

Sukuse

VraieEsprit

Bleach

Complete



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Sukuse

VraieEsprit

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Summary

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Description

25 years on from Meifu and secrets abound, from the mines of 7th to the barren wastes of the Rukon. As blood is spilt, Juu & Shun realise Seireitei's most wanted rebel is not only alive but far from alone - but what secret weapon is he hiding in Rukongai's forgotten land?

1. Prologue

Sukuse
すくせ

*“natsugusa ya tsuwamonodomo ga yume no ato”
(In the summer grasses are the fleeting traces of the warriors’ dreams)
(Matsuo Basho)*

Introduction and Disclaimer

Hello everyone. It’s been a little while, ne?

This story has been simmering on my pen drive for a lot of months now. It was in mental cogitation throughout the writing of the Fourth Maki and yet with various things going on in my real life, it’s moved a lot more slowly than any of its predecessors. As some of you who’ve read and reviewed my stuff before know, I am back at university full time now (studying Japanese, amongst which I am also studying the Classical language). It’s pretty busy, and so am I. For that reason, my writing has slowed down. This story is not yet finished, though I would like it to be.

*Therefore I am taking a gamble and posting it here in the hope that doing so might spur me on to write the rest.
Currently it exists in about twenty or so chapters.*

My internet at university is very unreliable and I am not home every weekend so updates may not be as regular as they have been throughout Meifu’s Gate. Please forgive me for this. I will do my best to provide a good story with a completed ending, but it is likely to take a little bit of time since I have essays to plan and write and an entire new grammatical structure to learn ;).

So, onto the story. We last saw Juushirou and Shunsui as they graduated and went on to their new lives as Captains of the Gotei.

Though I sent Juu to Seventh District, I haven’t chosen to write about his time there. This story is set approximately 20-25 years after their graduation, and Thirteenth Division have returned to Inner Seireitei, which now has the basic structure of what we know as Seireitei proper in Canon, a place where the squads all have their own specific headquarters. There are still Clans and there are therefore still eight Districts with distinct land of their own. There is also Rukongai and this story will introduce the basis for the development of modern Rukongai, beginning with the first three districts, the two canon ones

known as Junrin'an (1) and Hokutan (3), plus one of my own naming, Nakaken (2). Rukongai is quite a wide space, but not all of it is clearly mapped out by the Gotei — as will become clear.

Several of the characters from Meifu will be reprised in this story. Some will be focused on more than others. There are also new characters, some of whom provide ancestors for future canon characters of some significance. For those unsatisfied with how Keitarou's story tied off last time, this will bring him and his fanaticism back into the frame.

The finale of the last story mapped out the fate of the Team Stupid characters, including the deaths of some of them. I will reassure readers that none of those deaths occur within this story. That is not to say that death will not occur, though. On the contrary, it will, and probably in some quantity. However, it is not my intention to slaughter Team Stupid's members just yet. As a payoff, though, it's true to say that not all of them have as primary a role as in the other stories.

At the time of writing this, the primary focal point of the story is Juushirou's Thirteenth Division, therefore the role played by Shunsui — though considerable — is maybe shadowed by his friend's to date. I can't be sure yet how that will pan out in the long run, as Thirteenth Division itself is strategically important to the development of the plot in many different ways.

Fans of Shunsui, please don't tar and feather me for this. I love him just as much as ever, but characters must do as the plot sees fit, and that is all.

The title of the story, "Sukuse" is an old Japanese word often used in the context of literary and pseudo-historic figures talking about events being a result of ties or karma from a previous existence. Since the souls in Seireitei exist on a cycle of rebirth, death and balance, I thought it appropriate to use as a title for this story. This is not Meifu's Gate, because the boys are no longer students. This is a Gotei Thirteen story — but one set in the early days far flung from canon and therefore far more recognisable to readers familiar with the Meifu world.

Prologue: Murettai *Several Years Earlier*

There were fierce winter winds the night the stranger came to Murettai Village.

Wrapped in a heavy, dark cloak, his face mostly obscured from both sight and weather, the man made his way along the central trackway, pausing from time to time to ask questions of residents and occasionally slipping a coin between his gloved fingers into their dirt-

stained, calloused palms. His cloak hid his attire from view completely, but it was whispered among the villagers that he must be a member of one of the Clan families, for despite a limp when he walked, there was something in his bearing that told of a quietly assumed self-confidence. Although there were no retainers at his heels, he did not seem like the kind of person who would be easily taken off guard.

He reached the end house in the village as the moon drifted behind a cloud, creating an odd, hazy glow about the place. Was it an omen? Some of the younger members of the village thought so, even as he raised his velvet-covered fingers to knock at the door. Why had he come here, at such an hour, alone — and to visit the house of the sickly widow, whose life was ebbing away little by little as each day passed?

Some theorised that he was the ghost of the woman's dead husband, coming to claim her soul, and for this reason, none of the village folk strayed out of doors for long, fearing that watching his actions might bring bad luck down on their own heads. They had plenty of their own concerns to deal with — if a stranger came to call on the widow, so be it. It was her concern. Her sons were with her, were they not? They could surely handle matters themselves. It was not for them to interfere, whether he be an earthly or a spiritual visitor.

On the stranger's part, he cared nothing for whether his appearance had garnered attention. On the contrary, it amused him to be once more viewed with fear and awe and a faint smile traced across his lips as he pressed his covered knuckles once more to the hard wooden divide. Had they been able to see his expression, the villagers would surely not have been put any more at ease, for though humour showed in his face, his mud-slurried eyes were clouded, the dim light that glittered there cold and hard.

For Ketsui, younger son of the widow Irie, the visit had come completely out of the blue. When he had heard the knock at the door, he had fully expected it to be his family's close friend Kirio, returning from her errand to the herbalist with fresh remedies to help his mother's pain. The woman was sleeping now, a peaceful, dreamless sleep thanks to the last of the soporific concoction from the previous trip, but Ketsui was adult enough to know that it would not last forever. So even in this bitter wind, the girl had set out, bent on collecting the potion in person to prevent any delay. Hikifune Kirio was that kind of person, and so when Ketsui had moved to open the door, he had fully expected to see her on the other side, herbs in hand.

But it had not been Kirio. It had been a man who would change the fates of his family forever.

He was tall and lean, even despite the heavy fabrics that swaddled his body, and Ketsui stared at him for a moment, completely thrown off guard. The stranger, for his part, seemed equally startled, his cloak slipping from his face for a moment and utter surprise flooding his preoccupied brown eyes.

A moment of silence went between them, then,

“Daisuke?” The word dropped from the stranger’s lips, barely more than a whisper as two gloved hands came up to grasp Ketsui by the shoulders, disbelief in his tones.

Daisuke.

Ketsui’s brows knitted, and he carefully detached himself, bowing his head respectfully towards the visitor.

“I’m sorry, sir. I think you’ve made a mistake,” he said politely. “There is nobody by that name here.”

“Nobody by...” The stranger faltered, wetting dry lips as he stared at the boy, almost as though he struggling to understand what he was seeing. Then, as if a curtain had been lifted from his gaze, his eyes lit up with comprehension and he nodded, that faint, humourless smile once more touching his lips.

“Of course not,” he agreed, the faintest note of genuine sadness in his tones. “It was a long time ago — there would be nobody by that name here now. I saw with my own eyes...”

He took a deep breath, then,

“Ketsui-kun, I presume?”

Ketsui was taken aback, staring at the stranger afresh. Who was this man? How had he known his father’s name, and spoken it so freely? And more, how had he known his own name? Had he asked in the village? But no... that surely couldn’t be, for there was something in those eyes that reached out to Ketsui’s childhood memories, teasing and tweaking as though begging to be remembered.

At his silence, the stranger’s smile widened.

“You don’t remember.”

It was a statement, not a question. “Indeed, why should you remember? You were just a boy — very young, perhaps not even six the last time I saw you. The last time... with your father and mother...”

far from this place in another world.”

At this, Ketsui’s face drained of all colour, and he swallowed hard.

“K.Keitarou-dono?” he whispered. “Aizen... Keitarou... dono?”

At the sound of his name, true pleasure leapt into the man’s gaze and he nodded, slipping his hands down to clasp Ketsui’s warmly in his velvety grip.

“Indeed, even after so long,” he murmured. “It has been too long, Ketsui... you are all grown up, and I imagine your brother too — both of you must be full grown and sons to be proud of now, in this peaceful place. I came to see you — you and your poor mother, who I understand is in ill health?”

“She... probably will not live long,” Ketsui bit his lip, eying his companion with a mixture of emotions. “It has not been easy on her, since Father... since we came here, though she has always worked very hard and done her best for us. Now it’s our duty to support her — so Tenichi-nii and I are both at her side when she needs us the most.”

“Yes. Daisuke would have approved of that,” before Ketsui knew what was happening, Keitarou had entered the house fully, closing the door behind him with a soft click, “and you truly... you resemble him so greatly, for a moment I was completely thrown. You are a handsome young man, Ketsui-kun — but it brings me most pleasure to know that you hold your father’s likeness in your face.”

“Mother has said so too,” Ketsui agreed slowly. “Many times she’s said it’s both her joy and her sorrow to look at me, and know that Father is still at least partly with her. But even so — after so long... we did not expect...”

“A visit by a wanted fugitive may not be one welcomed by most families,” there was a rueful, self-effacing note in the visitor’s tones and he nodded his head, leaning up against the wall as his clever gaze ran over Ketsui’s features once more. “I understand your consternation — you do not need to fear me by voicing it. I trust that if there is one place in Seireitei that will not betray me to my enemies, it would be here. I have not come to do you or your mother any harm, Ketsui. I’ve simply come out of family concern, to thank her and give her my wishes before she passes from this place to the next.”

“Why... why now?” Ketsui had not expected Keitarou to be so frank, yet somehow his companion’s words did little to reassure him. “How could you know of Mother’s health, and why...”

“That was coincidence,” Keitarou admitted. “There have been many times I’ve thought to come to you, but the risk associated with my doing so has always made me shy away. Daisuke did not want you put in danger... I didn’t think his soul would forgive me if I led trouble to his family’s door.”

He smiled, a smile somehow out of place on the face of a wanted traitor, yet a genuine, warm smile all the same, and Ketsui found his wariness fading into confusion. Was this really the man that all of Seireitei had been hunting down? Was this kinsman of his truly the mastermind behind the assassinations of Endou Shouichi and the Kuchiki Clan’s beloved heir, the one who had struck and slain before disappearing back into the shadows without a trace? The stories about him were exaggerated beyond belief if it were true, for local stories made Keitarou out to be a monster of immortality. Yet Ketsui’s memories painted a different picture, and as he stood there, tracing his gaze across the shadowed features of his cousin’s face, he recalled with startling clarity one afternoon when, covered in dust and soot from his laboratory experiments, Keitarou had shown up at their home unannounced, bringing sweet treats for him and his brother as a new year celebration.

He closed his eyes briefly, forcing the recollection away. The man he remembered hazily as a kindly uncle figure was the most hated man in all Seireitei, and it would not do to confuse nostalgia with the truth.

“But now, you don’t worry about that?” he asked, opening his eyes to meet Keitarou’s gaze once more. “Mother is very ill, and in no state to defend herself if Eighth District sent soldiers here in search of you.”

“Yes, but when I learned she was so ill, I knew it was my last chance to see her,” Keitarou acknowledged. He laughed, seeing the doubt etched on the young man’s features, and he lifted a gloved hand, resting it lightly against Ketsui’s shoulder.

“You find it hard to believe, but your father was like my brother, and your mother therefore my much beloved sister,” he murmured. “You and Tenichi were nephews in all but name, and I was fond of you. Besides, there is no immediate danger. I assure you that I have done all I could to cover my tracks coming here, and I shall do the same again when I leave.”

“It seems an unnecessary risk,” Ketsui reflected. “Even if it’s as you say — and I admit, I remember the kindness you always showed my brother and I, even though I was so very young when we parted. It’s been all these years and Mother has never expected to make contact

with you. Now she is about to leave this world... even affection for her can't save her from this disease."

"You are my kinsfolk, and Daisuke would have wanted me to reach out to you," Keitarou said simply. "I have just delayed it from fear of bringing you harm. If Irie's health is failing, though, I can delay my coming no longer. There are no powerful Clansfolk in this area to hold your hands nor provide expert health care to make her comfortable, are there? Therefore for kin — for Daisuke's kin — it's my duty to do as I can. I am no healer, but I am a scientist — and I bring something which I believe will ease her pain."

He slid his hand into the sleeve of his heavy clothing, producing a small ceramic vial. He held it out to Ketsui, who took it, gazing at it quizzically.

"It is up to you whether or not you trust me enough to use it," Keitarou seemed to understand what was going through the young boy's mind. "I have simply brought it to you — the rest is up to you."

"What's this about, Ketsui?"

At that moment Tenichi stepped into the hallway, thick auburn hair pulled back in a long tail down his back. He was half a head taller than his brother, broader and more of a warrior to look at, and Ketsui saw Keitarou's gaze flit immediately to the boy's attire and the sheathed blade that he wore at his waist. Was it imagination, Ketsui wondered, or had a fleeting flicker of darkness entered those muddy eyes as the scientist had regarded his cousin's oldest son?

But unlike Ketsui, Tenichi did not look like an Urahara. Unlike Ketsui, Tenichi's genes followed his mother's side of the family far more closely — and Ketsui imagined there were no ancient, sleeping ghosts in this encounter.

There was a brief pause, then Keitarou bowed his head, pulling back the hood of his cloak as he did so to reveal a tail of sandy brown hair tied neatly at the nape of his neck with a simple, white length of ribbon. Though Ketsui's memories of the man were faint, he was struck by the fact this stranger had barely aged since their last meeting — whilst he had grown from a child to a young a man capable of making his own decisions, Keitarou had seemingly been frozen in time. He was aging but not aging — in the same way that Ketsui knew other shinigami had aged yet not aged over the course of passing years.

"I have come as a kinsman to enquire after your mother and to greet you both after so long," Keitarou said quietly now, and at the

sight of him, Tenichi's eyes widened with disbelief.

"Keitarou-dono," he murmured, and Keitarou chuckled.

"You remember more quickly than your brother does. I see," he murmured. "Well, so much to the good. Perhaps then you're less surprised to see me — or no, from your expression, would you be more surprised? Perhaps dressed in the attire of the Gotei of Seireitei, you aren't quite sure how to meet my gaze after so long?"

Tenichi bristled for a moment, then,

"I am a shinigami," he said quietly, "with the Gotei Thirteen, so that I can protect the people of Seireitei like we were protected when we were children. For that reason, both Ketsui and I have trained at Genryuusai-sensei's Academy. For that reason, we both intend to bear blades and hunt Hollows for Soul Society. Father died fighting for what he believed in. Both Ketsui and I intend to follow his lead."

"I see," Keitarou shifted his body more comfortably against the wall panelling, eying them pensively one at a time. "Your father would be glad to hear such words, but I wonder if even you remember what those things he believed in so strongly were, Tenichi-kun. To see you've both survived, grown and become strong brings me joy in his place — but even so, I can tell from your eyes that you know nothing of the fight that led you to be in this impoverished place. You don't know how much Daisuke suffered for your freedom — how much we all suffered so that you might have a future at all."

"Father sent us away so that we wouldn't become embroiled in his activities. He sent us away to keep us safe," Tenichi said stolidly. "Mother has told us many a time that Father wanted us to live and to do so in freedom. He wanted us to make our own choices about this world — thanks to him, both Ketsui and I have done so."

His eyes narrowed, flitting to the vial in Ketsui's hand.

"Why did you come here?" he demanded. "Your being here can only be viewed as trouble for us and for Mother."

"I came to see Irie, after so long," Keitarou repeated. "I brought medicine to ease her suffering, which I have already given to your brother. I also came because I heard that the both of you were currently here in the village too. I was curious to see you with my own eyes, and to see how well you remembered Daisuke. Having seen Ketsui's face, I can believe that neither of you would easily forget him."

He crossed the floor, resting his hand on Tenichi's shoulder.

“Ketsui has his appearance, but despite his name, maybe you are the one with his resolve,” he reflected. “Your eyes are different in colour, but the emotion I see there is the same. You’re driven to fight for something you believe in — even if it kills you. Whether I agree with your resolve or not, those are good emotions to have.”

“Keitarou-dono, you’re believed to be dead by most people in Seireitei,” Ketsui said softly. “Those who don’t believe you died are still people who would like to hunt you down. Even as a student at the Academy, I’ve heard of it. I’ve never said anything about our kinship, but I’ve heard it spoken of even in the halls and between classes. Your name is synonymous with chaos and destruction in most sectors of Seireitei. They say you murdered a head of the Endou Clan, conspired to bring down the Kuchiki by assassinating the heir, and a multitude of other acts that make you considered a felon beyond forgiveness. Your being are alive and here is dangerous... even if you covered your tracks, your presence in Eighth District could bring harm to both you and to us, especially to Mother.”

“Do you see me as your enemy?” Keitarou was surprised. “I did my everything to protect you and ensure you had a chance to live like you do now. District Seven was a place so full of pain and corruption — Daisuke and I both wanted a better future for you. A better world. A better chance. Even so, you see me as someone who comes to bring you harm?”

“Then...” Ketsui faltered, and Keitarou smiled.

“Daisuke sent you away knowing that he would die for his cause. Our cause,” he said quietly, his tones edged with something more intense as he began to speak about the distant past. “As your mother has rightly taught you, he loved you so much, and didn’t want you to be dragged into the mire by his decisions. He knew he would be slain by the despot madman who ruled in District Seven, and so it came to be. The man who I brought to Hades — the former head of the Endou Clan you spoke of — was the man whose own weapon cut down your father. In the first instance I took the burden of outlaw on my shoulders because of my loyalty to my kinsman, by avenging your father in your place. Knowing that, how can you consider me anything but your ally?”

“The man who...” Tenichi’s face paled, and Keitarou nodded.

“Irie has never told you the truth... perhaps she never knew it, completely,” he reflected, “but Daisuke died at the direct hands of Endou Shouichi, tortured to within an inch of his life and then slaughtered cruelly by the ice blade of his *zanpakutou*, Hijirobaya. I

witnessed it, so I know there is no falseness in my account. For that act, I sought revenge. Our people had been oppressed and illtreated for a century before that — for their freedom Daisuke fought and died, and to uphold that ideal, I fought and killed the man who had so oppressed us. I took Daisuke's body, gave him proper burial and promised him never to give up on the cause we had believed in so strongly. I wanted — and I still want now — for those displaced by corrupt laws to once again have a right to speak. The difference is that it is an injustice that touches more than just exiled Urahara. In my time in the shadows, I have learned this all too clearly.”

“Father was killed by an Endou?” Tenichi whispered, and Ketsui bit his lip, knowing his brother was thinking of Seireitei and the Captains of the Gotei. “By a kinsman of the Seventh Captain... that was why...?”

“Your father was a true and brave man who martyred himself for the freedom of his kin. Freedom you have lived in since then,” Keitarou said simply, “as I still live. Since they have stopped looking for me so actively, I have come to see with my own eyes that he did not die in vain. He did not. You are both sons in whom I'm sure he could have had pride. Irie has done well with you — both of you. Shinigami from the Districts — truly a great thing.”

“Do you mean that?” Ketsui looked doubtful, and Keitarou laughed, nodding his head.

“I have spent almost all of my life in the Districts or shadows, without protection of my own Clan, even if I was born that way,” he said frankly. “I have ultimate faith in the individual fighting power of people even if they lack money or friends in high places. This world is still the world of the Clans, but little by little that is changing. You both being accepted and trained as proper shinigami is proof of it. A change is coming — a change which I support with heart and soul. It's a change whereby the ordinary people are not simply trampled underfoot but that everyone born in Seireitei might have the same opportunity to make a difference.”

He shrugged his shoulders.

“Those who fear change would call me dangerous,” he added dismissively. “They would label me an outlaw and a rebel and a person who commits unspeakable crimes. Less is said of the crimes committed by those who hold all the power, however. The suffering in Rukongai, those who starve or perish trying to scramble into Seireitei for even one mouthful of proper food are never spoken about in polite society. The poor in Seireitei — you know full well that it is not easy

to live hand-to-mouth when everything you had is taken by a Clansman on the wrong side of justice. I have blooded my hands, yes. I won't deny it. But I am not simply a callous, destructive murderer. My ambition is as it was when your father still lived — to remove the oppression of those who cause such widespread suffering, and open up Seireitei to the ones who truly deserve to govern it."

He eyed Tenichi thoughtfully.

"Tell me, who is your Captain? You are a recruit, correct? To which division?"

"Thirteenth. Under Ukitake Juushirou-taichou," Tenichi was surprised by the sudden change in topic, and to Ketsui's astonishment, pleasure flooded Keitarou's features.

"Ah. Then such things can truly happen," he whispered, more than half talking to himself. "If that one, in whom I had so many high hopes can raise to such a level, then times are really changing. Perhaps now is the right time, after soon we will finish what Daisuke and I began, and bring everything down to the same level."

He clapped his hands down on Tenichi's shoulders again, eying him firmly.

"For your father's sake, remain strong and fight for those beliefs of yours," he said evenly. "As a shinigami of the Gotei or descendant of the Urahara exiles, the same rules apply. I will not tell you what path to choose, nor what side to take in the battles ahead. This is your future, and Daisuke would want you to make your own decisions about right and wrong. Still, think carefully on all I've told you tonight. You are of an age now to draw that sword and fight for the things you believe in — doing so helps to shape what this world will become."

He laughed.

"Your Captain can probably advise you of those things more successfully than me," he reflected ruefully. "I am gratified to know that he has continued to be the catalyst for change I felt sure he would be, even so many years since our last unfortunate encounter."

"You... know my Captain?"

"Long, long ago," Keitarou dismissed this with a flick of his hand. "His beliefs and mine collided and then parted in a brief moment, you might say. Ah, well. He was your age then, Tenichi-kun. Young men are impetuous and full of ideals. Once I thought we might fight alongside one another, but he was too easily seduced by Clan power,

and so our acquaintance ended.”

He sighed.

“Our family were given the gift and the curse of crafting the future of this place,” he murmured. “Whether the Clans realise it or not yet, our bloodline will eventually be triumphant in our goals. Perhaps, when that time comes, we will no longer see brave people like Irie in such abandoned places, waiting to breathe their last. Think about it... both of you. What do you want your future to be? The choices you make now will matter more and more as you go on, so make sure they are right from the start.”

He bowed his head, pulling his cloak up once more to cover your face.

“Carry my best wishes to your mother,” he added. “I trust my remedy will do her some good. It appears I will not be able to speak to her myself, as it seems you have another guest approaching, but if at least you can tell her I came by, that will have to suffice.”

“Another...?” Ketsui stared, and Tenichi frowned.

“It’s only Kirio coming back with Mother’s proper medicine,” he said frankly. “She’s a trusted friend, Keitarou-dono, and no reason for you to curtail the length of your visit.”

“Kirio... huh?” A faint, fleeting recollection seemed to cross Keitarou’s features, and he smiled, shaking his head. “No. I have outstayed my welcome. I am glad to have seen you both again, though... very glad. I hope... that it won’t be the last time we meet. I feel there is still something this scattered, trampled family can do to change this world, if we so choose.”

With that he was gone, slipping into a shunpo step so swift and exact that Ketsui’s raw skills had trouble processing the speed of his action. For a moment there was silence, then Tenichi sighed.

“Do you think that was really... true?” Ketsui murmured, and Tenichi nodded.

“About Father? Yes. Mother’s never told us, but yes. That was Keitarou-dono, Ketsui. For certain, it was. And as he spoke to us about Father... it was in his eyes. What Keitarou-dono said... about Father’s death... was true.”

“Then...” Ketsui bit his lip. “Father was killed and Keitarou-dono’s been living as he has since then because he avenged that death?”

“A lot of death and devastation happened then, and since,” Tenichi

spoke quietly. “Right now, don’t think about it too much. We don’t have anything to back up what he told us except the word of an outlaw. When Mother wakes... we’ll talk to her too, and find out what she knew about any of this. And then... when I go back to Seireitei, maybe I’ll speak to Taichou... since Keitarou-dono talked about him too, and...”

“No..I don’t think we should,” Ketsui shook his head hastily. “Keitarou-dono is our kinsman, and for our sakes and Mother’s we can’t draw attention to him so easily. If any of this is false, or if they think we’re protecting a felon — we shouldn’t do anything, Tenichi. The past is the past. The future is what he said — ours to create. We’re shinigami — you’re in a squad, I’m in training. That’s what we both decided to do with our lives, so that’s what we should focus on now.”

Tenichi was silent for a moment, then,

“I wonder if that’s true,” he murmured softly. “I really wonder if it is.”

With that he turned on his heel, heading back down the narrow, low-ceilinged hallway to their mother’s sick room.

Ketsui remained behind, a faint sense of unease in the pit of his stomach.

Like a ghost had reared up from the grave and had touched his skin, he felt certain that Keitarou’s appearance had not been by chance. Had he made a promise to Daisuke to come here? Did he want something more from them than just to see their faces? It had sounded as though he wanted to lure them to his cause — but was there even a cause any more?

Keitarou-dono probably did avenge father’s murder. Father probably was murdered by the Endou because even I remember that the Endou mistreated the Urahara exiles.

He reached up to touch his fair hair.

This made me a target for people until we came here, so I wouldn’t ever forget that that was the case. That side of it... probably is true. And yet...

He sighed.

Father sent us away. Mother brought us here so we could live in freedom — even if we were poor. We have. We did. And now we have a future. I can learn to be a shinigami without fear of my family’s past turning folk against me. Father wanted us to be that way — I’m sure he did. Whatever he intended to do — or died doing — he sent us away so we wouldn’t be tainted by it. Surely... that’s the reason. Surely... he’d want us to look

forward, not back?

“Why the troubled face, Ketsui-kun?” Kirio’s voice startled him and he turned, offering her a pensive glance.

“Is Irie-san all right?” Kirio’s green eyes were full of concern, and he forced himself to smile, nodding his head.

“We had an unexpected visitor, but they’ve gone now,” he said quietly, sliding the vial of unknown medicine deep into the sleeve of his white *hakamashita*. “Mother’s still sleeping — you’re back in plenty of time.”

“People in the village were talking about a stranger,” Kirio’s gaze burned with curiosity. “Was that the visitor? Was it someone you know?”

“I don’t really know the answer to that,” Ketsui admitted, “so let’s not talk about it any more. For the time being, Mother is our main concern... and right now, that’s all I want to think of.”

2. Inner Seireitei

Chapter One: Inner Seireitei

“From behind!”

The yell cut through the smoky haze of the burning village, followed by a sweep of a silver blade as it cleaved the smouldering beam in two. Immediately beneath it, the children screamed and huddled together in their terror as a huge shadow loomed out of the thick air, one hand clutched around the sword’s hilt whilst the other reached up above them, meaty fingers clamping themselves around the wood and throwing it bodily out of the way. Sky and air swirled overhead as suddenly there was nothing between the children and the clouds, and the monster bore down on them, sheathing his weapon and gathering the youngsters up in his arms as though they were little more than kittens who had been trapped inside an old log.

“Kayashima!” he roared, somehow managing to sound deafening despite the persistent crackle of the flames and the thundering, echoing cry of the creature who had thrown this place into such disarray. “Kayashima, dammit, where are you?”

“Here, Fukutaichou!” A young shinigami of no more than twenty one appeared suddenly at his right hand, his skin darkened by soot and ash and his face smeared with tears from where the fire had caused his eyes to sting and water. He made no complaint, however, and at the sight of him, the broad, bulky individual thrust the terrified children his way.

“Take these two and get them to safety. Find their mother, if you can — there’s nobody else in this house and it’s going to come down anyhow.”

“Yes, sir!” The youngster did not hesitate, taking charge of the two little ones and disappearing with them into shunpo as he took them across to safety. The tall man sighed, getting to his feet and stifling a cough as the air around him became once more heavy and thick with the acrid blackness of burning wood.

Above it all was the eerie shriek of the Hollow — the reason behind the village’s destruction.

He stepped back out into the main street, his fingers closing once more around the hilt of his *zanpakutou* as he regarded the scene. He

had brought four officers with him — Kayashima, the youngster, who his Captain had insisted on sending to give him true experience out in the field. He was better off seeing to the salvaged residents for the time being, the Vice Captain decided — no sense in putting him in unnecessary danger when there were three others of better experience ready and willing to fight.

The other two officers were engaging the beast now — the slight, yet determined form of Sixth Seat Hikifune Kirio on the left, and the fair haired ragamuffin that was Tenth Seat Kotetsu Ketsui on the right. As the Vice Captain gazed up at the monster he pursed his lips, drawing his own *zanpakutou* from his sheath but making no attempt to enter the fray.

Let them do it, if they can, Enishi.

His Captain's words echoed once more in his head.

This Hollow is of a high level — a tricky creature with the ability to fire cero, even if not at a very high strength. Certainly there will be danger and devastation to the people in the immediate vicinity. I want to make sure nobody in that village dies — so if need be, let Kirio and Ketsui handle taking down the beast.

“What if they can't handle it?” Enishi had asked, consternation in his eyes, and the Captain had smiled, shaking his head slightly.

“Then you'll be there, as Vice Captain, to make sure that they come home safely too,” he had said said pragmatically. “I have ultimate faith in all of you — save the villagers, take out the Hollow and come back in one piece. If I didn't believe in you, I wouldn't send you — so believe in them too. If you don't, how will they move forward? If nobody had believed in us, we wouldn't be where we are now.”

Enishi reflected on the words once again, a smile touching his own lips.

It was just like him, he mused ruefully, to think that way and have no doubts in the orders he was giving. That was the kind of Captain he was... the kind of Captain Enishi had wanted more than any other to serve.

His gaze flitted briefly around the now abandoned centre of the village, making sure that they had managed to extract the last of the residents safely. Some had suffered bruises and cuts, many had become dizzy from smoke and fear yet Enishi had been thorough and though their homes were in disarray, their lives had all been saved. There would doubtless be some form of support or compensation paid

them to help them rebuild — Enishi knew from past experience that every time his squad had been deployed to help a village like this one, an appeal claim had been sent in the very next day. His Captain had the highest percentage of support claims paid out in the whole of the Gotei — Enishi had long since decided that this was because those processing such things had found it easier to agree with the demands than to try and fight them.

That was Ukitake Juushirou's talent as Captain of the Thirteenth Division.

He did not generally take 'no' for an answer, especially when it was to do with the safety and survival of people from the Districts.

A whoop from the battleground ahead made him glance up suddenly, just in time to see Kirio's *zanpakuto* shear neatly through the hollow's white mask. As it screamed and glittered in its dying throes, Ketsui surged forward, slashing and chopping at its legs to prevent its sharp claws from spasming up towards the girl's unprotected lower body. They worked well as a team, Enishi reflected, as he watched the beast shimmer and dissipate into fragments of shadowy light. That was another of the ethics Ukitake-taichou had carved into the foundations of Thirteenth Division, though. If you weren't willing to work as a team, you might as well not be a part of the division at all.

"We got him!" Ketsui let out another yell, raising his hand in a high five which Kirio laughingly met, leaping nimbly over the still smouldering ruins of a nearby hut to slap her palm against his.

"We did," she agreed, landing gracefully on the blackened ground. "Well, Fukutaichou? What did you think of our team play?"

"I think that Ukitake-taichou will be happy to have you back in one piece," Enishi grinned. "Good work, you two. Kayashima and I were able to get all of the villagers to safety and he's watching over them a safe distance away — downwind from the fire."

He gazed around him, then,

"Though there's not much fire left now, since there's nothing much remaining that can burn," he said regretfully. "This wasn't a powerful Hollow in terms of its attack potential, but it still did enough damage here, that's for sure. Before we go back, we ought to at least see that a temporary shelter is erected for those who have nowhere else to go. When we've done that, we'll head back and report — but Ukitake-taichou will simply send us out again if we don't do it right away."

“I would have wanted to anyhow,” Ketsui’s expression became serious and he shrugged his shoulders. “This village isn’t that different from the one we used to live in before my mother died — and before that, when we were refugees... things were much harder. To lose everything is devastating, even if you keep your life — so if we can help them, I think we should.”

“I agree with Ketsui,” Kirio nodded. “There’s water flowing near here — a river or a spring or some such thing. If I can find the exact location, I can send a Hell Butterfly back to get people to help bring water, and we can see to sending out food provisions when we return to Inner Seireitei. Knowing Taichou, he’s probably already thought about that in advance and we won’t have to wait long for that to be deployed.”

“Yes, true,” Enishi agreed. “All right. You do that — and Ketsui, you come with me. There were frightened children among the hurt — you’ve been one of them, so you’ll probably understand their feelings better than I’m able, no matter how hard I try. We’ll try and construct some kind of makeshift shelter for the meantime — at least it isn’t the dead of winter, so hopefully nobody will freeze.”

“The Hollow is gone, though, at least,” Ketsui said softly. “That’s the main thing. That’s why we came here — they won’t be in immediate danger of their lives now.”

“No,” Enishi nodded, “but it bothers me too, you know. Even as a Clansman, I don’t like to see it — folk thrown out of their homes and into chaos because of those creatures and their rampaging. If we could rid Soul Society of them altogether it would be a good thing — but we’d need a hell of a lot more shinigami than we have now to manage that and think about cleansing the Real World fully.”

“If they stopped killing each other over petty trifles in the Real World, we wouldn’t have such a problem with Hollows,” Kirio muttered. “At least, that’s what I’ve heard said. Apparently people in the Real World are always having fights and battles and killing one another over land. Because of that, people die and their dissatisfied souls become Hollows. It’s a vicious cycle.”

“No different from this world, then,” Ketsui said pragmatically. “Maybe we should stop fighting and killing each other over here, because then the Real World would have no souls to be reborn from and they’d have to stop their wars.”

Enishi laughed.

“That sounds like the Captain’s logic, but it’s true enough,” he

agreed. “Though Seireitei’s been nice and quiet for a couple of decades together, there’s really no perfect world without fighting, Hikifune. If there was, we’d none of us be needed, would we? But as it is, we are, and so we should attend our duties and go back to report. I don’t suppose we have time to hang about for long periods discussing things like this — probably as soon as we return there’ll be another assignment.”

“Taichou was going to speak to the Captains this morning, wasn’t he?” As Kirio darted off down towards the river, Ketsui fell into step with his superior officer, sending him a quizzical glance. “He said something about needing to look more into the current wave of Hollow appearances in this part of Seireitei and the way in which squads are handling the problem. He looked concerned about it — does that mean that it’s unusual for there to be so many Hollows gathered in this region?”

“Mm. Something like that,” Enishi agreed. “This is Kyouraku land — District Eight — traditionally a very quiet area for Hollow activity. When Thirteenth first came into being and we spent most of our time stalking around Seventh, well, that was different. There was so much violence there that there were Hollows coming out of every orifice, and we had our work cut out for us in more ways than one. This is different, though — and made worse by the fact Seireitei passed the law to remove limits on where each division could patrol. We were drafted in here because everyone else was already flat out with other incidents, if I understand it right. Whichever the case is, anyhow, Taichou said he wanted to speak to the Captains about how things were going down. He’s got some concerns, and you know he’ll not sit back until he’s addressed them with someone in a position of higher authority.”

He sighed, shrugging his shoulders,

“Tisn’t like there aren’t grounds for concern, though,” he admitted. “Although there always have been Hollows in Seireitei, I’ve not known it to be so widespread as this. Even when the Taichou and I were students in District One, the Hollows we encountered were only occasional ones. Now I think of it, though, there have been a lot of Hollow incidents in the last year or so, all over Soul Society. All of them a little unusual — all of them capable of Cero and yet none of them particularly distinctive in terms of reiatsu, making it hard to know where they’re going to hit until they do.”

He rubbed his brow thoughtfully.

“I’m repeating what the Taichou said, but it stuck with me all the

same. Apparently, unlike most Hollows, they don't seem to attack with the intention of targeting those with highest reiatsu. It's all beyond me a little, this science stuff — but I *doknow* that Hollows take down the ones with the highest spirit power and consume them to fuel their own energy. Yet this hasn't happened in any of the recent cases. The Hollows have simply attacked to cause chaos and fear among the populace — if Hollows can think enough to make a decision like that. Not one villager has been killed by a Hollow since it began — but countless villages have been destroyed and people have died in the resulting devastation.”

“I heard from my brother that one of the recruits in Seventh Division lost his life in one of those battles, too,” Ketsui looked grave. “He took it pretty hard, since it was one of the juniors he was supervising himself. There was nothing to be done about it, though, and the order came through too late for reinforcements to be on scene right away. Ten-nii said that the Hollow tossed the kid up like a rag doll with his claws, but then discarded him and didn't even try to consume his spirit power. It was as though the creature didn't care that he was a shinigami. It just wanted to kill something, so it killed.”

“I've heard similar things too,” Enishi sighed, “and I'm not happy with it, because it makes the Gotei look like they can't cope. People get scared if they think the shinigami can't keep the Hollows at bay, so I'm glad we've managed to get rid of this one today. Doubtless more will surface, but a mission completed with no lives lost is always a bonus and a victory for any officer, whatever his rank.”

“That's why we become Shinigami, isn't it?” Ketsui's eyes were suddenly thoughtful, and Enishi nodded.

“To defend the people who can't defend themselves. To give them a way to fight back,” he agreed. “S'why I did it, I suppose — though I can't say I'd thought much on the subject when I first joined the Academy. That place focuses you — teaches you stuff beyond the skills of a fighter. I realised by the time I graduated that I didn't care what rank I held or which squad I belonged to, but that I wanted to use whatever skills I had to protect the people who weren't strong like me.”

“Mm,” Ketsui pursed his lips. “I think... that's how I feel too. And that I want to give back to Soul Society as well. Since my kinsfolk...”

He trailed off, and Enishi sighed.

“Taichou told you about that,” he said reprovingly. “He told you and he told Tenichi both the same when you recruited with the

Thirteenth, and the secret's stayed with us, except for young Kirio, of course. Ukitake... uh... Taichou believes the sins of the past aren't visited on the future, and so do I. You're both your own shinigami — your decisions are yours and that's all you need to take responsibility for. You're a fine shinigami — hell, Tenichi's one as well. I was sorry to see him go to Seventh, even if they did need his sword skills there more than we needed them at the time. You're both great examples of what the Academy is about — so you shouldn't dwell on the past. Nobody's passing judgement on you for things you had nothing to do with, and even if everyone did know about it, I doubt anyone would care. Nobody looks at the Urahara with suspicion, do they? There's no reason for them to do so with you, either."

"I know," Ketsui's expression cleared slightly and he smiled. "I like Thirteenth, because you and the Captain think like that. Ten-nii had his own reasons for going to Seventh, so he moved — but I think I'd be happy fighting in this squad until I died, to be honest. I don't ever feel, when I'm deployed by Thirteenth, that I'm anything but Kotetsu Ketsui, Tenth Seated Officer of this squad. I like it that way, and I don't mind if my rank isn't as lofty as Ten-nii might one day reach. When Mother died, I kind of promised myself to put the past in the past and live for the future she and Father worked hard to give us. They wanted us to be free and alive and because of them I am. So that I've had the chances I have... I'm glad, Fukutaichou. I didn't mean it to sound otherwise. Just when there are other people suffering, I want to do more to help them. And so I'll keep working hard."

"That's no bad thing," Enishi assured him as they reached the edge of the clearing where Kayashima and the huddled, grimy villagers were awaiting them. "It keeps your blade sharp, if you work hard for what you believe in. Tenichi's doing it too, even in a different squad — when he left, he said he had things he believed in doing and wanted to achieve them as quickly as possible. You both have learnt from that past and used it to move forwards — nobody can complain about that."

"Fukutaichou! Ketsui-san!" At the sight of them Kayashima got to his feet, relief in his expression as he greeted them. "Is the Hollow gone? I thought I sensed it, but..."

"Kirio-nee and I sliced it into bits," Ketsui nodded. "What about the villagers? Are any of them in need of Fourth Squad?"

"Mm... no serious injuries," Kayashima shook his head. "Just... most of them are scared and upset and don't know what will happen to them now. It's hard to get them to talk, and they flinch away from

me when I come near them, as though they think I'm going to hurt them somehow."

"I can understand their confusion," Ketsui said gravely, and Enishi cast a glance around the assembled group, noting the wary, fearful expressions in the eyes of many of the people. They truly had lost everything — perhaps even hope, and his heart tweaked slightly as he strode towards them.

Despite his gorilla-like size and his imposing presence, Enishi was known among the Gotei for his big-heartedness and his warm, friendly compassion. Although the villagers shrank back slightly at his approach, as he paused in the centre one of the young children he had saved from the fire darted forwards, reaching across to grab the leg of his *hakamain* thick, sooty fingers.

"Thank you for saving me, ojisan," she said, in a piping, reedy voice, and Enishi grinned at her gesture, bending down to ruffle her hair playfully. She was no taller than his knee, for Enishi stood at well over six feet and the child was probably no older than three, yet she beamed, looking up at him with hopeful, eager eyes.

"That's what we came here to do," he told her gently, "and we've got rid of the Hollow, so you needn't be afraid. But right now, your village is in a mess, so one of my officers has gone to arrange for water to be brought here, and the rest of us will try and build a temporary shelter for you until proper aid can come. We'll return and report as quickly as we can — you won't be forgotten about, and we will make sure nobody goes hungry. For now, though, just sit tight. We'll do what we can and then send further help."

"At least it doesn't look like it's about to rain," Ketsui offered the gathered people a smile. "We should be able to find dry materials with which to build something before it does."

"You have some ideas on doing that, Ketsui-san?" Kayashima stared at him in surprise, and Ketsui nodded.

"I come from a village just like the one that burnt down," he agreed, "and before that, my brother, mother and I spent a lot of time travelling and making do as we went along. Even as a kid I got quite good at pulling tree branches together and making makeshift rain-shelters so we didn't end up with pneumonia."

"You're not from one of the Clans?" Now an older man stepped forward, his beard grizzled and grey yet not quite snowy with age and wear. He was clearly a figure of some seniority in the village, for all eyes shifted to him as he spoke, a sudden sense of expectation in their

gazes. Ketsui hesitated for a moment, unsure how to answer, and Enishi clapped a heavy paw down on his shoulder.

“Ketsui understands far better than me what it’s like to be robbed of your homes and your security,” he said gravely. “There’s no need to fear him — or any of us — because we were sent to help you and help you we will.”

“But... shinigami...” The man faltered, and Kayashima frowned.

“Shinigami aren’t something to be scared of,” he snapped. “We’re the ones who just saved you from the Hollow, in case you didn’t notice — we’re the good guys!”

Ketsui shook his head.

“No, it’s perfectly natural to be afraid of them. Of us,” he corrected. “We’re strong, we fight with unknown magics and we carry swords that are by nature weapons intended for killing. It’s a survival skill to fear anyone in that position — but Fukutaichou is right,”

He turned his attention to the wary villagers.

“We came here as members of Thirteenth Squad and we came to help you. Please don’t be scared of us. We don’t mean you any harm.”

“Since we just risked our lives taking out that monster for them, I’m surprised they’d think otherwise,” Kayashima muttered, clearly put out.

“But the Hollow destroyed their village first, and we didn’t manage to prevent that,” Ketsui said reasonably. “These people have lost pretty much everything in a short space of time, and it’s natural for them to be unsettled about it. We have warm barracks to go back to, but these people don’t even know where they’ll sleep tonight, because we couldn’t stop the Hollow setting their village alight.”

The village elder shuffled forward, bowing his head slightly in Ketsui’s direction at these words.

“We’re sorry to doubt so easily,” He murmured, “but you see, we’ve heard... several stories in recent weeks about shinigami who have killed Hollows yet left the village-folk stranded — or in one or two cases, simply told them to get out of the way or they’ll be cut down too. Those kinds of things come to our ears from fleeing refugees hunting for shelter among us — therefore when the Hollow came here too...”

“*Shinigami* who said those things?” Kayashima looked startled. “Fukutaichou, is that...?”

“Nobody in the Gotei with any pride or respect in his rank would hold that attitude,” anger sparked in Enishi’s usually kind dark eyes.

“I heard it said myself, though,” A young woman disentangled herself from the crowd, pulling her tattered cloak more tightly around her body as if making a defence against the Shinigami’s indignation and as she did so, the young girl ran towards her, reaching grimy fingers up to grab hold of the woman’s hand. “I came from one of those villages where several of us were robbed of our homes by one of those monsters. Shinigami appeared and slew the beast — but they hounded us at the same time, and some of us were beaten for getting in their way. They were dressed as you are — in the robes of a shinigami of the Gotei. It is not a rumour. It is truth.”

Enishi groaned.

“You’d think in this day and age, with so many District shinigami among the squads, that hit and run attitude would be a thing of the past,” he said wearily, addressing the village elder with an apologetic look. “I can’t explain or justify those things, but I can promise you nobody from my division would ever treat anyone in that way, no matter how urgent the situation. Taichou wouldn’t stand for it. He’d whip the *shihakushou* off our back with his bare swords if he thought we conducted ourselves like that out in the field. Hell, I’d do it myself, if it comes to that.”

“Whichever squad it was should be ashamed of themselves,” Ketsui said frankly, “but Fukutaichou is right. *Our* Captain was born in the Districts, just like me and just like you. He cares more than anyone in the Gotei about helping the people unsettled by Hollows, and he definitely does the most he can to resolve things for them after the Hollow is defeated. Most of the members in our Division were born in the Districts, and even those who weren’t, like Houjou-fukutaichou, believe in protecting District people.”

“We’d do better by proving that with actions, rather than words,” Enishi decided. “For now, setting up shelter is our first priority. We’re few in number this time round, so if any villagers who can help out do so, we’ll be done twice as quickly. Ketsui, I’m putting you in charge of organisation — Kayashima, you’ll be responsible for helping to gather any materials together. When Kirio gets back to us, she can oversee the operation, as the highest ranking officer here.”

“What about you, Fukutaichou?” Kayashima asked curiously, and Enishi frowned.

“I’m going to send my own Hell Butterfly back to Soul Society,” he

said frankly. “Based on what that girl just said, I’ve some choice words to send back to base, and several of them shouldn’t be voiced in front of women and children.”

He clapped the young recruit on the back.

“I’ll be back as soon as I can,” he promised, “You get started and I’ll haul in to help when I’ve let base know exactly what these people need.”

“...And it’s another one in as many days.”

The white haired Captain continued his impassioned speech, waving his hands to illustrate his point.

“My officers have returned from four more dispatches bearing the same report from the field. The Hollows have been defeated, homes and livelihoods have been destroyed and members of our Gotei squads are not doing their Seireitei-sworn duty in making sure those left behind are adequately provided for! The nights can still be cold, and there are exposed areas in some of those valleys, yet time and time again we hear the same thing filtered down to our officers. Shinigami come, kill the Hollows — sometimes they cause greater devastation themselves than the Hollows do, releasing their swords in a combat situation where such a move is clearly ludicrous — then they leave, abandoning the residents to their fate.

“If it was just once or twice, then maybe it could be seen as an accidental oversight, but with Hollow incidents increasing, more and more people look likely to be cast out with no shelter or support after suffering one of these raids. Maybe we’re still limited in numbers given the wide area of land we’re covering, but this is not what the divisions were set up to do! If we aren’t going to take care of the people we’re here to protect, why are we here in the first place?”

“A lot of us could ask you that question on a very direct and personal level, Ukitake,”

His neighbouring officer snorted, sending the speaker a derisive glance. “I don’t recall the members of this Gotei voting on appointing District riffraff to lead in the Divisions, let alone treat us to a diatribe that really has very little bearing on our jobs at all. If you want to patch up peasant homes, be my guest. Doubtless they’re all like kin to you anyway. I entreat you, however, to re-read the terms by which we all accept the *haori*. We are here to protect the balance of Seireitei by destroying Hollows. At no point did any one of us take an oath to scabble around in the dust building makeshift shelters for common

folk as I've heard members of the Thirteenth Squad are wont sometimes to do."

"The Districts are a permanent part of the Gotei now," a tall, dark haired lady whose *haori* was marked with a bold character 'four' put in quietly, her eyes conveying a firmness that her gentle tones belied. "We are much indebted to them, in fact, for providing us with such a wide pool of talent from which to select our officers."

"I didn't say a thing about that, either, Unohana-taichou," the original protester insisted. "I'm simply pointing out to Ukitake that there are things which are expected of Gotei officers and things which are not. He obviously has personal connections to these... whatever you want to call them, but the fact of the matter is that Thirteenth Division are squandering valuable Gotei resources on rehousing these individuals. Should we really be responsible for compensating peasants whose lives we've saved? Without our intervention, they would be dead — isn't their survival recompense enough in such a situation?"

"I have no particular personal connection to any District families in District Eight," Ukitake Juushirou spoke stiffly, his words calm yet his eyes flashing with indignant pride at the fake courtesy in his colleague's tones. "I think, however, there are duties which are written into our agreements with the Council and ones which are simply common sense. The Eleventh Division Captain has clearly mistaken the two — either that or he is entirely lacking in compassion."

"Compassion?" The Eleventh Division Captain clicked his tongue disparagingly against the roof of his mouth. "What are we, missionaries or soldiers, for heaven's sake?"

"Fourth Division consider themselves both, Minachi-dono," Unohana Retsu spoke in soft, even tones, but the warning in her words was more than clear. "Besides, I don't believe that to be the material point here. Ukitake-dono has rightly raised a concern which I in turn share. I believe there is a significant disparity between how squads are acting when in the field and it is right that we discuss it further."

"It might help, Unohana-taichou, if we had a full complement of Captains with whom to discuss it."

As a dark glower crossed Minachi Atsushi's features, the room's final inhabitant raised his hand, offering his companions a lazy smile. "This isn't much of a Captain's meeting when most of the Captains have played hooky — do you think maybe we ought to continue this

debate when there are more people present and correct?"

"That can't be helped, Kyouraku-dono," Retsu sighed, spreading her hands helplessly. "The Council of Elders are also meeting today, and therefore many of the central Gotei members are tied up with that. I alone abstained because I felt that Ukitake-dono's submission ought to be heard and minuted by one of us, but there was really no way to ask my colleagues to do the same. Today they are reviewing the progress of a particular project, and as it is I have had to send a trusted kinsman in my place."

"Even if that's so, we're still missing the Captains from Ninth and Twelfth," Juushirou reflected with a sigh, "as well as the Tenth. Hakubei-dono is still patrolling on the far borders of Third District at the moment, so I didn't expect him to be back in time, but in terms of the others... I suppose not everyone thinks there's much value in protecting District livelihoods. Still... a Captain's meeting is..."

"A Captain's meeting summoned on the request of a District Shinigami is unlikely to inspire high attendance," Atsushi said crushingly.

"And yet you're here, Atsushi-dono," Kyouraku Shunsui reflected lightly, reaching across to pat his comrade on the shoulder. "In the circumstances, I feel I ought to commend you for making such a sacrifice of time. Unless, of course, you merely came to try and belittle J... Ukitake's submission. I can't imagine that the Captain of a division such as Eleventh would do such a cheap thing, however, so I really think we ought to applaud you."

"Kyouraku..." Atsushi's eyes narrowed, and Shunsui shot him a benign smile.

"In the meantime, the issue remains," he added evenly. "It won't have escaped anyone's notice that Eighth District is still Kyouraku land, and my brother has also heard rumours of this haphazard style of dealing with battle aftermath. This isn't a new thing, of course, but it's become all the worse since squads stopped being associated only with the Clan land from which most of the members came. I don't say I agree with the old system — divisions have been far too partisan for a long time, and I was as much in favour of that as anyone when the Council first started mooting the idea of a more varied jurisdiction. Trouble is, though, some shinigami just don't care. And, if they don't care, well, things like this happen."

He gestured to Juushirou, who nodded his head with a sigh.

"I didn't know there was a meeting of the Council today," he

admitted, “and I’m sorry for my timing as a result. I was just so cross when I received Enishi’s report, and I wanted something done about it as soon as possible. I realise that maybe demanding things of Captains is not my place — I’m not a member of the Council of Elders, and I can’t give orders to those who hold the same or higher rank as I do. I just don’t like hearing about ravaged villages and decimated crops. With Seireitei spending so much time and effort focusing on improving Rukongai, it seems a shame that we can’t do the same thing here, right in front of our noses.”

“Sentimental,” Atsushi muttered, and Retsu pursed her lips.

“Kyouraku-dono’s points are all valid ones,” she acknowledged. “I will take this forward to the Council and see whether or not they can hand down some kind of directive to shinigami as to what provision they should or should not be making. It will be difficult, however. I fear that there will be support and opposition at that level, just as there is at this. Finances are somewhat stretched in certain areas, and, well, the Spiritless Zone is taking up a good amount of Council expenditure at the current time.”

“The Spiritless Zone,” Shunsui’s eyes became thoughtful, and he nodded his head. “That’s what the Council are meeting about today, isn’t it? My brother mentioned something...”

“Council matters shouldn’t be discussed so openly at Captain’s meetings, Kyouraku-dono,” Retsu said reprovingly. “For the time being, we should return our attentions to Ukitake-dono’s submission. The matter of shinigami conduct in the Districts, and what should be done about it. Aside from my taking it forth to the Council, I’m not sure if...”

“Sorry I’m late!”

Before Retsu could finish her sentence, the door burst open, and a figure stumbled in, an anxious glitter in her pale eyes as she gaze around at the half-empty room. Her hair, a bright yellow blond was sticking out around her head like a halo, and black smudges across her face and hands indicated that she had most likely been working with something explosive — possibly even highly dangerous. Her *haori*, once pristine white was now a murky grey colour, charcoal singed around the edges and with a rent through the back that left a large strip of fabric trailing behind her folornly in the dust. This was Sekime Mareiko, Twelfth Division’s Captain — though a less likely looking candidate for Captancy of anything could not possibly have presented itself. Mareiko was both extremely gifted and extremely scatterbrained — a combination which caused Shunsui no end of amusement

whenever the two should meet.

“Did I miss the meeting? Is everyone gone? I was working on something and lost track of time. If Aoi hadn’t knocked on my door, I swear, I would’ve never realise what the time was!”

“...Sekime-dono,” Atsushi’s brows twitched together in disbelief, “what on earth happened to your *haori*? This might be a meeting summoned by a District pedant, but even given that that’s the case...”

“My *haori*?”

The young woman’s eyes widened and she turned, spinning around on the spot as though trying to view the back of her tattered white robe. “What about it? Is there something stuck on it? Atsushi-kun, could you help me get it off? I’m sure I can’t reach if there is, but I don’t see... ah!”

As she turned, her foot caught in the torn piece of fabric that hung loose from the white coat, and she almost tumbled headlong.

“Woah there, girl,” Shunsui was the first to react, catching her deftly and righting her on her feet. “What Atsushi-dono means is that your *haori* looks a little, erm, less white today than it usually does. Your work before the meeting — might it have something to do with kidou testing?”

“Thank you, Kyouraku-dono,” The Twelfth Captain shot him an embarrassed smile, reaching up to tuck a wisp of scarecrow blond hair behind her ear. “You’re very on the ball today. It was exactly that. How did you know?”

“Just a hunch from your choice of meeting apparel,” Shunsui told her playfully. “I thought for a moment you might be following my example and flouting the rules of Gotei convention by wearing a *haori* in a different shade to a Captain’s meeting — but then I remembered the huge mound of books that I almost tripped over the last time I came to your barracks, and put two and two together.”

“It’s really all very exciting,” the girl’s cheeks flushed with pleasure, her eyes shining at the memory of her research. “I’m beginning to find that combining two Kidou spells into one and then controlling reiatsu to a particular level gives a user...”

“Sekime-dono, this is a Captain’s meeting,” Retsu interjected quietly. “Whilst your Kidou research is extremely valuable and of great interest to each and every one of us, for the time being we have another issue on the agenda. I wonder if you might be able to put your work aside for a brief instant?”

“Oh! Yes, yes of course,” hastily Mareiko smoothed down her wild hair, having very little effect on the overall haystack, nodding her head eagerly. “I’m sorry to have interrupted, Unohana-taichou.”

“We were trying to resolve what to do about squads who don’t make provision for people they’ve unhoused,” Juushirou explained briefly. “I see it as a problem, Minachi-dono doesn’t believe it is, and Unohana-taichou was offering to take it before the Council. I’m not sure that’s a solution, though. The Council of Elders is a different entity from the Gotei in a lot of respects. Even though many of our Captains serve on both, a matter such as this one ought to be settled by the Gotei, surely? If we can’t do even that by ourselves, we’re very useless beings indeed.”

“No comment,” Atsushi muttered, and Shunsui grimaced in the Eleventh Captain’s direction.

“For my part, I don’t suppose Eighth squad have been derelicting in that regard,” he said pensively. “Sora-chan is quite quick off the mark with everything like that. I daresay she’s not as efficient as yours seem to be, J... Ukitake, but nonetheless, I’m fairly sure some of the big pile of paperwork she had me sign last night was to do with things of this nature. You can take it as read that mine’s a vote to make sure all squads do the same. It can be a bare minimum, but even if Council funds are tight at the moment, the Gotei’s coffers aren’t so shabby. We’re most of us from Clan backgrounds and there’s a considerable amount of private wealth invested in individual squads. If Thirteenth can get away with so many petitions for relocation or rebuilding, there’s no excuse for the others to fall behind. Besides, fostering good relationships with the District people is good PR. It doesn’t do to tick off a social class of people who outnumber you. First rule of basic survival, Atsushi-kun — there’s strength in numbers.”

“Strength and numbers are not the same,” Atsushi said archly, shaking his head. “There are a lot of them, I’ll grant you, but the percentage of them who are of any value or potential threat to the Gotei is minimal. Conversely, you might argue that if we were to provide them with too many handouts, they could become bored and use their free time to generate resistance. If they have to rebuild their farmsteads and rehouse their children, they will be far too occupied to raise any kind of rebellion against the Council or against the Gotei. Idle hands make restless minds — is that not the case?”

His gaze flitted to Mareiko at this juncture, who blinked, apparently missing his implication completely.

“Sekime-dono, what do you think?” Juushirou asked quizzically,

and Mareiko frowned, pursing her lips.

“Some of the Hollows are pretty dangerous,” she said frankly. “They do a lot of damage, sometimes destroying whole villages or towns.”

“We know that,” Atsushi was impatient. “That’s not the Gotei’s responsibility or fault, however.”

“On the contrary, I think it is?” The vague look had gone from the young woman’s eyes at Atsushi’s comment, and she shook her head. “No, it must be. We’re here to purify Hollows. If we get to them too late to stop them destroying things then we are responsible, aren’t we? Our job is to purify them — if we’re tardy, then well, of course the fault is with us.”

“I give up,” Atsushi groaned. “I came here today because I hoped I’d get a sensible perspective on a ridiculous request, but instead I have the Gotei’s laziest Captain and a scarecrow in a charcoal *haori* telling me that Ukitake’s ludicrous suggestions have foundation. Unohana-taichou, I realise that Fourth Squad have a particular interest in helping all the less fortunates in this world, but surely you aren’t going to side with them as well?”

“I believe that, for the time being, there has been enough concern raised for us to bring the matter to a full Captain’s meeting,” Retsu said matter-of-factly. “As a representative of the Council of Elders, I will also mention it at that level if we are unable to reach a consensus among Gotei leaders as to what should be done. Ukitake-dono, your plea is noted and will be carried forward. This meeting is dismissed.”

“He really only came to cause an obstruction, didn’t he?”

As they trailed out of the meeting room and onto the streets of Inner Seireitei, Shunsui fell into step with Juushirou, casting him a resigned glance. “There’s no other good reason why Atsushi-kun would’ve chosen to come to a meeting you asked for unless he wanted to push his blade in metaphorically and twist it around a bit. I’m sorry, Juu. You came with a valid point, and his overall attitude sucked.”

“I know, but I’m used to it,” Juushirou ran his fingers through his lank white hair, offering his friend a rueful grin. “He’s hated me since I poached Enishi away from Eleventh as my Vice Captain, and my being District just adds insult to injury. You put him neatly in his place, though, and besides, I got what I wanted. I didn’t expect the idea to be passed through today, with so few Captains present — but I did think I might have a chance of getting it put on a full agenda if I

tackled it like this.”

“Meaning that you fibbed. Naughty boy,” Shunsui tut-tutted, arching an eyebrow in his friends direction. “You knew full well the Council were meeting today, didn’t you?”

Juushirou’s grin widened.

“I’m not completely stupid, you know,” he said frankly. “You don’t spend so much time surrounded by duplicitous Clansfolk without learning a native trick or two. Of course I knew. If I’d have made a submission to anyone else at any other time, it would probably have been trampled under other people’s paperwork. Giving it to Unohana-taichou means it will at least get a full airing, and that’s all I wanted. I can take any amount of abuse from Minachi and those like him if the end result is still a more positive one for the District folk in Outer Seireitei.”

“I’m not sure whether I ought to be proud of you or worried that spending so much time in Clan company has made you devious,” Shunsui clapped a warm hand down on his friend’s shoulder, letting out an amused chuckle. “Though in seriousness, I’m glad for the Districts that they have you to speak for them. What Thirteenth Division is doing in Eighth District hasn’t gone unnoticed. Nisama wanted me to thank you for your Division’s efforts — and I’m sure it’s been the same in other places, as well.”

“I try my best, but you have to remember, I have a lot of District members, too,” Juushirou reminded him. “My squad was formed originally as a place for District shinigami to go. Even now, it has the highest quantity of District-born shinigami in all of the Gotei Thirteen. True, your squad took on a few, and there are others scattered here and there, but the bulk of them remain in Thirteenth Division because other squad Captains aren’t sure about dealing with them. Most of the Captains are tolerant of the idea, but not all the Vice Captains are and as for the seated officers...”

“Prejudice is a hard demon to tame,” Shunsui reflected pensively, “but you might be the one who’ll do it, if you keep on at them hard enough. You’re idealistic enough for ten Captains, when you get something fixed in your head.”

“It isn’t just about being idealistic,” Juushirou shook his head, a shadow entering his hazel gaze. “People don’t talk about it any more, but it doesn’t mean that it’s forgotten. I don’t want it remembered, if at all possible... I want to keep Seireitei as peaceful as it’s been in recent years.”

“Pardon me?” Shunsui looked blank, and Juushirou grimaced.

“Keitarou,” he murmured, lowering his voice, and Shunsui’s eyes narrowed.

“Yes,” he agreed grimly. “I was afraid you meant that, only I was hoping you didn’t. I’m sure you’re right — he’s there, watching and waiting for his chance to strike back. It’s been a long time, but I find it hard to believe he’s given up and the longer the lull, the more time he has to prepare a surprise attack. The Clans are foolish if they think the coast is clear and they can ignore the danger. The wider implications of being kind to District people might only be apparent in a time of crisis and it’s a crisis we all want to avert... but it doesn’t hurt to lay reassuring groundwork, just in case.”

“Exactly,” Juushirou nodded. “To which end, we’re doing our best.”

“The Council is so focused on the Spiritless Zone that they’ve forgotten about Outer Seireitei,” Shunsui sighed. “We never thought it would be easy, did we, if you were made a Captain in the way you were, but even so, by now I had hoped...”

“Working in Seventh District and dealing with raw abuse on a daily basis was easy in comparison to seeing innocent people bereft of everything and those who could help them standing by and refusing to do so,” Juushirou rubbed his brow absently. “In Seventh, I knew what to expect and I wasn’t afraid to face it. I had Enishi and Hirata to back me up, and Shikibu Naoko as well, of course. Between their Clan influence and my bullheadedness we pulled through and as a result, people like Kotetsu Tenichi are now able to transfer to join Seventh without risk of reprisal, even though he’s born as District as I am. Maybe working there with them gave me a false impression of being able to do the same on a wider scale — but it’s that old lesson again. You can’t change people, not really, and you will never be accepted by everyone you meet.”

“More fool them, then,” Shunsui said categorically. “In any case, this round of the battle was your win. In the next round, you’ll have to be prepared to bring on the big guns if necessary, though — you’ve thought about that, I suppose?”

“I already have the provisional backing of three Captains,” Juushirou said dismissively. “If you include me, that makes four. I need three more and it’s a carried vote. I’m not worried about it, Shunsui. I’ll speak to Shirogane-dono when I have a moment, see if he can mention it to Guren-sama, and I’m pretty sure Hirata will take our part, given the precedent of aid in Seventh. That will leave one more

to find, and when Hakubei-dono's back from the Third border, I expect that he'll be it."

"Hrm," Shunsui's eyes became slits. "Do you want me to send Sora to discuss it with him? It might be a quicker persuasion, if it's his sister who's doing the convincing."

"If you don't mind, that would help," Juushirou agreed. "I'd be hopeful of Shihouin Midori siding with us, and I'll send Enishi to speak to his kin in First if I have to, but it doesn't hurt to have all bases covered and I'd rather not get Genryuusai-sensei involved if I can avoid it."

He sighed heavily.

"To be truthful, I originally wanted to address the problem of the Hollows themselves, but there weren't enough people present to make it worthwhile doing," he admitted. "When I realised that, I decided to change my tack and focus on the other matter instead. I'm sure I'm not the only one who's noticed an increase in our workload, though, particularly in the last couple of months. I've not had a chance to be out in the field much myself, so I'm relying on what Enishi or Naoko have told me, but their impressions are that Hollows are appearing more by design than by accident. I realise that sounds at odds with everything we know about Hollows, but the way in which they're attacking..."

He shrugged helplessly.

"Naoko came back to camp yesterday saying that the Hollow they'd taken out had waited for them to appear before launching any major attack on the village," he continued. "She said it was as though they'd been left there as bait to lure out a shinigami squad, and then destroyed the village, so as it looked like the shinigami were to blame. Naoko being Naoko, the Hollow didn't get much chance to think about killing anything, but how she described its behaviour concerned me. Enishi's said similar things about them, too — they act as though they can discriminate what and when they are attacking. I know it sounds insane, and I'm not sure quite how to put that before the rest of the Gotei, but Shunsui, even so..."

"Your Vice Captain and your Third Seat are both people whose opinions I'd trust," Shunsui rubbed his chin ruefully. "Naoko-chan in particular has become a very sharp individual, and that sword of hers may be one of the nastiest in Seireitei, but it's one of the best for picking up spiritual information. No, if that's what they've told you, I'd be inclined to believe it. I see what you mean about the rest of the

Captains, though. They might consider it to be excuses by your subordinates if they looked at the information in the wrong way.”

He shrugged.

“I’ve not been in the field either,” he owned, “and for once it hasn’t been because I’m lazy. I’ve been in and out of Inner Seireitei, but not fighting Hollows. My brother wanted my input on something he was taking to Council about the Spiritless Zone, and whenever I’m dragged back home, Haru-kun uses it as an excuse to draw blades and fight with me. He seems to think that if he can beat me he’ll have proven himself as the most powerful member of the Kyouraku... and being that he’s heir to the Clan, it’s not really in my power to refuse him.”

“His spirit power is still unsettled, I take it?” Juushirou paused, eying his friend keenly, and Shunsui nodded.

“Yeah. Oh, he has it, at least, in part,” he reflected, “but nothing like the level needed to do what we’re doing day after day. He’s quite ticked off about it, I think, deep down — he’s got a layabout Uncle who drinks and sleeps more hours in the day than he trains and yet he still can’t take a sword from me.”

Juushirou chuckled.

“I can understand his frustration,” he teased lightly, “but perhaps it’s no bad thing for Eighth Squad and Eighth District’s leadership to part into two distinct strains. Tokutarou-sama is a statesman but he’s not a shinigami. You, on the other hand...”

“I’m barely either, but I can muddle along with my *zanpakutou* and flap my *haori* where need be,” Shunsui agreed good-naturedly. “No, I agree with you. You can absolutely have too many responsibilities... as today’s Captain’s meeting proves.”

“Yes...” Juushirou clicked his tongue against his teeth absently. “I wonder whether that way of running things will be able to last long-term. With squads becoming more demanding, it must be hard to juggle everything.”

“Agreed,” Shunsui inclined his head. “Oh well. For the time being, all we can do is tackle the hurdles right in front of us, and hope for the best. Whether we worry or we don’t, there’s been no activity of any kind from anyone fitting Keitarou’s description, and Hirata has more or less given up on finding his missing sister. Whilst we can’t assume they died, we also can’t waste resources chasing after them when so many District people are suffering and there’s so much work going on in Rukongai.”

“The Spiritless Zone...” Juushirou’s expression became pensive, and Shunsui shot him a grin, patting him reassuringly on the back.

“I’m sure your *hime* hasn’t forgotten you, even if she is surrounded by desperate plus souls on a daily basis,” he said lightly. “Mitsuki’s not that kind of girl, and I’m sure that no matter how warm and friendly her squad mates are, she won’t stray. You shouldn’t look like that, Juu — in Shinigami years, a little over twenty is nothing.”

“You can say that so easily,” Juushirou grimaced. “I haven’t any idea what she’s facing, out there. It’s cruel, you know, expecting her to be recalled and then discovering her patrol is going to be the one patrol staying in Rukongai to manage the Spiritless Zone because they have the least conflicting reiatsu and therefore are the only safe option. It might be another decade or two now before I get to see Mitsuki again — and even if things have changed between us, I miss having her around. She promised at the very least we’d stay friends, and it’s hard to do that when you can’t even send a message.”

“Unauthorised contact with the Spiritless Zone is entirely forbidden,” Shunsui reflected. “I’m sure it’s nothing personal.”

“Even so..”

“It’s something else that we can’t do anything about,” Shunsui said gravely. “Listen, Juushirou. I know how you feel — believe me, I do — but the both of you decided on pursuing your individual dreams and it’s what you’ve done. Don’t say you regret it now, do you? Think of all the people you’ve helped since you took the *haori*. Was that worthless?”

“No, and I still believe I did the right thing. We both did,” Juushirou responded evenly. “It’s just hard when those dreams have to take place in entirely segregated locations. It’s fine, Shunsui. I’m fine. Really. Just all this talk about the Spiritless Zone makes me wonder what’s happening over the Sekkiseki divide. Are they all all right? Are they succeeding? We get such fleeting reports that it’s hard to be sure.”

“The spirit levels in Rukongai have become so dangerous, Plus souls are being contaminated on a daily basis,” Shunsui said grimly. “The Spiritless Zone may not be a permanent solution, nor the most ideal, but if it helps to steady that anomaly, then it’s a good thing. This world isn’t out of danger, balance-wise. Plus souls should not be in such close proximity to marauding Hollows, not to mention spiritual radiation spilling out from our battles here and in the Real World. The seals the Urahara are working on to limit the power of people like us

when we cross into the Real World aren't yet perfect, and the *Senkaimon* are still little more than floodgates when it comes to leaking spiritual energy. If it's true that that pollution is contributing to the number of Hollow transformations among Plus souls, then drastic action was necessary. Mitsuki's at the forefront of saving those souls, isn't she?"

"She is." Despite himself, Juushirou smiled. "You're right. I'm just being nostalgic. It'll pass."

He glanced up at the sky.

"It's getting late. I need to get back to Thirteenth's base, and hear Naoko's report."

"Naoko-chan?" Shunsui looked curious, and Juushirou nodded.

"After Enishi and the others destroyed that Hollow yesterday, I sent her out to scout the perimeters of the District to see if she could find where the Hollow had come from," he agreed. "Call me paranoid, but I'm suspicious about this and I can't wait for the Council to order a full investigation, not if it's putting people's lives at risk. Scouting for Hollow activity is within my remit as Captain, so I decided to send Naoko out with Dokusou Houshi to see what she could see. As *zanpakutou* go, hers is better than a tracker dog for stray *reiryoku*."

"I see," Shunsui rubbed his chin. "You're going through Council channels, but you're pursuing your own as well?"

"Mm," Juushirou's hazel eyes darkened. "I can't explain it, but I just have a bad feeling about it. All of it... feels wrong somehow. I sent Naoko because of everyone, I thought she would be the best placed to check whether my worst suspicions have any basis."

"Keitarou, you mean?" Shunsui frowned, and Juushirou nodded.

"Naoko and I have both been manipulated by him and his sword, and we're both very aware therefore of what Chudokuga's *reiryoku* feels like," he said softly. "I'm not sure if that sword can manipulate Hollows like it can shinigami, but even as an outside chance, it's something worth looking into. Keep this to yourself though, Shunsui. I told Naoko to report direct to me about it, and nobody else — I don't want Enishi troubling about this kind of intrigue when he's got so much on his plate with training and leading clean-up missions. His skills are better put to helping the District people — but Naoko doesn't let go of something once she has a hold on it, and I trust that sense of hers in a situation like this."

Shunsui eyed him for a moment, then he nodded his head.

"I'll come with you, if I may," he said frankly. "I'd like to hear Naoko-chan's report too, if you don't mind."

"If you like," Juushirou agreed, a flicker of relief in his hazel gaze. "It might be good having your take on it, too."

"I see," Shunsui looked pensive. "This isn't a first mission, is it? What you said about the Hollows and Enishi and Naoko's reports... you've been keeping track of this for some time, haven't you?"

"A while," Juushirou acknowledged, his cheeks reddening sheepishly. "I didn't want to worry you by telling you I was looking for Keitarou, but I think it's something I need to fully rule out before I'm satisfied. It's perfectly possible that the increase in Hollows and their activity might be explained away by something else, but..."

"You needn't say anything else," Shunsui said grimly. "I'll come with you to Thirteenth, you can feed me, and I'll hear Naoko-chan's report with you. I don't promise I can add anything, but it might give me things to think about."

"Taichou!"

As the two men approached the Thirteenth Division's barracks, a young woman hurried up to them, her tail of thick auburn hair pulled back from her face by a white ribbon and her attire the simple black and white of an on duty shinigami. She paused a foot or two away from the pair, briskly bowing her head towards Juushirou before raising her gaze quizzically to Shunsui's. "I'm sorry, I thought I was reporting to you alone? Why is Kyouraku-dono here?"

"I invited myself, Naoko-chan," Shunsui offered her a blithe smile, bowing his head playfully towards her. "I missed your pretty smile, so decided to come gatecrash your meeting. Do you mind my company that much? I'm shattered!"

"You never change, do you?" The girl's greenish eyes glittered with irritation, then she sighed, her gaze flitting to Juushirou's.

"Taichou? What do you want me to do?"

"Shunsui knows where you've been, and why," Juushirou said evenly. "If you don't mind, Naoko, I'd like him to hear your report too. It might be that he can add to it."

"I see," Naoko's sharp features took on a look of comprehension, and she nodded. "In that case, I have no objections. If it's Kyouraku-dono, I suppose he knows as much as anyone about... the thing you've sent me to investigate."

“I should hope so,” Shunsui said soberly. “All teasing aside, Naoko, I want to help. I have just as many horrible memories of certain past events as you both do — and I understand the reasons for Juushirou acting how he is. That being the case, I hope for once you’ll ignore my idiocy and allow me into the loop. I hope that Juushirou is wrong — but on the off-chance that he’s not, the more prepared we are, the better.”

“Yes,” Naoko’s greenish eyes clouded, and she inclined her head.

“Let’s go inside,” Juushirou stepped forward, pulling back the divide that led to the Thirteenth Division’s Inner Seireitei barracks. They were more sparsely furnished than those belonging to any of the other, Clan-sponsored divisions, but they had a unique, homely atmosphere all the same, and for the District Captain, the frills and trimmings that other Captains liked to adorn their chambers with seemed an unnecessary expense. As a result, the building was simply but comfortably appointed. As the smallest Gotei squad, Thirteenth Division’s barracks housed seventeen seated officers and four recruits, which, along with Captain and Vice Captain gave the squad an overall population of twenty three. In comparison to Shunsui’s Eighth Division, which now numbered a thriving thirty six, it should have been a quieter place, but the mutual trust and friendship Juushirou had built between his members meant that whether they were training, doing chores or preparing for a Council inspection, merry banter could generally be heard drifting between the hallways.

“When I come here, I realise that when you used to say you’d make your squad your family, you really meant it,” Shunsui said ruefully. “Thirteenth Division has a nice atmosphere — I can’t imagine that it’ll remain the smallest squad for much longer.”

“Thirteenth Division has no Clan rivalries or unnecessary parades of status or wealth,” Naoko said shortly, casting him a long-suffering glance. “Everyone starts off the same, so there’s never any conflict of position.”

“You and Enishi are both Clan, though,” Shunsui pointed out, and Naoko shook her head impatiently.

“I left the Unohana a long time ago, so I count the same as any other District shinigami,” she said briskly. “As for Houjou-fukutaichou, he’s always been the type to either ignore or not notice Clan convention, so he fits better here than he would’ve done in First. We’re a District squad, Kyouraku-dono, and that’s how we prefer it.”

“I see,” Shunsui let out a low whistle, offering her an approving

grin. "Well said. I see Juu's dream has fully seeped into you, and so it should. You make an impressive sight, Naoko-chan, and all the more so knowing you earned it through your own hard work, not your connections. Dare I say it makes you all the prettier, seeing that resolution in your eyes?"

"Until you said the last part, I almost thought that was a compliment," Naoko sighed, shaking her head in resignation. "Sometimes, you know, it's very hard remembering to call you Captain when you still act as foolishly as when we were schoolmates."

"In private quarters like this, there's no need for you to call me so formally. No subordinates are here to see us," Shunsui assured her. "Unless your Captain objects, of course?"

He cast Juushirou a glance, and his friend grimaced, shaking his head.

"We came here for business, not banter," he reminded them, leading the pair of them through the barracks towards the rear door. Beyond this was a long pine walkway suspended over a thriving koi pond, and, when Juushirou had first seen it, he had fallen in love with the location at once. As a result, he had instructed the building of his Captain's quarters to be here, surrounded by the lapping waves of the lake's surface, and consequently there was now a small, simple structure at the very end of what was almost a pier.

Known as Juushirou's "Ugendou", it had soon become his home from home, being both a place of convalescence when he was ill, and a place of strategy when he was fit. No matter what the time of day or night, members of Thirteenth Division knew their Captain's door was always open, and even in the throes of fever, he never turned anyone away.

It was empty now, and as the trio made themselves comfortable on the cushions that littered the floor, Juushirou sighed, letting out his breath in a rush.

"Well?" he asked softly, his expression troubled as he met Naoko's gaze. "What have you to report to me, Naoko?"

Naoko did not respond straight away, then she slowly shook her head.

"I didn't pick up any trace of a reiatsu Dokusou Houshi knew," she said softly. "I don't think Chudokuga was active in the region where Fukutaichou met with that Hollow yesterday, nor could I find any trace of its presence in the vicinity Atsudan and I took down the

creature that threatened the other village. In short, the result of the investigation was negative.”

“Negative, huh?” Juushirou rubbed his chin, and Shunsui’s eyes narrowed thoughtfully.

“Despite that, Naoko-chan, you seem remarkably preoccupied,” he observed. “If there’s no sign of Chudokuga, that means that you can’t connect the Hollow activity with Aizen Keitarou, doesn’t it? If that’s the case, surely it’s good news? You should be relieved — why aren’t you?”

Naoko shot Shunsui a startled look, then she bit her lip, nodding her head.

“I didn’t detect any trace of Chudokuga, or any other zanpakutou, so far as I’m aware,” she agreed carefully. “I can’t, however, dismiss those two incidents as unfortunately timed coincidences.”

“What do you mean?” Juushirou eyed Naoko in consternation, and Naoko sighed.

“It wasn’t easy to read the scene where Fukutaichou fought,” she said quietly. “There was a lot of released reiatsu there from Kirio and Ketsui’s attacks. That said...”

“There was something else?” Shunsui asked sharply, and Naoko hesitated, then slowly lowered her head in agreement.

“It was faint and fleeting, as though it was nothing more than imagination,” she agreed. “I wasn’t sure, so I released Dokusou Houshi and my sword confirmed it. Kirio’s reiatsu is still at the scene, and so is Ketsui-kun’s. There’s a trace of the Hollow... and... something else. Something unfamiliar, but something that... shouldn’t have been there.”

“In short, foreign reiatsu?” Shunsui tapped his fingers idly on the tatami-mat floor. “You didn’t recognise it?”

“No,” Naoko agreed, ‘and nor did my sword. It was really only the most fleeting trace of it, so I couldn’t process it properly. I’m sorry, Taichou,’ she turned to Juushirou. “I feel like I’ve come back with an inadequate report.”

“You’ve done the best you could, and probably better than anyone else would have in that situation,” Juushirou shook his head, though his own brow was creased with concern. “It could be coincidence, I suppose, or something left over from a previous encounter, but...”

“It was right there at the same location, and Dokusou Houshi was

certain it hadn't been there any longer than twenty four hours — about the same length of time since Fukutaichou encountered the Hollow,” Naoko shook her head. “I’m sure it’s not a coincidence, but I can’t prove it. It was just... too convenient.”

“Someone trying to hide their reiatsu, perhaps?” Shunsui suggested, and Naoko shrugged.

“Perhaps,” she said uneasily. “I don’t know. It’s hard to explain — I haven’t felt anything like it before. It didn’t feel like a zanpakutou’s release, but it seemed like a rush of spiritual energy from something or someone.”

“But it was too feeble to properly analyse?” Juushirou questioned.

“Yes,” Naoko sighed. “At least, it was too polluted to get a clear reading from. It was meshed with the reiatsu belonging to the Hollow and the blades that eventually took the creature down. It was a strong Hollow, Taichou. Above average, and perfectly capable of killing a few District people, if it had wanted to. Now I’ve sensed it’s spirit power, I’m all the more confused. It was attacking the village, but it didn’t have any killing spirit. And then, this weird reiatsu was there too... almost as though...”

“Someone had tamed a Hollow and was giving it distinct orders not to kill District people?” Shunsui asked quietly. Naoko nodded.

“Yes. Just like that.”

“Is that possible, without a sword like Chudokuga?” Juushirou looked blank. “Shunsui, your sword uses manipulation — is that something Katen Kyoukotsu could do?”

“Are you trying to frame me?” Shunsui demanded lightly. “No, I don’t think so. It’s not the same kind of manipulation as Chudokuga’s blade has. Keitarou’s the only person who has a weapon like that, and I think we’d have heard something about it if one of the Gotei was capable of releasing that kind of attack.”

“It wasn’t a *zanpakutou*. Dokusou Houshi was quite sure it wasn’t a *zanpakutou*,” Naoko said firmly. “He wants me to tell you that, Taichou. Whatever that reiatsu was, it was someone’s raw ability, and nothing to do with a blade. He’s certain it wasn’t Chudokuga, and I agree with him. I don’t know what it was, or why someone would be playing puppets with Hollows, but I’m pretty certain it wasn’t Aizen Keitarou controlling that monster.”

“A Hollow attacked a village, did a lot of damage, but did not kill a single resident,” Shunsui said slowly. “At the scene, a foreign reiatsu is

detected, and that reiatsu is somehow meshed with the Hollow's. It could be a coincidental meshing of residue, but it might not be. It wasn't the reiatsu associated with a released *zanpakutou* — I'm sure Dokusou Houshi would recognise a fellow sword's spiritual footprint, so I'm inclined to believe your *zanpakutou*'s right, Naoko. If that's true, though, that means..."

"Someone used bare reiatsu to control the Hollow, made it fight but denatured its killing instinct, so it just created chaos?" Juushirou looked incredulous, and Shunsui shrugged.

"Someone wanted to leave living witnesses," he said pragmatically.

"But why, for goodness' sake?"

"Maybe for the exact result we're looking to ourselves," Shunsui mused. "Perhaps they wanted to draw attention to it, and to the Districts. Maybe they wanted someone to go plead their case before the Gotei and the Council, to improve things for the people living there?"

"You're saying this is a District rogue acting for the sake of his or her people, and nothing to do with Keitarou at all?" Naoko was taken aback, and Shunsui shrugged.

"We know nothing about anything," he said heavily. "It's just a hypothesis, but if such a District vigilante does exist, we ought to try and find them and persuade them to find a different way to express their feelings."

"I'll teach them to do that," Naoko's eyes darkened. "Whether they're acting with the Districts in mind or not, they're doing damage and causing panic and homelessness. It has to stop — so if there is someone acting out like that, we'll find them and stop them, Taichou. That's a promise."

Juushirou nodded.

"Do so," he agreed gravely. "Take Atsudane and Ketsui with you, Naoko — go to the Districts and see what you can find out about anyone with unusual spirit power who seems to have a dislike for Shinigami."

"Consider it done," Naoko was already on her feet. "Ketsui has a way with getting people to trust him, so if there's something to find out, we'll track it down."

It had grown quiet, now.

As the sun began to set over the southernmost edge of Eighth District, the young man leant lazily back against the trunk of an aging elm tree, surveying the changing colours of the sky with a sigh of contentment. Standing here, he reflected, it was like he was looking out across an artist's pallet, with the warm reds and ambers of the sunset against the rich greens and soft petal blue and lavender of the Kyouraku landscape. During the day, there was no time to sit and absorb Seireitei in this vein, but in the evening, when his work was over, he looked forward to his few moments of peace and pleasure underneath the darkening horizon.

“Beautiful...”

The word slipped from his lips, half wistful, half joyful as little by little the night began to encroach across the District.

“If I had known coming to Seireitei would be like this, I would have volunteered to come much sooner.”

He reached up to stretch his arms, clasping his fingers around the lower branch of the elm and pulling himself nimbly up into the branches, curling his body securely among the leaves as he took a better view of his surroundings. Although the light was starting to die away, it was a clear night, and before long he knew the moon would be gleaming down over him, the stars acting like tiny nightlights to guide him back home. Soon, he knew, he would have to leave this place, for his job was done and he had no reason to prolong his stay — and yet he lingered, unwilling to leave the pure air and the peaceful countryside sooner than he must.

Rukongai really is the end of all existence.

He sighed, sinking back against the wood and closing his eyes as a cool evening breeze teased at stray wisps of his sleek black hair.

If possible, I would prefer to end things here sooner, rather than later. Making this place resemble that one would be unforgivable, even if this is the Shinigami's land. Surely it would be better to steal it away from them, than burn it and destroy it and leave it a wasteland. It seems such a waste, ravaging such a beautiful skyline for the sake of politics and pride.

He let out his breath in a rush, remembering the last time he had raised such a point of view at home.

I've spent too long in Rukongai to understand, huh? I suppose that's true.

“So here you are.”

He had come silently, and despite himself, the young man started, almost tumbling out of his tree in surprise. There was a soft chuckle

from the grass below, and the man shifted his position, peering down through the leavy foliage to make out the speaker in the gloom.

He was wrapped in a heavy cloak, the hood raised to all but obscure his face, and only the tips of his fingers emerged from the long sleeves of his *hakamashita*. If he were to stand completely still, the man reflected, his companion might be mistaken for a dead tree or even just a shadow in the gloom, for there was nothing distinctive about his appearance, nor did he give off any significant aura to announce his presence.

If I wasn't me, probably I wouldn't even be aware of him. He knows that, and even knowing that, he still managed to catch me off guard. I ought to be more careful.

"I thought you might have got distracted by a pretty District girl again?"

There was light humour in the stranger's tone, but the young man knew that there would be no flicker of amusement in the other's pale brown eyes.

"I didn't expect to have to come fetch you this evening, Katsura-kun."

"I'm sorry."

Despite himself, the young man called Katsura bowed his head, dropping down between the tree branches onto the grass below.

"I didn't mean to be late... I just stopped to watch the sunset. District Eight is really very pretty at night, and I thought it would be a shame to miss it."

"I suppose there aren't many peaceful places for you to sit and observe the world, are there?"

A shapeless arm came up to rest against Katsura's shoulders, and for the first time the young man saw the glitter of eyes beneath the cowl of the cloak. "Sending you here is a risk and a worry for me, you know that. Maybe you'll choose to stay here. Perhaps you'll let your naivety bewitch you into believing this is a good place to be. I worry about those things, Katsura. I worry, and so I came to find you."

"A good place to be..."

Katsura pressed his lips together, turning to glance back towards the horizon, where the beautiful colours of moments before were now shrouded in the black of night. Slowly he shook his head.

“The beauty is here only for a fleeting moment,” he said quietly. “I wanted to see it, just for that moment. Now it’s gone — swallowed up by the darkness, and it doesn’t hold any interest for me any more. It was just a brief whim of mine, that’s all. I’m coming back... I never intended otherwise.”

“Then we should go,” the figure responded evenly. “The *Senkaimon* isn’t far from here, and there are those who are anxiously awaiting your report. Staying here longer than necessary is not safe, and you should know better by now. You are an unknown here, true enough, which is why I took the risk of sending you — but that doesn’t mean it’s safe. Believe it or not, I worry for your safety as much as for the success of what we try to do. Keep that in mind too before you engage in your own whims, Katsura-kun. It’s not the world you want it to be, and you must not let yourself get seduced by it, not even for a moment.”

Katsura sighed, nodding his head in resignation.

“I understand. I’m sorry. I’ll be more careful in future.”

“Good,” his companion seemed pleased, and Katsura could almost discern relief in the hooded man’s words. “If that’s so, then we’ll say no more of it and move on. What of your tasks? Did you manage to carry out each satisfactorily?”

“As easily as breathing in and out,” Katsura feigned a yawn, patting his hand over his mouth. “Hollows really are stupid creatures, aren’t they?”

“They pose you no particular competition, that’s for sure,” now his companion was amused, and Katsura knew he had the hooded figure’s approval. “I suppose the shinigami came and took care of them all?”

“They did, exactly as you said they would,” Katsura agreed. “I couldn’t watch them do it, of course, but I read the vibes they left behind. They’re remarkably efficient, some of them... though do we really need to destroy villages to get our point across?”

“In order to create an army, Katsura, you first need to create dissent,” the other man said wisely, pulling something small and silver-bladed from his belt and plunging it into what appeared to be empty dark sky. The atmosphere shuddered then divided, revealing a passage blacker than the night itself, and the hooded man gave his younger companion’s sleeve a little tug, leading him into the tunnel as the sky closed behind them. “The people here are half scared, half complacent about the way the world currently is. They want change, but do not know how to get it, and lack the motivation to join

together to make it happen. They are naive, just as you are — they see only the good, and don't realise the bad lurking beneath the surface. When they observe how little the Clans that rule them are able or willing to protect them, then we gain in strength. Some things cannot be rushed to fruition — sometimes the slow path yields a better crop."

Katsura shot his companion a sidelong glance, stifling a sigh.

There he goes again, talking about things I don't understand and bringing out metaphors that make no sense to anybody but himself. I'm sure what we're doing has a point, but it would be nice if he'd just come out and say what it was.

"Katsura-kun?" The other man reached up to push back the hood of his cloak, casting his companion a quizzical look, and Katsura shot him a sheepish smile.

He might not read minds, but he reads people all the same. I should be more careful — he doesn't miss a trick, and I can't open him up the way I can most others.

Out loud he said,

"I suppose it's part of my being naive, but I don't understand how making those people scared and homeless will make it easier for us to take control of Seireitei. Even if the people do get cross, won't they be cross at us?"

"People are remarkably easy to manipulate, and very willing to believe what they see without looking to the inner workings for the truth," his companion said frankly. "Let me worry about those things, all right? Your job is to continue as you have been."

He pursed his lips.

"How many shinigami have become victims to your Hollow rampages?"

"Shinigami? I wouldn't know," Katsura was surprised. "I haven't been counting things like that — why?"

"And District people?"

"None, of course," Katsura snorted. "I told you, I wasn't going to kill people that might one day be our neighbours. It would be too weird. Shinigami are one thing, maybe — they're the enemy, aren't they? If this is a war, and if they've done all the things you say they have, that's a whole other matter. I'm not going to kill folk who just live quietly minding their own business, though. I'll take the Hollows and I'll make them rip apart buildings and forests, but I won't sacrifice

people that don't need to be sacrificed."

"You really are still far too naive for your age," his companion sighed, but nodded his head. "Very well. For now, I'll humour your idealism and let it go. There's no need to cause unnecessary death, and so for the time being you can have your way."

He slashed the silver blade across the atmosphere once more, reopening the gateway into the ramshackle backstreets of Rukongai's seventeenth District. Katsura stepped reluctantly out into the cool air, shivering involuntarily as a sharp wind blew through the gaps between the settlements, whistling and howling between the split rafters.

"It must be nice, living in Seireitei," he murmured, and his companion offered him a slight smile.

"One day, you'll be able to judge that for yourself," he said firmly. "One day, when we return Seireitei to the people and are able to live there in peace."

Author's Note

Characters in this fic.

Hikifune Kirio is, of course, a canon character but about whom we know practically nothing. This story rendition of her may yet be contradicted by canon in the not so distant future. **Ketsui** and **Tenichiboth** made an appearance as children in *Third Chronicle*, along with their ill-fated father Daisuke and their resolute mother Irie. They will appear more in this story and Kotetsu Isane and Kiyone we know from canon are descended from this line.

Many of the others are OCs, both new and those from Meifu's Gate. Hopefully they will be received with as much love and understanding here as they were throughout Meifu. If you haven't already waded through Meifu's Gate's installments, you might find yourself missing on bits of the backstory to some of the characters introduced in these first few chapters.

The last thing I'm going to do is put huge long biographies of each into the text, since it disrupts the flow of the story and is known as "information dumping", a big writing no-no. Besides, it'd take me a few chapters to summarise everything that happened through Meifu's Gate, so you'll forgive me I hope for not rehashing the old ground. A bunch of the OCs in this are Ukitake and Kyouraku's Academy classmates or peers from Meifu, so shouldn't need heavy introductions

for most readers who are familiar with my Academy fiction.

I shall endeavour to use the AN to introduce/reintroduce a few of the more significant ones as the story goes on, so as people aren't confused.

Ganbarimasu :)

3. The Spiritless Zone

Chapter Two: The Spiritless Zone

The tension in Rukongai was definitely increasing.

The young woman stood at the edge of the ramshackle settlement, a troubled expression on her fair features as she gazed down into the valley below. The day before yesterday, there had been a Hollow raid in this part of the Spiritless Zone, and it had been all she and her companions could do to shelter the frightened people as the monsters raged and ravaged through their few paltry possessions. The whole area had been razed to the ground with many left dead or dying, and as she surveyed the still smouldering site, something lurched inside her chest. They were gone, but she could still hear them. The dead were as ghosts on the wind, but their scattered spirits were lost and confused in this impoverished place.

Even the three protected regions that the Council were working so hard to maintain were still far more dangerous a place than the Real World. This time it had been a village in Hokutan which had suffered the worst of the raid, but only a week before it had been a shack settlement on the border that ran between Nakaken and Junrin'an, in which twelve souls had been killed and a further seven seriously maimed. Tonight the shinigami would stay here, waiting and watching for signs of further danger, but despite the faintly smouldering ruins of the Plus soul's village, the Hokutan skyline was still.

The young woman sighed, turning on her heel and making her way slowly back towards the makeshift refugee camp that had been erected for the survivors of the village. There had not been many — perhaps ten or fifteen at best, and as she and her companions had treated them, the shinigami had been struck by one thing in particular. Though they were of all ages, large and small, these souls had something in common.

Each of them had a distinct spiritual soulprint of their own.

“Mitsuki, the squad captain has been waiting for you.”

The familiar tones of her comrade and colleague, Aomori Seri pulled the shinigami back to the present and she bowed her head in acknowledgement of the message, shooting Seri a faint smile.

“I’m sorry. I was dwelling far too much on what’s already happened, instead of what needs to be done,” she said apologetically, falling into step with her companion as they both made their way back to the heart of the survivors’ camp. “It’s a bad habit of mine... I just can’t help wondering whether, if we’d arrived here more quickly...”

“We came as quickly as we could,” Seri’s own expression became grave. “It’s not like we dallied en route, it’s just that these attacks are becoming more and more frequent, and the target zones are spread far apart. The *Buchou* is worried about it too, you know. We’re few, really, considering the scale of what’s been going on here, and last night he was talking seriously about sending to Seireitei for back-up. Tragedies like this village really shouldn’t be allowed to happen — but we’re only so many and we can’t be in two places at once.”

“That’s true,” Mitsuki sighed, resting her hand against the wooden beam that supported the makeshift shelter tent in place. “I’m sorry, Seri. I know that our priority is the ones left behind... I just haven’t let go of the ones we lost yet.”

“You sense them, don’t you?” Seri eyed her keenly, and Mitsuki nodded.

“I can’t help it,” she agreed resignedly. “My senses are all too keenly attuned to people in pain, even if those people have already passed over the line.”

“They’re Plus souls,” Seri reminded her. “There’s no earthly reason for you to pick up anything from them at all, alive or dead. They exist, but they’re not like us... we can only protect them so long as they have awareness, we can’t do anything for the ones who are already scattered. This is the Spiritless Zone, Mitsuki — are you sure you’re not just letting your emotions take control of your imagination?”

“Maybe,” Mitsuki acknowledged, glancing up at the sky and taking in its odd, brassy appearance. “I’ve never liked watching anyone die, so maybe you’re right. I want to save everyone, even though I know we can’t. It takes its toll, after a while — no matter how many years I stay here, I never get used to the poverty and the suffering that the people face.”

“Me either,” Seri acknowledged. “As healers, how can we be otherwise?”

She offered her companion a smile, giving her a little shove towards the tent opening.

“In the meantime, the *Buchou* is waiting for you,” she added. “Whatever he has to say, you shouldn’t make him late by lingering here. He’s been in a short enough temper lately... I’d run along and report to him before he finds things to add to his list.”

“All right,” Mitsuki held up her hands in mock surrender. “I understand, and I’m going. Is he really in that bad a mood?”

“With your senses, I’m surprised you haven’t picked up on it,” Seri said frankly. “Try focusing a little on the living for a while, and let the ghosts of the departed go... okay?”

Mitsuki shot her comrade a grimace, but made no further rejoinder. Instead she pushed back the flap of the tent, ducking inside and bowing her head respectfully towards the small shelter’s lone inhabitant.

Though he was the squad captain and essentially in charge of all of Fourth Division’s operations in Rukongai, at first glance Unohana Madeki seemed nothing more than another Rukongai citizen, robed as he was in the rough fabrics of the district and with his long dark hair tied back by a simple piece of scrappy ribbon. The son of an important member of the Unohana Clan, Madeki had sacrificed his creature comforts to take charge of this mission in the field, and as Mitsuki gazed at him from beneath lowered lashes she knew that no matter how much she was bothered by the recent events, he was twice as concerned. Even now he was hunched over his makeshift desk, scribing something with a worn out brush on a piece of recycled parchment. His body was tight with tension and strain, and Mitsuki was sure that he had not even heard her approach, so intent was he on writing his report.

“You wanted to see me, sir?” she asked softly, and Madeki glanced up from his work, letting out a heavy sigh and setting his brush aside.

“Edogawa,” he murmured, and Mitsuki was half-sure she heard relief in his words. “Good. I was afraid you’d made an expedition down to look for survivors in the dead village, and I would have to wait for you to return.”

“I may have thought about it,” Mitsuki admitted, her cheeks colouring red as she realised how well her superior knew her. “I keep sensing spiritual signals from there, as though there are still people calling for help. I know we dealt with everything yesterday and there were no signs of life anywhere when we left, but even so...”

“You feel them too, huh?” Madeki’s question was soft, and Mitsuki started, staring at her companion in surprise.

“Sir?”

“I had thought you might, though you’re the only one that would,” Madeki ran his fingers through his tangled dark hair, loosening the dirty ribbon in his agitation. “Your senses are far more sensitive than most of the squad’s — I dare say they’re better than mine on the odd occasion. That’s why I called you here — I wanted to have your perspective. You’ve felt spirits from the razed village too, then? Spirits belonging to those who were destroyed, as though they still lived?”

“Yes... something like that,” Mitsuki agreed slowly. “I didn’t really understand it, but it’s as though they... had some lingering presence in this world. But this is the Spiritless Zone, isn’t it? There’s just no way...”

“I’m starting to wonder about that,” Madeki shook his head, gesturing for her to sit down. “What I’m going to say to you is between us, Edogawa, and I’m trusting you simply because you’re the only other person who might be sensitive enough to pick this out. I want your perspective as much as anything, I suppose, on what you think might be the cause.”

“I... hadn’t thought that far along, sir,” Mitsuki admitted. “It did seem strange to me, because the majority of people we’ve been treating are spiritless Plus souls and without any kind of reiatsu to identify them.”

“Most, but not all?”

“I...”

“Edogawa, tell me plainly what your impression of yesterday’s settlement was?”

“My impression, sir?”

Madeki’s eyes narrowed and he nodded his head.

“Did you notice anything... unusual about the people we rescued from that attack?”

Mitsuki’s brows knitted together, and hesitantly she lowered her head in agreement.

“Yes, sir. I confess that I did.”

“And your chief observation of them would be what?”

“Of the fifteen people we took from that village alive, sir, every one of them has some discernable level of spiritual ability.”

“Reiatsu?”

“Yes, sir.”

“*Reiryoku* too?”

“I... am not sure of that. Perhaps not,” Mitsuki was taken aback. “They’re fleeting impressions, but doubtless real. Too faint, maybe, for anyone else to really notice them, but I... I really thought...”

She trailed off, and Madeki sighed, reaching across for a folded, creased piece of dirty parchment and tossing it in her direction. Obediently Mitsuki took it, smoothing it out against the rough ground and casting her gaze across it. It was a map, she realised, crudely drawn but recognisable as the region of Rukongai where she and her companions had been dispatched. Several areas were marked with a cross, and she frowned, raising her gaze to her captain.

“Sir?”

“The areas on that map are all villages we’ve intervened in at times of crisis in the last two weeks alone,” Madeki said quietly. “Four in Junrin’an, two in Nakaken, now one in Hokutan. Every single one of them has been different in every way... except one. The survivors have discernable reiatsu, too faint to belong to Seireitei’s people, but too vivid to be normal for this area. I’ve checked again the brief that Retsu-sama sent us here with, and this region of Rukongai is fiercely protected space. The people here are all Plus souls from the Real World and the fortifications that surround the three mapped regions are made from Sekkiseki, preventing any leak of stray spiritual energy into this area. The barriers filter out impurities, preventing any but the Plus souls from entering into protected space. The Hollows should not be here, and the people shouldn’t be contaminated, and yet, somehow, they are.”

He sighed.

“Each of us has a temporary seal placed on our own powers while we work here, in order that we only help and don’t harm,” he added. “Although it’s still a Urahara prototype, it seemed to work when there were more of us based here, and so I don’t want to think that this has anything to do with our presence. That said, I can’t be entirely sure.”

“I thought the Council already looked into that?” Mitsuki pursed her lips. “Urahara Nagesu-sama did a lot of research into this when the Spiritless Zone was still being discussed, didn’t he? I thought healers’ reiatsu was considered non-reactive and therefore unlikely to pollute the atmosphere? Wasn’t the sealing of excess spirit power

simply a precautionary tactic? Surely... surely we can't be the reason for this?"

"I was under that impression too, but this is the first time the hypothesis has really been put to the test," Madeki admitted. "Nagesu-sama was quite clear that most spiritual emissions could prove extremely dangerous to pure Plus souls, and even though there were so many tests done before we were allowed to come here, it's just possible that something was overlooked. We have been here for a long time, and we are using spirit power to combat the dangers — maybe even our *reiryoku* has corruptive potential, if we use it to heal people enough. Whatever the answer, though, one thing is for certain. People who did not come here with spirit power and who have no discernable means of obtaining it are now giving off fleeting but genuine evidence of *reiatsu*."

"Do you think it *could* be us?" Mitsuki whitened, handing the map back, and Madeki shrugged.

"For that, you'll need to ask the Urahara," he said acidly. "In fact, that is what I'm doing — I'm writing a report right now which I intend on sending back to Seireitei as soon as it's completed. Whatever is happening here suggests at the very least the Sekkiseki barrier has suffered some level of damage, and if it is our presence that's causing this imbalance, we may be required to pull back whilst the scientists investigate."

"What about the people being attacked, though?" Mitsuki looked horrified. "If we pull out... unless... sir, do you think we're the reason places are being attacked, too?"

"Since the attacks happen before we reach a place, I don't think so. We're reacting to reports, and the attacks are not anticipating our movements, although the two are becoming hopelessly intertwined," Madeki groaned, rubbing his brow. "Hollows are generally without clear psychological aims or intentions, so I find it unlikely that they're planning an attack before it happens at all. The increase in attacks and the rise in *reiatsu* signatures, however, that's a different problem. I suppose you realise that there are far more Hollows here in Rukongai now than there used to be, and they're even able to penetrate the Spiritless Zone. They're only doing so for one reason — they detect *reiatsu* here, and are coming to devour it."

"That means that villages like the one yesterday are sitting targets," Mitsuki said unevenly. "Sir, their only defence is us, in that case. Even if they are showing abnormal levels of spiritual energy, isn't our job to protect them regardless? Surely we need to be sending for more

shinigami to come here, not thinking of pulling out completely? Isn't that why we were left here, as a holding squad in case of further danger?"

"That's for Seireitei to decide, not us," Madeki said heavily. "I've written already to Retsu-sama with my fears, and have not yet had a reply. It is concerning, though. The Spiritless Zone is the one part of Rukongai that's supposed to be sealed and secure — the whole point of its inception was to keep out Hollows and make a safe location for Plus souls to dwell. All of the Clans have been united in trying to make this project a reality, and yet something is still going wrong. If stray reiatsu is corrupting those souls... it concerns me about the long term consequences. Spirits infused with alien reiatsu are vulnerable and unstable, and many Plus souls have been killed in recent weeks. If some of those spirits on the wind that you and I have been hearing are actually souls in the first stages of turning Hollow, everything that the Council has worked for in stabilising the balance of spirit particles between the worlds might prove in vain. For that reason, if we are part of the cause of this... we should pull out. Our jobs are as guardians of the Spiritless Zone, nothing more. It might seem drastic in the short term, but in the long term... we have to consider the whole picture, not just what's in front of us. If we jeopardise this now, there may never be another chance like it."

Mitsuki chewed on her lip, remembering the frightened tears of the young children she had ferried back to the camp late the night before.

"It's hard to ignore what's right in front of us, sir," she said quietly. "How soon will you know what we're supposed to do?"

"I hope Retsu-sama will respond shortly to my appeal for help," Madeki admitted. "In the meantime, all we *cando* is keep doing what we've been sent here to do. Those who live must be helped and then relocated to one of the regions outside of the Spiritless Zone, given our findings, and we must be alert for any other approaching threats. I'm going to send a group of shinigami out as a scout party to check the level of Hollow activity to the south, towards the Sekkiseki divide between Junrin'an and the territory that lies beyond. More attacks have happened in Junrin'an than anywhere so far, so that seems the most likely source of the leak. That's my other reason for bringing you here, Edogawa — with your spiritual precision, I want you to lead the group."

"Me, sir?" Mitsuki's eyes widened. "Not Seri or one of the others? I have far less experience, really, and..."

"You have the sharpest senses in the squad — possibly in the whole

Fourth Division, barring Retsu-sama herself,” Madeki said evenly. “If we were back in Seireitei now, I have no doubt that you would be ranking at a fourth or fifth seat level, and it’s not uncommon to delegate leadership responsibilities to the shinigami holding those ranks. Besides, as your squad captain, I’ve made that choice. If anything goes wrong, the blame lies with me, not you — I’ll be the one answering to Retsu-sama.”

“I won’t let that happen,” Mitsuki assured him. “I’ll do my best, sir, if you really think I’m the right choice.”

“I do,” Madeki agreed evenly. “I want you to take Aomori as your second, since she’s good in the field and her combat skills are better than yours — no good sending out a party of people with no sword capabilities, just in case. You can choose two others yourself — no more than that. It’ll leave seven shinigami here with me to do what we can — that should be plenty, though. You’ll report back to me directly in three days from now, by which time I hope to have answers from both Retsu-sama and the Urahara on our best course of action.”

“Yes, sir,” Mitsuki bowed her head. “Do you want me to leave at once, or...?”

“As soon as you can muster your companions,” Madeki agreed. “There’s no time to be wasted, since we’ve no way of tracking the Hollows before they attack. Be careful, Edogawa — I’ll see you in three days.”

“Yes, sir,” Mitsuki bowed again, withdrawing from the tent and stepping back out into the Rukongai sunshine.

The Spiritless Zone is already under threat.

She frowned, biting her lip as she considered the implications of those words.

It’s the first time all eight Clans have worked together without question in order to bolster and stabilise the future of this world. By sealing off an area of designated Rukongai land and securing it for Plus souls alone, there were hopes that the numbers of Hollowfications might actually decrease. If the souls were located in time, sent to Soul Society and encapsulated in a safe, spirit-free environment, they could never become Hollows. If that happened, when their souls broke down and dissipated into the ether, they would simply be part of Soul Society and not something tainted or dangerous. If there are less Hollows, there are less souls being devoured. And, if there are less Hollows in the Real World, there is less chance of the balance being badly upset by other, intervening forces.

Her lips thinned.

Buchou never mentions them, but I know Retsu-sama was concerned about the actions of the living humans in the Real World. I don't know whether it's really true that some of them have begun to find other ways to destroy Hollows, but if they managed to do so in great numbers, the balance of Soul Society might yet falter. The Urahara worked so hard to find a better way of purifying souls so that they didn't have to be destroyed. If that's all been in vain... but the more Hollows that invade Soul Society, the more shinigami are pulled back here to deal with them. That means less deployments to the Real World... and less chance of Hollows being purified. I understand that the Real World people want to fight back — but if they knew they were damaging their world as well as ours by interfering.

Still, those things aren't within my power to change at present, and I can't do everything myself. For now the only thing I can do is find Seri and some others and follow the Buchou's orders. If we do that, maybe we'll be able to prevent another village being destroyed — and sometimes the important things have to be done in small steps.

She made her way to the heart of the makeshift settlement, where the biggest tarpaulin was stretched over an area of muddy ground, providing living, sleeping and eating quarters for the fifteen village survivors. As she had surmised, Seri was among them, carefully checking their bandaged limbs and heads for any sign of infection. At the far end of the shelter, one of the lesser ranking division members was already beginning to spoon the thick, nutritious soup into bowls, handing them out among the survivors, and Mitsuki watched for a moment as each claimed their ration, taking in the way in which they downed the pasty liquid. Some were more eager than others, she noted absently... a sure sign that reiatsu was burgeoning inside of them and, perhaps, growing in strength.

She sighed, rubbing her temples.

“Mitsuki!” Seri finished re-tying the strapping on the leg of a young girl of six or seven, casting her comrade a warm smile. “What did Buchou have to say about everything? You look like he savaged you — was it that bad?”

“No, but he has given me... well, us... an assignment,” Mitsuki came across to join her, offering the scared child a gentle grin as she did so. “Well? Are you feeling any better? I know it's cold and windy here, and not as snug as your own home, but your colour's a lot better than yesterday.”

“I... I think so,” the girl looked startled, gazing up at the shinigami with wide, frightened eyes, and Seri patted her lightly on the head.

“Go get your share of lunch,” she advised. “Don’t let them push you back because you’re not as quick on your feet right now. The quicker you get well, the sooner we can find somewhere safer for you and your companions to stay — so eat up and don’t look so worried. Mitsuki’s on your side — more than anyone else, most likely.”

The child gawped at Seri, then back at Mitsuki, wriggling down off the pile of logs she had been perching on and limping off towards the food queue. Watching her go, Seri let out a heavy sigh.

“The Council ought to be able to prevent this,” she said pensively. “That one was lucky — she and the girl she was sheltering with both escaped with minor bruises and her ankle is only sprained. They’re scared, though, and I can’t blame them. They’ve no way to fight back.”

“Rukongai is the most dangerous part of Seireitei, even now,” Mitsuki agreed grimly. “The Council are trying, Seri — but it’s a hard problem to fix. Plus souls have no defences — that’s how they are.”

“And Hollows should not be able to follow them here,” Seri sighed. “Oh, I know. It’s not as though it’s anyone’s fault, exactly. Just, seeing them like this...”

She shrugged, offering her friend a rueful smile.

“Well? You said we had an assignment?”

“Mm,” Mitsuki nodded, quickly filling her companion in on what Madeki had said. At her words, Seri’s eyes became thoughtful.

“Recon? Is he sure about that?” she asked doubtfully. “It isn’t as though the Hollows put up warning flares before they strike, and if we’re separated when they do...”

“I know, but Buchou’s worried about a bunch of stuff, and he wants us to check things out,” Mitsuki responded. “Probably, he’s right. There are a cluster of villages to the south of our original camp in Junrin’an, and none of them have been attacked by Hollows, yet. If we can get there quickly, we might even help the people improve their defences. It won’t matter much in the final analysis, but if it buys a little time and saves a few lives...”

“I suppose so,” Seri sighed, getting to her feet. “All right. An order is an order, so I suppose that’s that. He looked pretty frazzled last night, to be honest, so I’m not totally surprised. We’ll do our best, and

that's all we can do — right?"

"That's right," Mitsuki agreed, nodding her head. "Hopefully when we get back, there'll be news of reinforcements and a wider spread of protection for the Spiritless Zone... but we'll see what the Council come up with."

"The trouble with dispatching people here is the problem of sealing spirit power. Only certain types of people are allowed to go, so it might take longer than that to get clearance," Seri said wisely. "Healers are one thing — we don't pollute the atmosphere in the way some of those combat shinigami too. Can you imagine the devastation if they were to send some thugs with fire power to fight these Hollows? We're managing as best we can with the skills we have but at the very least our spirit power isn't toxic to other creatures. I dread to think what would happen if some of the others were allowed into the Spiritless Zone... it could make things much worse."

"Yes, it could," Mitsuki conceded, "but defeating Hollows isn't exactly Fourth Division's strongest skill. You're not bad with your sword — far better than I am, it has to be said — but we're not trained as combat fighters in the same way. Other divisions might be quicker at quelling the problem, leaving us free to worry about the damage."

"I've seen the way some of those squads work," Seri snorted. "I know you're a Kuchiki, Mitsuki, and that Sixth Squad has some claim on your loyalties because of your kinsfolk there, but I'm sorry, I'm not a fan. I've always been glad I was born in District Four and I never had to fuss about perfecting fighting techniques beyond base necessity. We do all right, and believe me, we could do much worse. Whilst I've no problem with Retsu-sama sending us some more people to help bolster our work, I really hope the whole of Seireitei isn't about to descend on the Spiritless Zone."

"If they did, it would rather defeat the object of the project," Mitsuki sighed. "It would probably spell the end of it, in fact, if that kind of thing had to happen."

"Agreed," Seri grasped her loosely by the arm, "so we'll go and complete our mission and hope to prevent it. An order is an order, and we'd better obey it. Decide who we're taking with us and we'll split — the sooner we've done our surveying, the sooner we can report back!"

"What exactly are we looking for, Shikibu-san?"

Ketsui scrambled over a clutch of uneven rocks, pulling his slim

body onto the narrow ledge and settling himself more firmly against the dark stone. "Everything here seems quiet and I can't pick up any sense of Hollows in this area. Why are we heading down towards these villages? Has there been some report of danger from Inner Seireitei?"

"It hardly looks that way," Atsudane Makoto, Thirteenth Division's fifth seated officer shook his head, his shock of messy dark hair flopping over his forehead as he did so. "It's like you say, Ketsui-kun. There's nothing here. If Seireitei got a report of danger in this vicinity, it must've been some points off the scale."

"An order is an order, and we'll carry it out properly," Naoko said acerbically, dropping down between them and resting a hand on the shoulder of each. "Taichou sent us here, so here we are. That's as much as you both need to bother about it. We'll do what we came to do, and then we'll go back and report. You do remember that part of basic training, I trust?"

"Yes, but Shikibu-san, it would help if we knew what we were supposed to be finding here," Ketsui said earnestly, turning quizzical pale eyes on his superior officer. "Taichou wouldn't send us anywhere without good reason, so there must be something in this area. That being the case..."

"As far as I know, there are no Hollows actively here at present," Naoko shook her head impatiently. "We're not here to hunt anything down. We're here to ask some questions of the local residents hereabouts."

"Questions?" Atsudane paused, sending his companion a disappointed look. "You mean we came all this way to talk? I was sure that when Taichou dispatched us it meant we were going into another Hollow eradication mission — are you saying it's not that at all?"

"If you cleared out your ears and listened to me more carefully, you'd realise that," was Naoko's scathing reply. "Now pay attention. What I'm going to tell you is secure information and not to be repeated back at barracks. It's need to know data and anything we discover here is also to be disclosed only to Ukitake-taichou. Understood? No gossiping about it in the mess hall — Atsudane, that's for you in particular."

"I don't gossip!" Atsudane looked wounded. "You make me sound like a chatty schoolgirl!"

"Most of the girls in our squad would be offended by comments like that," Naoko shot him a withering glance. "Or maybe I made a

mistake and it wasn't you I heard holding forth to some of the recruits about how you and I slashed down that Hollow the other day...?"

"Well, I might've shared some experiences with them," Atsudane coloured, shrugging his shoulders. "That's what senpai do though, isn't it? We're meant to be teaching them stuff, so I didn't think there was any harm in answering their questions."

"This isn't the kind of mission that needs public scrutiny... certainly not embellishment," Naoko said firmly. "Ketsui, that goes for you too — though I don't suppose you need to be warned."

"Hey!" Atsudane objected indignantly. "I rank higher than he does — why are you railing at me and not at him? Ketsui-kun's far more inexperienced than I am in missions! Surely he's the one who needs to be warned far more than I do!"

"Ketsui-kun isn't given to disclosing unnecessary information to his juniors... or his seniors," Naoko said briskly. "Nor is he given to embellishing his adventures in lower Seireitei to crowds of adoring recruits. You're a good shinigami, Makoto, but sometimes you lack discipline when it comes to keeping things to yourself. Ketsui might not have your experience, but he can keep a secret."

"Fine," Atsudane sighed, folding his arms disgruntledly across his chest. "I got the message. This is top secret."

"What are we here to talk to the locals about, Shikibu-san?" Ketsui eyed his superior quizzically. "If it's that important that it needs to be kept secret, should Makoto-san and I be here at all?"

"Taichou told me to take the pair of you, and I'm not questioning his orders," Naoko sighed, sinking down onto the stone. "Atsudane's one of the quickest thinkers in the division, even if he is a touch sweet on his own ability, and we don't know if it might become a combat situation. You've proven you can use your sword in high pressure conditions, but the reason you're here most of all is because you're far better at forming bonds with District villagers than any of us. You've lived among them and you understand... even Atsudane, with all his District roots, has never lived in a village like the ones hereabouts."

"That's true, for what it's worth," Atsudane's eyes roved thoughtfully across the roofs of the ramshackle settlement. "My family were never this level of District poor. Even among District people, there's a wide difference in living conditions... probably to people like those, I'd look like a bocchama."

"Nothing could be further from the truth, trust me," Naoko

responded acidly. “Even so, though, Ketsui understands this level of living far more than you or I do. I don’t mean that as a slight to your background, Ketsui-kun — but you know that I’m not incorrect.”

“No, it’s as you say,” Ketsui’s pale eyes clouded, and he nodded his head. “Mother, Oniisan and I were refugees. We had nothing at all to begin with... I understand that feeling only too well. If I can help in any way, Shikibu-san, I promise that I will.”

“We still haven’t discovered what Taichou wants us to ask these people, though, Naoko-san,” Atsudane pointed out. “If we’re not hunting Hollows, we’re surely not asking these people about them?”

Naoko was silent for a moment, then she sighed.

“It’s just my instinct, but I thought this would be the best place to start,” she admitted. “As you said, Makoto, among the Districts there are families who are reasonably off and families who are not. The Clans don’t always notice those at the bottom of the poverty ladder — before I became part of Thirteenth Division, I admit, there was a lot I didn’t understand about such people and it has been a learning curve for me, breaking my Clan assumptions and seeing people and places in a new way. If it was that way for me, I am sure there are many forgotten among the lowest classes, and surely those who struggle are the ones who most need help?”

“That’s true,” Ketsui nodded his head. “When we left District Seven, we had aid from the Kyouraku and, thanks to them, we were able to move on and start a new life. They didn’t pay for us to live on their land, though, and we had to work very hard to make ends meet even when we were granted sanctuary.”

“In Seventh District, some of those left behind lived in worse conditions than even that,” Naoko said gravely. “The scars were deep among those people and probably, they remain deep now among some of the most neglected. Resentment breeds in those places... resentment against the rich people who don’t seem to lift a finger to help them.”

“You think these people are rebels against Soul Society?” Makoto’s eyes widened. “Isn’t that a leap? They might be poor, but suspecting them of plotting an uprising...”

“I’m not saying that at all,” Naoko said impatiently, shaking her head. “These people are poor, downtrodden and pathetic. Their daily lives are a fight to eat, feed one another and simply stay alive. These people have no time to be plotting things like rebellion — though there is doubtless much the Clans could and should do to help them,

even here in Eighth. No, I didn't mean that at all."

"Then...?"

"If someone in the Districts wanted to create dissent against the ruling classes, this is the kind of neighbourhood he or she would target," Naoko said succinctly, getting to her feet and pulling her companions up with her. "Whether with Hollows or with sugared words, they're bound to be the kind of place a rebel would hone in on. Places like this are poorly defended and if a Hollow attacked, there would be the maximum devastation, since the houses are insubstantially built. That being the case..."

"You think that someone *planned* the Hollow attacks we've been fighting off lately?" Consternation flickered into Ketsui's pale eyes, and he turned his gaze on the villages as if seeing them anew. Naoko shrugged.

"Taichou thinks that we ought to investigate the possibility, though there's no clear evidence of it," she said carefully. "If something is going on, though, people like this will hear about it more quickly than people in more affluent areas. That's where you come in in particular, Ketsui — I confess, I don't have the patience for dealing with gentle interrogation, not when lives might be at stake and there are a thousand other things we should be doing to protect them."

"Understood," Ketsui's gaze hardened and he nodded his head. "If that's what Taichou wants us to do, I'm in. Are you coming, Makoto-san?"

"I suppose I am," Makoto grinned, nodding his head. "I think Taichou might be overthinking the problem, but I'll humour him since there's no harm in being safe."

"I hope you're right," Naoko watched the two shinigami slip down over the rocks and onto the path that led towards the nearest village, letting out a heavy sigh.

There was something in that boy's aura then, Naoko. Did you notice it?

As she prepared to follow them, the thin, sour voice of her zanpakutouspirit made her pause, her brows knitting together as she felt the swirl of something sinister sweeping through her senses.

Boy? Which boy?

The fair haired one. Ketsui. He tensed up when talking about the possibility of someone controlling Hollows.

Dokusou Houshi's voice was disapproving.

You didn't notice it? I might have known.

My mind was on other things.

Naoko pressed her lips together thoughtfully.

Well? What are you trying to tell me? You can't think Ketsui is involved in any of this business. I know his reiatsu and so does Taichou — besides...

That boy has a connection to the devil and we both know it, Naoko.

Dokusou Houshi's voice was uncompromising, his words cutting through her thoughts like the edge of a blade.

His thoughts are in the same place yours are, only unlike yours, they're surrounded by fear and uncertainty.

Fear and uncertainty?

Naoko's gaze rested on the disappearing figure of her division's Tenth Seat, her eyes taking in his demeanour carefully. Was he more tense than usual? Perhaps there was an extra urgency in his step, something fragmented in his aura that she couldn't quite place.

Ketsui's a member of my Division, Houshi-sama. I trust him, and so does Taichou. It's not for us to taint him based on distant kinsfolk... he and his brother have never given anyone any cause for alarm.

I wasn't making any accusations to the contrary, Naoko.

The spirit's voice was acerbic.

Still, watch that boy. I don't think he has the nature to hurt anyone, nor do I think him involved in a plot against Soul Society. Without your saying so, however, his thoughts have gone to that missing kinsman whose name is still considered unspoken in so many parts of Seireitei. More, you said yourself that he isn't one who shares secrets. That includes his own, as well you should know. Ketsui is a shinigami, and, probably, he is loyal. That doesn't mean he is ignorant of the things you and Ukitake are so familiar with. Bear it in mind. Watch that boy.

Fine, I'll keep an eye on him.

Naoko sighed, shrugging her shoulders in defeat.

It wasn't his reiatsu though, Houshi-sama, and I know his sword and his spirit power. So do you. Whoever was responsible for controlling that Hollow, it wasn't someone like Ketsui-kun. I'd stake my life and my

reputation on that fact.

You're fond of the young one, aren't you?

He's a good shinigami, and a Third Seat should look out for the younger members of her squad, should she not?

Naoko was defensive, and the sword's spirit chuckled, his pale face flitting briefly across her senses.

You trained him when he first came to Thirteenth Division, so of course you would be fond of him. It stands to reason that you'd believe in him, even to the point of blinding yourself as to his true identity. Whether you like it or not, Naoko, he is as much a reject of Clan stock as you are, and from far more sinister blood. Neither one of you can escape your heritage — Ketsui might not go looking for trouble, but that doesn't mean it won't come looking for him.

I see. So that's what you mean.

Naoko rubbed her chin thoughtfully.

I suppose it's possible that, if they knew of Ketsui's kinship to that devil of a man, and maybe his brother's as well, rebels might come looking for them to stir up old wounds. You don't want me to suspect him, but to protect him... correct?

Protect him, by all means, but watch him all the same.

The spirit's voice was noncommittal.

Blood ties can prove strong ones, and if this incident connects to that individual...

You think it does?

We need to do more work to prove that it is. Without proof, speculation is a waste of time.

There was a ripple of energy across Naoko's thoughts, and then the presence of her zanpakutou's spirit was gone, fading back into the haze of mist from which he had come.

"Shikibu-san? Are you coming?"

Ketsui's call jerked the Third Seat back to her senses and she nodded, hurrying to join her two companions.

"I was just making sure the coast was clear," she lied as she reached them. "Since Hollows appear where Shinigami are, it seemed better to be safe than sorry."

"There's nothing ill on the wind here, though," Atsudane objected.

“Under cover of darkness, we should be fine.”

“Let’s hope the people are in a talking mood, then,” Naoko said with a sigh. “All right, both of you. Let’s go.”

Evening.

In the small wooden hut, a solitary figure sat quietly behind an uneven wooden desk, pieces of aging, worn parchment scattered across the wood like fragments of a patchwork quilt. The flame of a kidou lamp flickered dimly in the darkness, casting only the minimum amount of light across the work surface, but despite this, the brush in the figure’s hand did not stop moving, the swift, even strokes of ink across the page like gathering insects swarming across the coarse surface.

To one side lay a bowl, still half-full of a thick soup but discarded, as though whatever the individual was studying was more appetising than putting food between his lips. Against the wall were piles of paper notebooks, each one roughly pulled together with pieces of recycled rope into distinct volumes, their titles scratched across the wooden cover by the blunted edge of a rusting blade.

It was hardly a living environment, for there was nothing more than a moth-eaten blanket to suggest that this chamber could be anyone’s quarters, yet despite that, this was the place he called home. From morning to night, this was his haven and his retreat, and the books marked his life’s work, carefully and painstakingly pieced back together from broken scraps into something resembling coherence.

“The Shinigami are stepping up their surveillance across Seireitei’s wider regions.”

The cloth divide that hung across the doorway of the hut was tossed back at that instant, revealing a young man, and at the sound of his voice, the figure reluctantly lowered his brush, raising muddy eyes to the dark brown ones of his apprehensive companion. For a moment there was silence between them, then the older of the two opened his lips, one word dropping from them into the quiet of the night.

“And?”

“It’s as you expected. They’re starting to investigate beyond just taking down the Hollows.” Taking this reaction as an invitation to enter, the young man stepped into the room proper, allowing the cloth to fall closed once more behind him. In his hand he held a folded

piece of parchment, and at the sight of it the figure raised an eyebrow, stretching out a hand to take it.

“From the usual channels?”

“Yes,” the young man clicked his tongue idly against his teeth. “It just arrived, and I said I’d bring it back here to you. That ape Kurotsuchi brought it back through the gate — I thought I should claim it from him before he decided that the contents were for everyone’s eyes, not just yours.”

“Yet *you* know its contents? Did you happen to read it in his place?” The older man glanced at the message, turning it over and examining the seal with his careful, meticulous gaze. “No, you haven’t opened this.”

His eyes narrowed, and he raised his head once more to scrutinise the young man’s impassive expression. “I see. It’s like that, is it?”

There was no reply, and the older man chuckled, using a grubby fingernail to split the seal in two. Carefully he unfolded the sheet, scanning over the contents with a thoughtful gaze.

“A Council meeting might be convened to discuss this? How interesting. And the one who raised the question was Ukitake Juushirou? I’m almost proud of him, seeing through the layers of deceit. Still, if he should happen to associate it with me, it would be troublesome.”

“That’s why you have a man on the inside, isn’t it?” the young man asked off-handedly, and his companion nodded.

“One, but one may not be enough,” he said reflectively. “You said that Kurotsuchi had brought the message? He’s been skulking around Seireitei, has he?”

“So it would seem.” Clear dislike flickered across the young man’s features. “Why? Do you want to see him before he skulks off somewhere else on another whim of his own?”

“Yes... I’d rather like him to work on a whim of mine,” the other tapped the sheet of parchment with the index finger of his left hand. “Would you send him in to speak to me?”

“If you like,” the youngster shrugged his shoulders, then ducked back out of the chamber, leaving his companion once more alone. A few moments later the curtain rippled again, then a shadowy figure emerged from beneath it, vivid eyes peering intently around the chamber as though looking for something of value which, in a quieter

moment, he might manage to spirit away to his own dwelling. He was a small, unimpressive man, his host reflected, lifting a hand to indicate for his visitor to come properly into the hut. He was the kind of individual that most souls would pass without a second glance, and it was exactly that nondescript veneer that made him such a useful, powerful weapon if properly deployed. He had greedy fingers and a mind narrow to the point of obsession when it came to his outlook, but both of those things could be controlled with subtle manipulation, promises and threats.

“You asked for me, Keitarou-sama?”

The voice was low and somewhat husky, and the man called Keitarou nodded, watching his companion kneel before him with a mixture of contempt and amusement.

“I did. I heard you had brought this message,” he tapped the parchment, “and I realised that I had a job for you.”

“A job, sir?”

“Yes,” Keitarou’s eyes became like slits, boring into the pale ones of his companion. “It seems that Seireitei are beginning to get a hint of our operation here. That concerns me.”

“Only the vaguest of whiffs, sir,” his companion was dismissive, his eyes burning bright with curiosity all the same. “They know nothing of the things you’ve planned, and have only begun discussing vagaries, not confirmed facts. There seems little risk of them discovering your involvement or your true location — not while they bicker among themselves for supremacy within their corrupt Council of Elders.”

“Ah yes. Clans are always so concerned with status and appearance,” Keitarou sounded weary, but the amusement in his gaze became derision as a memory flitted across his thoughts. “Even so, though, it pays to be steps ahead of the opposition, just in case they decide to become opposition in the days or weeks to come. They are many, Masaya, and we are as yet few. Whilst I have confidence in the weapons at my disposal, it is still too soon. If we were to be discovered before things really got moving... it could be catastrophic for all concerned.”

Masaya’s beady eyes darted quickly to the entrance of the hut, then he lowered his voice.

“The message I brought conveyed such information, Keitarou-sama?”

“The exact contents of the message isn’t important,” Keitarou dismissed this with a flick of his hand, sensing the disappointment that filled his companion’s aura at his casual response. It was not in his nature to disclose details to those who did not need to know them, although, he reflected ruefully, Masaya hardly had anyone to whom he could disclose any secrets, even if he wanted to. On the contrary, Keitarou kept his secrets from Masaya because Masaya’s entire existence was focused on Keitarou’s will — and if he was not vigilant, a careless word could see quite the wrong moves being put into play. To most in the Rukon, Masaya was greedy, inquisitive, insolent and nosy — but to Keitarou he was as devoted and loyal as a samurai to his lord — with all the negative and positive connotations such a bond could bring.

Well, all scientific experiments carried risks, and for the most part, the bad outweighed the good. Masaya had proven extremely useful so far — his abilities invaluable to Keitarou’s growing cause.

“All you need to know is that some shinigami are beginning to make forays beyond their usual remits, and doubt has been raised within the Gotei as to whether the influx of Hollows is a natural occurrence,” Keitarou continued now. We cannot, of course, stop acting. If we did that, the people who have already turned to our cause might forget their grievances against Clan and Council and go back to their former lackadaisical ways of life. I thought that I had taken all the precautions necessary when I courted the favour of someone on the other side of the fence, but I am beginning to think one will not be enough.”

“If you would tell me your contact in the Gotei, sir, I would go myself and instruct him on the best way to obtain clear and concise data,” Masaya’s expression looked hopeful, the hunter’s intent dancing across his featureless face and reminding Keitarou briefly of the man that he had once been. “I could go and return within the night, and nobody would detect me. In fact...”

“That will not be necessary,” Keitarou shook his head, half wondering whether, if he disclosed that information, he would next hear that that contact’s throat had been slit. Masaya was jealously possessive of his role in Keitarou’s revolution — and there was no sense in taking unnecessary risks. “The contact I have is working well enough, but they are not placed in the right areas, nor are they close enough to the most dangerous people. They do not have your skills, Masaya, and so I can rely on them far less. For most of Seireitei, I am just a name — but for a few, I am more than that, and those few must be distracted away from looking for me.”

“Ridiculous,” Masaya snorted. “Could a Gotei shinigami really have the intellect to find you, Keitarou-sama? Of course not. None of them believe you’re even alive, let alone...”

“I never take such things for granted,” Keitarou interrupted him briskly. “There are those among the Gotei who have met and spoken with me before.”

He frowned, his fingers moving absently to his shoulder.

“Indeed, even drawn blood from me,” he admitted. “There are vipers with shrewd minds and sharp tongues lurking in that den of overindulgence and pomposity and I would be remiss if I did not take them into consideration before I acted. No, my contact works hard, but one is no longer enough. I need to look further afield... and recruit again.”

He gestured to Masaya.

“That is where you come in,” he added frankly. “There are few people who can cross over into Seireitei without being detected, and you are one of the few. Your skills are useful to me — that’s why I saved your life ten years ago and put you back together, piece by piece, using the skills at my disposal. Your native power and my skill as a scientist have made you a formidable tool for spying and information gathering, and your willingness to serve pleases me. I would trust this mission to no other, so please listen well, Masaya. You must not deviate from my plan in even one respect, or all may be lost.”

“I understand, sir,” Masaya’s eyes widened with anticipation, reminding Keitarou of a weasel or a stoat poised to invade a juicy nest of young mice. “I, Masaya, am your loyal servant so long as my body has life. I will act exactly as you instruct me, and will not fail to succeed.”

“I’ve no doubts of that,” Keitarou told him calmly.

“What is it you wish me to do?”

“Before I go into that, Masaya, tell me something.” Keitarou’s lips pursed thoughtfully. “Is Katsura still within Rukongai’s borders?”

“Katsura-sama?” Masaya looked startled at the sudden change of topic, but nodded his head, bowing low before his companion. “Yes, sir. He has not yet left for a fresh raid on Seireitei — I believe he was waiting on Lady Eiraki this evening.”

“Good,” Keitarou looked approving. “My contact included some

additional information I would like him to hear. When I have finished outlining your mission, you will send him to me, understood? I have somewhere I need him to go, and unfortunately it is not a place I can easily go myself.”

Masaya’s eyes became calculating, and he jerked his head in a nod of acceptance.

“As you wish, sir,” he agreed readily. “I will tell Katsura-sama of your wishes directly I leave this place.”

“Then let me explain to you what I want you to do,” Keitarou settled himself more comfortably on his cushions, absently rubbing his hand against his aching leg as the rheumatics of an old injury twinged in protest at his long hours sitting still. “It is very important you heed me exactly. If we are to neutralise the threat that Seireitei poses, we need to work hard... and to anticipate their every move before they have even thought of it.”

Author’s Note

If there’s anyone here who still doesn’t know who Keitarou is, where have you been? xD Yep, the demon is back!

For those who don’t know the ‘past’ that exists between Keitarou and the people of Seireitei, in briefest terms, he is an exile whose father was killed by Seireitei and a scientific genius who wants revenge on the Clans. His family name is Aizen, and he is Sousuke’s ancestor. Another ancestor of Sousuke’s will appear during this story. If you’ve read Mirror, Flower, Water, Moon, you’ll know to look out for him... but if you haven’t, it really doesn’t matter at all ;).

Kurotsuchi Masaya is a new character for this story and is intended as an ancestor of our beloved (?) Mayuri. More about him — and Katsura, and the other young man — later in the story.

Also, don’t please have too many expectations of this quick an upload every week. The only reason this one is going up now is because right now my university net is working, and I already had this chapter readied for upload.

My laptop and FFnet have had a few arguments converting word to FF format, so if any of the sentences run together or seem oddly formatted with spaces missing, please don’t send me lots of reviews about it it’s because FFnet doesn’t like docx files and so I have to convert, sometimes it messes up the format.

4. Heaven's First

Chapter Three: Heaven's First

It was turning into a nice evening.

Kirio hummed a tune to herself, pushing back the sliding door and stepping into the Thirteenth Division gymnasium, pausing to cast a cursitory eye over the chamber's smooth wooden surface. Earlier in the day, she knew, two of the recruits had been assigned to sweeping and polishing the planking, and as she picked her way carefully across the wood, she found herself scanning their work for any sign of slacking or oversight.

It was a tradition of Juushirou's, she mused pensively, pausing to open the sword cupboard and gazing into the darkness beyond for the tool that she wanted. Recruits to Thirteenth Division were always tested with a mixture of menial tasks and hard sparring, and a faint smile of nostalgia crossed her features as she remembered her own such initiation, some several years before.

I didn't understand it, then. I wasn't sure how polishing floors and replacing paper panels would help me in any way become a better shinigami or control my spirit power more easily. I didn't understand anything at all back then — I was such a kid.

She pulled two of the asauchi from their holders, holding them up to the light to examine the blades for signs of damage and wear.

"Looks like the kids have done a good job, for once."

A voice from behind startled her and she jumped, one asauchi slipping through her fingers to the floor below with a clatter. Indignant, she spun around, meeting the interloper's amused expression with a dark one of her own.

"What are you trying to do, scare me half to death?" she demanded, bending to pick up the blade and examining the floor for any sign of damage. "You really are an idiot, Tenichi — what if that had scratched the floor?"

"Then you'd have had to explain to Ukitake-taichou why you were clumsy with his swords," Kotetsu Tenichi said unrepentantly, crossing the floor towards her and taking the weapon from her hands, turning it over. "Doesn't look like this is in too bad shape, though. You worry

too much.”

“I am still working, you know,” Kirio snatched back the sword, shoving it with some force back into its holder and repeating the motion with the second. “I’m meant to be checking and sharpening the weapons with the most wear, and you’re getting in my way. What are you even doing here, anyway? This isn’t your kennel now — or had you forgotten that little fact?”

“So cold!” Tenichi adopted a wounded expression, but there was still a glitter of humour in his vivid eyes. “Is that any way to speak to your classmate and close friend? I came by to visit, of course. Why else? I had some time to kill, so I thought I’d come and kill it with familiar faces.”

“Mmhhh,” Kirio pursed her lips, gazing up at her companion with a grimace. “You mean, you thought you’d come and annoy me, as ever. You might be ranking up in Seventh now, Tenichi-kun, but you haven’t changed even the slightest bit since you were here. You ought to watch that — you’ll get yourself into trouble, and Endou-taichou isn’t as lenient as Ukitake-taichou when it comes to mischief.”

“No kidding,” Tenichi ran his fingers through his thick reddish gold hair. “Though it’s not really Endou-taichou that’s the problem, or, really, the Fukutaichou. It’s Kikyue-dono that I’m keenest to keep out of the way of — she’s worse than the pair of them put together, if you know what I mean.”

“That sounds suspiciously like you ran away here to hide from her,” Kirio said darkly. “Taichou will only send you back if he sees you, you know. We’re plenty busy with our own things here, and it doesn’t look good if members of other divisions are swanning around our barracks letting themselves into secure areas.”

“I know my way around Thirteenth Division in my sleep,” Tenichi said flippantly. “Don’t be like that Kirio-chan. I didn’t come to cause you any trouble. I actually came to see Ketsui, rather than you — but since I don’t sense his reiatsu anywhere around, I thought you’d be as good a distraction whilst I waited as any other.”

“A distraction, huh?” Kirio snorted. “I ought to slap you silly for that. You really haven’t changed the tiniest bit — unlike your brother, I hasten to add. Ketsui’s out at the moment with Naoko-san and Atsudane-san, on some kind of recon mission for the Taichou. I don’t know where they went, before you ask me — I’m not Ketsui’s minder, and he’s a grown man in his own right now. He doesn’t need you to watch over him like an anxious nursemaid any more.”

“You really are cross with me, aren’t you?” Tenichi eyed her pensively. “Am I really that unwelcome a presence around these parts now I’ve transferred? I know Thirteenth has a family spirit, but surely you’re not still cross with me for going?”

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you?” Kirio sighed, and Tenichi cast her a keen glance.

“Did I hit the nail on the head?” he asked curiously. “I didn’t think I meant that much to you, Kirio-chan — did I miscalculate your opinion of me?”

“No...” Kirio shook her head, closing the cupboard door and grabbing him by the arm, dragging him across the gymnasium towards the back door that led out onto the grasslands which divided Thirteenth Division from the central Council compound. “It’s not that. I was just thinking about when we were recruits here earlier, and you surprised me... nothing more than that.”

“Well, if you say so,” Tenichi shrugged, allowing himself to be hauled away from the wood-panel building. “I don’t think Ukitake-tai would mind as much as you think, though, if I came by to visit. He did tell me I was always welcome, and even though you say I don’t have to watch out for Ketsui any more... well, I always have, and always will. There isn’t anyone else, you know that — you said yourself that you’re not Ketsui’s minder, and I wouldn’t ask you to be. Since Kaasan died, there’s only been him and me. Even though we’re in different divisions now, I want to make sure he’s doing okay.”

“You heard about the fight with the Hollow, then, I suppose?” Kirio dropped down on the grass, pulling her companion down with her. “I should have known. You’d sense Ketsui’s *zanpakutou* mile away... you came to make sure he didn’t take injury, didn’t you?”

“I suppose I did,” Tenichi admitted, looking sheepish. “He’d yell at me, I’m pretty sure — as you say, he’s grown up and he doesn’t need me to protect him any more. It’s an old habit that dies hard, though — and to tell the truth, the idea of him in danger still scares me far too much. You can call me a silly, flustery older brother if you like, but it doesn’t make it any different.”

“I sort of envy it, and always have,” Kirio admitted, leaning back on her elbows and gazing up at the stars overhead. “My sister and brother disappeared to goodness knows where and left me to fend for myself. If I hadn’t been taken in by the Hikifune family, I would’ve probably starved to death, or been eaten by a Hollow, or something horrible like that. You always had Irie-san, and Ketsui, too. Even when

it was hard, you stuck together. I envied that a lot, you know.”

She sighed.

“My adoptive family care about me, but they are scared of my spirit power, and don’t know how to handle it,” she added resignedly. “The Academy taught me to manage it, but as a shinigami, I’ve put a wedge between myself and them. They like to know I’m doing all right..but as far as family goes, I suppose there’s nobody looking out for me like you’re looking out for Ketsui.”

“You’re wrong,” Tenichi gestured towards the division barracks. “You have a whole division full of people looking out for you. That’s something Thirteenth has that isn’t easily duplicated elsewhere — trust me.”

“Is Seventh really that bad?” Kirio looked surprised, and Tenichi grimaced, shrugging his shoulders.

“It isn’t bad,” he said cautiously. “It’s different, and that’s all. True, there’s not the same prejudice against District people that there are in some squads, thanks to the time Ukitake-tai spent in Seventh District, and Endou-taichou isn’t particularly unfair. Kikyue-dono is a demon in wolf’s clothing, and that’s no exaggeration — but on the whole, now I’ve got the bit between my teeth, it’s all right. It doesn’t compare to here, of course, but I never expected it to.”

“I thought you were the one who wanted to go to Seventh?” Kirio looked confused. “Surely Taichou didn’t push you out?”

“No, I chose it,” Tenichi agreed. “I came from Seventh, remember? Just like you, originally, I was born in Seventh District. Besides, it’s what you said about Ketsui, too. If I’m here, I’m always watching him far more than my own duty. Taichou spoke to me about it a couple of times, and Fukutaichou too. It’s only gonna put one of us in danger, if we’re in the same squad. I’m stronger than Ketsui, and older, so it’s obvious that I should be the one to go somewhere else. I can cope on my own, but Ketsui takes longer to adjust to new surroundings. That’s the real reason why.”

“I see,” Kirio looked pensive. “You really did think it through — now it makes more sense.”

“Mm,” Tenichi cast her a faint smile. “It’s something of a weight off my mind to go into a fight knowing that I can give my all and not worry that my little brother is somewhere around, blade drawn, and possibly in danger. Seventh and Thirteenth patrol different areas, so this way Ketsui and I can just be brothers. We don’t have to be battle

partners, too.”

“Maybe you have grown up more than I thought,” Kirio reflected. “What about Seventh District, though? You’re there a lot, these days, and no offence, but I would’ve thought you’d not want to go there at all. You and I both remember horrible things there much more clearly than Ketsui, and though Endou-taichou has helped change that, the memories don’t go away that quickly. Why would you choose Seventh to go to, with the background we have? It confused me then and it still confuses me now.”

“Mm,” Tenichi paused for a moment, and Kirio saw his eyes cloud over. “You want to know the truth?”

“That’s why I’m asking,” Kirio agreed. “Well? Why Seventh?”

“I want to find Father,” Tenichi offered her a crooked smile. “I know he’s there, somewhere, and I’d like to know where.”

“Father? Daisuke-san?” Kirio was taken aback. “But he’s dead... isn’t he? Your father... he died before you and I even met?”

“He did,” Tenichi clenched his fists, nodding his head. “I never knew where or how, not really... but I thought that, now I’m grown up, I ought to go and pay my respects to him. Thanks to his actions, Ketsui and I grew up free and safe from all the bad things in Seventh. Father wasn’t so lucky — I at least want to find his grave and thank him for the sacrifice he made for us.”

“Does Ketsui know that?” Kirio asked, and Tenichi shook his head.

“Ketsui doesn’t remember Father like I do,” he said simply. “It would simply burden him more, bringing the past into the present. This is something I want to do, and being in Seventh Division allows me to patrol the areas where I might find him. Even if it takes my whole career, I’ll track him down. That’s my hidden motive — well? Is it a shameful one, or do you approve?”

“Daisuke-san would probably be proud of both of you,” Kirio said softly. “Unlike my kin, yours loved you. I don’t think it’s a shameful thing at all — I think Daisuke-san would be very happy to be visited by his son.”

She got to her feet, hauling her friend up with her.

“Meanwhile, you ought to go back to base before Kikyue-dono realises you’ve slipped out,” she advised lightly. “Otherwise you might find yourself scattered on the breeze before you get to hunt Daisuke-san’s resting place down. I’ll tell Ketsui you called by, but you can rest

assured that he's fine. He fought well against the Hollow and we both took it down with no real problems. He's capable of fighting his own battles, now. You needn't worry about him so much."

"You are watching out for him, despite what you said," Tenichi eyed her keenly, and Kirio reddened, shrugging her shoulders.

"Maybe a little," she acknowledged. "It's a different kind of relationship, though. I'm his senpai — we're not blood relatives so it's not the same."

"I'll trust him to you, then, for now," Tenichi reflected. "Pass my regards on to the Taichou and Fukutaichou when you see them, all right? I'll do as you say and head back — if the swords don't get checked, you'll get disciplined too, won't you?"

"I suppose so," Kirio cast a guilty glance back in the direction of the barracks, and Tenichi grinned.

"I'll see you soon, then, no doubt," he told her, offering her a wink. "Take care and make sure Ketsui does the same, all right? I'm counting on you."

With that he was gone, slipping into shunpo like a ghost into the evening mist, and Kirio let out a heavy sigh, turning back towards the barracks and the waiting *asauchi*.

"Of course we miss you, Tenichi-kun," she murmured absently to herself, pushing back the sliding door and stepping into the training chamber, hurrying across the wood to continue her inspection of the blades. "But if you're going to find Daisuke-san, then I suppose that's all right. Irie-san would want you to do that, too. She never got to visit Daisuke-san's grave, and I know it hurt her — if you did it for her, maybe she'd be more able to rest in peace."

"Very touching. Very touching indeed."

As Tenichi made his way back towards the Seventh Division barracks, a voice from the darkness made him pause, his brow creasing in consternation as he turned to look for the speaker.

"You won't see me, so you needn't try and blow both of our covers by looking for me," the voice scolded him, and though he could see nobody, from the darkness he felt a sudden, sharp tap of something against the back of his neck. Instinctively he froze, recognising the ice cold sensation of a blade point, and a soft chuckle came from out of the black.

“Good boy,”

The words were so soft, Tenichi could barely make them out against the evening breeze, but from the race of reiatsu that surged suddenly through his body, he knew that he was not alone.

“Don’t speak. Don’t move. Pretend nothing is happening,” the voice continued softly, and Tenichi felt a slight scratch of metal against his skin. “You can hear me, and that’s enough. You don’t need to see me — you wouldn’t remember my face, even if I did show it to you. It’s better for both of us if you don’t turn around... I don’t want anyone’s attention to be drawn out here.”

“Who are you?” A faint hiss escaped Tenichi’s lips, and suddenly the pressure of the blade became firmer against his neck.

“I told you not to speak!”

From the darkness, something long and thin uncoiled itself, wrapping its considerable length around his throat and tugging slightly, causing him to cough.

“I don’t want to hurt you, so long as you don’t move. I have my orders not to bring you back dead,” the voice continued, calm and even. “You can’t even imagine what I might be capable of, so it would be better that you didn’t even try to fight me. I’m not the kind of enemy you can take down.”

For a moment, Tenichi considered calling his assailant’s bluff, his fingers glimmering briefly with Kidou energy.

“I wouldn’t, if I were you.”

The voice was no more than the hiss of a snake, and Tenichi felt the invader coil more tightly around his throat. “Just because I need you alive doesn’t mean I can’t do damage to you if it gets my job done more quickly.”

“Who are you? What do you want?” Tenichi’s words were hoarse, anger glittering in his eyes, and a deep, throaty chuckle came out of the darkness.

“One who does the bidding of someone you’d do better not to cross,” came the cryptic answer. “It’s best not to ask too many questions. He has sent for you — that’s all you need to know.”

“He? Who?”

“Come with me.”

Tenichi felt a little pull at his throat as the creature uncoiled itself,

but before he could react, two thin hands clamped themselves around his wrists, and the shinigami felt the ominous click of bracelets fastening themselves against his skin. Frustrated, he tried to pull free, but he knew it was a futile effort. In the gloom, he could not see his assailant beyond the long, pale fingers and heavy black sleeves — but he knew that the bands on his arms were spirit draining cuffs, and he was now helpless to defend himself with his sword or with Kidou.

Inwardly he berated himself for not having taken the risk to attack, but it was too late now.

“Come with me,” his companion repeated, his voice gentle yet somehow Tenichi knew it was not a request.

“Where are we going?” he asked quietly, knowing it was probably a futile question, but voicing it anyway.

There was no answer, and the ghoulish figure tugged on his wrists, pulling him headlong into a sea of darkness.

“Everything seems perfectly peaceful round these parts.”

Seri leant back on her hands, gazing up at the darkening sky that spread out like a great black blanket over the Spiritless Zone, its surface peppered with the tiniest of white specks. The moon was nowhere in evidence that evening, as it was the night of the new moon, yet with the flickering light of their campfire and the brave glittering of the stars, it was far from gloomy. “Mitsuki, stop looking so fretful. We’ve been on the hoof for almost a day, now, and we’ve encountered nothing strange on our travels. Buchou was probably just covering all bases — it doesn’t mean there’s something there for us to find.”

“Seri, you shouldn’t be so insensitive,” another member of the group Mitsuki had selected to accompany her across the Zone put in reproachfully. “This is Mitsuki’s first time in command of a mission — of course she’s going to worry about it. She’s got us old hands to back her up, but she’s the one who’s got to report back to Buchou when we return to base camp.”

“It’s nothing like that, Kazuki.”

Mitsuki stirred from her reverie, shaking her head slightly to indicate she had heard their conversation. “I do have to report to Buchou, but it isn’t that I’m worried about what he’ll say if we don’t find anything. On the contrary, I’m hoping we don’t... but I’m certain he wouldn’t have sent us out here if it was that simple. I can’t help

thinking whatever it is is just beneath the surface — and if we don't find it soon, more people might get hurt."

"You're taking it very seriously, though," the final member of the group, a young woman of about Seri's height put in from where she had been stoking the fire. "We can't find something that isn't there to find. True, the last raid on the Plus souls' homes was brutal, but there's been no evidence of a repeat, and..."

"Those souls were tainted, Haseyo," Mitsuki interrupted softly. "They were corrupted somehow — maybe by the Hollow, maybe by something else. That 'something else' is what we're looking to find. If we can't find it — there's a good chance that Seireitei might consider us to be the contaminant and remove us from here altogether."

"Leaving the people of the Spiritless Zone without protection," Seri sighed, stretching her hands over her head. "When you say it like that, Mitsuki-chan, it makes sense. What's decided by the Council is out of our hands, though. Retsu-sama will make decisions and recall us or leave us based on what she learns from the report Buchou already sent back to base. We can't do much about it now except follow orders and check all the other possible alternatives. Look on the bright side. Right now, nobody is being hurt, right? Right now, if Rukongai is peaceful, that means everything is fine."

"I wonder about that," Mitsuki rested her chin in her hands. "It seems quiet and restful, but for some reason I can't help being on edge."

"Tomorrow we'll be practically on the borders of the Spiritless Zone," Kazuki observed, spreading the map out beside the campfire and using the flames as light to see their course through the charted territory. "It's funny, isn't it? With all of the attacks we dealt with here in Junrin'an, none of the Hollow raids have happened so close to the edge of the Zone. You'd think that, if something was leaking in through the Sekkiseki barrier, they'd be the first places hit."

"The same is true in the North," Haseyo reflected pensively. "None of the border shanties in Hokutan have been hit, but that one further in was pretty much wasted. It's still a wide stretch of land to consider, but I suppose that does indicate something *inside* the Spiritless Zone is the key, rather than an outside force."

"The question is, do we count as an inside force or an outside one?" Mitsuki wondered aloud, pausing to glance at Kazuki's map. "We've been here for some time now, so we could be considered either."

"More likely it's something else," Seri reflected. "Maybe it's a

failing with the shinigami sending souls through to Rukongai from the Real World. Perhaps they're tainting them with their swords when they bury the souls."

"If that was the case, wouldn't the barrier around the Spiritless Zone prevent them from slipping through?" Haseyo asked. "I thought that was the point of making it so strong — they didn't want anything like that slipping in and turning Hollow."

"Then where do the souls go who are tainted?" Kazuki looked confused. "I mean, if what Seri said is right, and careless shinigami are using *konsou* without paying due care to their own spirit levels, what happens to the poor, unfortunate soul that they happen to mess up on? Where do they go? If not within the Spiritless Zone, where?"

"I don't think that's happening, Kazuki," Haseyo said matter-of-factly. "We're all trained far too hard and for far too long about the dangers of incorrect *konsou*. Goodness knows that the souls coming here are plentiful enough — it's unlikely that any would miss the net."

"What about the ones who are now tainted, though?" Mitsuki rested her chin in her hands. "Buchou talks about them being relocated or evacuated, but where too? Inside the Spiritless Zone is too unsafe, for them and for the other souls they're mixing with. That means outside — I hope the Gotei have devised an action plan for dealing with Pluses tainted by no fault of their own."

"You think it's infectious?" Kazuki asked, and Mitsuki shrugged.

"We don't know enough about the causes or reasons for it to assume it is or it isn't," she pointed out. "In a worst case scenario, it could be like an epidemic, if we left it unchecked, and then there would be no point in having a Spiritless Zone at all. That said, though..."

"No doubt the Council have thought about that," Seri mused. "They've been pretty quick with things like that so far. Maybe there's another area cordoned off in readiness for little accidents of nature such as those. We wouldn't need to know about it, since it's outside our brief. We patrol the Spiritless Zone... maybe that's the real reason for recalling so many of the Fourth squads from this area. Perhaps they've sent our comrades to police those sectors whilst we stick it out here... it's more than likely, thinking about it, because we're the division best suited for this kind of work and even the most moderate combat shinigami would probably do a Plus soul more harm than good."

"Everyone in Seireitei is committed to making sure Rukongai

stabilises and becomes a safe space for Plus souls to exist,” Haseyo agreed. “It would be strange if they hadn’t thought out that side of things, too. We all know there were corrupted souls in this area before they started building barriers and so on — that’s one reason why so many Hollows were lurking in this area and why they were lured to feed on the unprotected population. It will just take time to eradicate the problems, that’s all. This is only the beginning of the project, really. It might take years to iron everything out, and decades or even centuries before they can expand the Spiritless Zone into more areas of Rukongai.”

“I’d still like to know if we’re the reason those souls have to be evacuated,” Mitsuki murmured. “Even if the Gotei are providing for them, they’re being uprooted from what’s become their homes. It might seem stupid, but I can’t help being bothered about it. If they’re suffering because we’re here, then we ought to go back to Seireitei as soon as possible.”

“Then they’d be unprotected.” Kazuki pointed out, and Mitsuki sighed.

“I wonder which is the greater evil,” she reflected. “Us being here or us not.”

She got to her feet, checking to make sure Yuuyugo was securely sealed in its scabbard before scooping up her cloak from the ground and wrapping it firmly around her shoulders.

“Mitsuki?” Seri looked startled, staring at her friend in some confusion. “Where are you going? It’s late now, and we ought to be sorting out who’s on night watch, not venturing off into the forest on our own!”

“I’m not going to go far,” Mitsuki assured them. “I’m restless at the moment and I won’t sleep or sit guard safely until I’ve got the jitters out of my system. Something is preying on my nerves tonight and I don’t want it to affect my judgement. I’ll be back shortly, I promise — in the meantime, Seri, Buchou would want me to leave you in charge.”

She smiled.

“Whatever you decide about the night watch rotation, I’ll go along with,” she added. “I’ll take what you give me, and leave it in your hands.”

“I suppose that counts as an order, so I guess I have no choice,” Seri grimaced, but nodded her head. “Okay. Make sure you’re not long,

though. Perhaps the area is quiet now, but just in case there's the slightest possibility of danger, we ought to stick together as much as possible. Your sword is awesome when it comes to healing, but she's not much cop in a battle situation and I don't want to take you back to base in chunks."

"Understood," Mitsuki acknowledged, a rueful grin relieving some of the tension that had blighted her clever features. "Don't worry. I'll just patrol round and then head back here."

She patted Yuuyugo absently.

"Maybe I'm not good at combat," she added, "but Yuuyugo will keep me alert for danger, and I won't take any unnecessary risks."

With one last grin, she was gone into the darkness, moving swiftly with quick, deft flashsteps through the trees towards the river that snaked across the southern region of the Spiritless Zone. It had not always been such a fast-flowing river, she reflected, as she dropped out of shunpo at the water's edge, bending to trail her fingers through the glittering water. When Seireitei had begun to plan this project, a huge amount of work had been done to bring the meandering water source more directly through the centre, to provide sustenance for as many Plus souls as possible. As a result, what had once been little more than a twisting stream was now a good six feet across and deeper than human height in places. Bridges fashioned from brand new slats of Seireitei timber forded the river at intervals along its length, sturdy and secure in their foundations, and as Mitsuki crossed by way of one of these constructions, she reflected on how much hard work and faith had gone into creating this protected space.

It will all be for nothing if the reiatsu issue can't be resolved. Hollows are here now just as they were before, but with only us to take them down. Things are becoming ever more hectic, and there are only eleven or so of us stationed here to cover the entire area. I wonder how much longer we can call this a safe haven — even in the quiet areas, there's the scent of something uneasy on the breeze.

She rested her hands on the edge of the bridge, gazing out pensively across the landscape. In the gloom, she could just make out the uneven tops of what, to the Zone's residents, comprised houses, simple and unadorned yet functional all the same. The people who lived here lacked most of the comforts of Seireitei, but they had water and shelter and, at least for now, protection from the marauding beasts that tormented them in the Real World.

Plus souls don't belong in that world and they don't belong in ours.

They're trapped in limbo, waiting for the time their spirit matter disperses and spreads back into the ether to be reborn as a new life somewhere else.

She sighed, resting her chin in her hands.

To keep this world in balance, they're a vital part of the chain of rebirth — but although the Gotei and the Council are working flat out to reduce the amount of Hollow incursions in any part of Soul Society, plenty still remain. They're in the Real World, they're in Seireitei and, still, they're here. This feels very much like the calm before some kind of storm... irrational it might be, but I can't shake the feeling.

“Oneesan?”

The high, reedy voice startled her out of her reverie and she turned, making out the form of a young girl no older than some of the injured children she and her companions had helped to nurse in the ravaged areas of the Spiritless Zone to the north. This youngster was robed in the same thin, flimsy sack-cloth, wound round at her waist with a length of grubby ribbon, and in her hands she clutched a dirty piece of pottery, eying the shinigami with a mixture of confusion and hope. As she looked down at the child, Mitsuki was relieved to note that she detected no spiritual pulse of energy coming from the youngster's aura. Unlike the victims of the Hollow raid, this child was a pure Plus soul, one of the many who had benefited from the inception of the Spiritless Zone and one who was comfortable enough in her life to approach the strange shinigami without an inch of fear.

“Oneesan, will you help me?” the girl asked now, dark braid of hair falling over her shoulder as she gazed up at Mitsuki earnestly. “I need to gather water from the river for Obasan and I but it's running so quickly and I'm afraid I'll fall in. I don't know how to swim, and it's too deep for me here. One of the boys from my village got washed away in it just last month, and I don't want the river to eat me, too.”

She proffered the bowl, and Mitsuki smiled, reaching out to pat the young girl gently on the head.

“I don't see why not,” she agreed warmly. ‘Which is your village? The one on the far bank of the river? I see,’ as the girl bobbed her head in a nod. “The river does run very quickly here, it's true. All right, then. Lets see what I can do about getting you some water.”

The girl's eyes lit up as Mitsuki carefully took the bowl, skipping along behind the shinigami as though they had been lifelong friends and not brief acquaintances.

“My name is Yukio,” she offered cheerfully. “What's your name,

Oneesan?”

“Mitsuki,” Mitsuki replied frankly, stepping off the bridge and making sure her small companion navigated the slight dip in the wooden structure to land safely on the far bank. “You know, it can be dangerous to be out so late at night, and especially to talk to people you don’t know. Your Obasan might be worried about you — you ought to take care.”

“No, I knew you wouldn’t hurt me,” the girl spoke with complete confidence, her piping voice clear and bright in the quiet night air. “Obasan told me that if I saw someone dressed in black and white, I could ask them for help. They’re shinigami, she told me. I don’t know what that is, exactly, but she said that you’re here to help us. That’s true, isn’t it, Oneesan? That’s why I knew I could ask you.”

Despite herself, Mitsuki grinned.

“I’m glad you think that way,” she said sincerely. “Your Obasan is right, of course. We are here to look after all of you, as best we can. It’s hard, when there are so many people here, but we do our best.”

Yukio simply beamed, and Mitsuki got down onto her knees, steadying herself on the river bank before dipping the battered ceramic into the flowing river.

The chill of the rushing water made her start, almost loosing her grip on the precious vessel, but she managed to keep a hold of it, pulling it up onto the bank carefully so as not to spill more than the smallest amount.

“It’s heavy,” she observed, eying the child’s thin arms and spindly body pensively. “Shall I come with you, back to your house? You might drop it and that would be a waste, don’t you think?”

“I’m sure I could carry it,” the girl looked at the bowl, but Mitsuki made up her mind, shaking her head.

“I’m here to help you, remember?” she said lightly, ruffling the girl’s hair playfully and leaving glittering drops of cold water against the dusty dark waves. “That means that I should help you take this home. It isn’t as though it’s far — and I’d be happier knowing you got back to your village safe and sound.”

“All right, then,” Yukio agreed at length. “Obasan won’t mind, since you’re a shinigami. She wouldn’t mind me coming with you at all.”

“Your Obasan sounds very kind,” Mitsuki hauled the bowl back up into her arms, the young child trotting along merrily beside her as

though this kind of encounter was an everyday occurrence to her. “Have you lived with her for long?”

“Mm-mm,” the girl shook her head. “Obasan came here only a few months ago.”

She beamed.

“She gave me the name Yukio,” she added brightly. “I didn’t have a proper name before that, only ‘musume’, and stuff like that. Obasan had a little girl too, where she came from. She missed her, and I was on my own. She looks after me and I let her share my shelter. Yukio was her daughter’s name, so she called me that. It’s nice having a name, isn’t it? I don’t really know if I had a name before, but I can’t remember even if I do. Just, I like living with Obasan. It’s better than being on my own.”

“I’m sure it is,” Mitsuki nodded, pressing her lips together pensively as they mounted the small bank that divided the river’s land from the settlement boundaries. “It sounds like a happy ending for both of you. I’m glad.”

“Me too,” Yukio beamed, and Mitsuki was struck by the child’s genuine innocence. Despite how little she had, the child was happy and content with her lot.

Thanks to the Spiritless Zone. Thanks to the Council. Maybe, even, thanks to us.

This thought warmed Mitsuki’s doubting heart a little.

Perhaps we are making a positive contribution. Perhaps it isn’t us that’s making the Hollows come here. Maybe it’s some kind of other technical leak — something that can be fixed from outside, so we won’t have to be recalled.

Yukio’s Obasan was a plump lady who had left life in the Real World in middle age, her hair greying but still quite dark and a genuine, welcoming smile that dimpled her cheeks. She greeted Yukio fondly, thanked Mitsuki warmly for her help, and wished her a safe journey back to her base. As Mitsuki left the village, she found herself remembering the reasons she had come to Rukongai in the first instance.

We came here to help. This was my vocation — I left everything in Seireitei behind because I wanted to be a healer and work with people who needed me. The Kuchiki Clan, my friends, even Juushirou are all there, living their lives around each other, and I miss them all a lot. Still, I want to stay here, because this is where I can make the most difference. There

are many, many healers in Seireitei, but now there are only eleven in the Spiritless Zone. We need to be here and we need to make it work. I shouldn't doubt in myself just because some unexplained things have happened. We'll overcome them, and we'll move forward. I'm sure Retsu-sama will find the answers to Buchou's questions and then we'll take the necessary steps to fix the problem once and for all.

A faint rustle from the bushes near the bridge alerted her to the fact that someone else was abroad that evening, and she turned, her eyes squinting in the darkness as she tried to make out her companion's location. It was hard, she recognised wryly, when your companions were mostly Plus souls, for even for one as sensitive as Mitsuki, picking out their presence was far more difficult without requisite amounts of spiritual reiatsu.

This person was different, though, she soon realised, for as he stepped out from the shadows and into clearer view, she picked up the faint, flickering presence of a spiritual identity, cloaked and concealed but not sealed away enough to fool her healer's senses.

She frowned, once more suddenly on her guard.

"Can I help you?"

She raised her voice, hearing her words echoing in the otherwise quiet valley, and her fingers strayed to Yuuyugo, even though she knew she would not be able to put up much of a fight. At her sudden tension, however, the other person laughed, raising his hands to indicate that he bore no weapons about his person.

"I'm sorry," he spoke in even, friendly tones, his quiet words carrying easily on the night wind. "I was just passing through, and heard voices. I thought there might be danger, and so I hid, in case the girl needed help."

"You thought she was in danger... because of me?" Mitsuki's brow creased, and the stranger shrugged.

"You have the sword," he said frankly.

"I'm a healer. I'm not here to hurt the villagers." Mitsuki was taken aback, and the stranger lowered his head in a sage nod.

"I know. I saw. It was kind of you, to go out of your way to help the child get water."

He paused, and though she could not see him clearly, Mitsuki had the impression that she was being scrutinised by the dark eyes that lingered beneath the hood of his cloak.

“I hadn’t seen a shinigami act like that before,” he admitted. “I’m sorry that I thought you might harm her.”

“No harm done,” Mitsuki sighed, letting out her breath in a rush. “I wish I could say that everyone viewed us as peacekeepers... unfortunately you’re not the only one to see our swords and feel fear.”

She frowned.

“Your aura is contaminated,” she added softly. “You’ve been in contact with something dangerous — you should be careful where you roam. If you came back with me...”

She trailed off, as her companion shook his head.

“I travel,” he said cryptically. “I belong nowhere, but I won’t bother you.”

“Even so, the Spiritless Zone is...”

Mitsuki began, but the stranger had already disappeared, melting into the bushes and the surrounding landscape as though he had never been there. Slightly chilled, Mitsuki glanced all around her, but try as she might she could no longer pick up any trace of his presence, nor see which way he had gone.

She frowned, the chill breeze blowing suddenly and briskly across the river making her remember her promise to her companions not to stray for too long. Whoever the young man was, she reflected, they would have to locate him another time — perhaps in daylight, when darkness would less hamper their progress. It bothered her that someone with a tainted aura was so far south of their base camp, in this pure, clean area of Plus souls — yet deep down Mitsuki knew that wasn’t what had struck her. There was something intangible about the man’s presence, as though he had been a ghost among dead souls, there but not quite real all the same.

Mitsuki, huh?

The words whispered across her thoughts unbidden, making her jump and swing around. It had sounded like his voice, but breathy and indistinct, and she dismissed the thought almost as soon as she had had it. She was tired, and her mind was full of many things, she scolded herself, turning back onto the path that led to the base camp. Maybe she had hallucinated the stranger completely — in her current state of mind, she wouldn’t rule out the possibility.

A soft chuckle brushed against her thoughts, as though trying to make a fool of her.

It was nice to meet you, Mitsuki-dono, she thought she heard a voice whisper, though she knew deep down it couldn't be any more than the rustle of the elm trees shifting and swaying on the night breeze.

With any luck, we'll soon meet again.

5. Savage Land

Chapter Four : Savage Land

Her name had been Mitsuki.

Katsura hopped deftly across the river, using the bridge only as a support as he leapt from stone to stone through one of the shallowest points of the racing water. He knew the whole of this area like the back of his hand, so used was he to slipping in and out of the Spiritless Zone's confines, but in all the times he had visited here, he had never encountered her before.

Pausing to skim a pebble or two across the racing surface of the water, Katsura reflected again on the chance encounter. He had hidden his presence instinctively at her approach, not wanting to give himself away to one he had assumed would be an enemy, but when he had spotted the young child skipping along alone towards the bridge, he had been unable to pull back entirely. Katsura had spent a lifetime around Rukongai's people, both those with and without spirit power, and so, although the girl was also a stranger to him, he still felt he had a duty to protect her from harm. The shinigami had come and had killed indiscriminately, had they not? The shinigami had caused pain and confusion and created divisions between families and peoples that were unnecessary and cruel. He had never thought anything of them other than as black avengers in grim uniforms the colour of death, so at the sight of the young woman with her sword clipped to her belt for all to see, he had been ready to launch in and save the day.

Shinigami are the enemy of Rukongai and District Seireitei.

He watched the pebble skip across the ripples before it disappeared beneath the surface, and frowned, chewing down on his lip as he considered this problem.

Shinigami hurt those weaker than them, abandon them and leave them in ruin to suffer and starve. Shinigami are the reason that everything is topsy turvy. Because of them, we live like we do. Because of the shinigami, we're cast out of Seireitei and forced to live like beggars and like thieves. Because of the shinigami...

His thoughts trailed off as he remembered once again Mitsuki's soft, gentle way of dealing with the young girl, how easily she had agreed to help the child and how she had gone out of her way to take the water back to the youngster's village in order to make sure both got

home safely.

His brows furrowed in confusion.

No matter how he thought about it, she didn't seem like an enemy.

He sank down onto the riverbank, resting his chin in his hands as he considered.

Perhaps there are some shinigami we don't know about. Kind shinigami, who help the people here and don't hurt them. Maybe it's too easy to assume they're all lurking with ulterior motives and dark agendas. I've seen enough of them in Seireitei, attacking Hollows and abandoning villagers to rebuild their livelihoods as best they can. I've done my fair share of lifting timber for old ladies widowed by war and famine whilst the Gotei simply stand by and watch. I thought that was how things were everywhere... but maybe I was wrong.

He sighed, gazing up at the sky.

Mitsuki. He supposed her name meant 'beautiful moon', but his eyes scanned the sky in vain for any sign of the celestial satellite. It was a new moon tonight, then, he realised, a faint smile of irony touching his lips. The only moon on the horizon that evening had been the fair skinned, dark-haired healer who had come so unexpectedly across his path.

He closed his eyes, trying to get a fix on her location, but it was no good. She was too far out of his range to reach now — even when she had been standing before him, he had only been able to touch her thoughts with the vaguest hint of contact. She had a strong aura, he supposed — far more guarded and well trained than the Hollows whose actions he could dictate almost without trying.

Maybe I can't do that with shinigami. I've never really tried, so I don't know... perhaps there are limits to my powers after all.

He sighed, opening his eyes and resting his chin in his hands.

It's a pity. I never had any trouble persuading some of the District wenches that they'd like to come play with me after work on the village was done. Mind you, Seireitei women are one thing — even Rukongai ones would probably not register on his radar. He's always indulged me and he'd see it as just another one of my games. If I was to start chasing after female shinigami, though, I'm sure he'd have something to say about it. He has a bee in his bonnet about them — that's one path better off not followed.

He got to his feet, not bothering to brush the mud from his already grimy cloak.

I'm wasting time. Finding Hollows within the Spiritless Zone is a tricky

business at the best of times. All these barriers and divides designed to keep spirit power out... it makes my job a whole lot more difficult than it ever is in Seireitei. I don't know what the point is of this, anyway. Controlling Hollows inside a place where only Plus souls are meant to be seems pretty meaningless to me. Surely we're only going to hurt people who can't fight back? We'd do much better wresting Seireitei away from the Shinigami by driving all our forces that way... but I guess I know better than to ask too many questions and make too many complaints.

He rubbed his temples.

I'd like to take a break, but I suppose there's no rest for the wicked. It'll only be my neck on the line if I don't have anything to report back when I return... and I won't be alone for much longer.

His eyes narrowed to near slits, and he gazed around him as if expecting to see someone materialise out of the night air.

I wonder whether she's already come through to this side. It's such a pain, not being able to read her movements. If Koku were here, maybe he'd be able to get a lock on her... but as it is it's just me, and I'll have to handle her as best I can — providing I even manage to find her.

He stifled a yawn, realising as he did so that he was almost asleep on his feet. He had been on the move since the same time the previous evening, and it was not as though there was anything to eat within the Spiritless Zone. It was a pity — he could have used a snack, if just to keep him going till first light. Still, there was no embargo on sleeping, and if he could not recharge his body one way, it would have to be the other. Almost instinctively he began looking around him for a safe place of shelter to spend the rest of the night.

It's some hours till the sun rises, yet. A short nap won't hurt, surely? Tomorrow I'll need every inch of my wits about me, if Sakaki really intends on crossing over to the Spiritless Zone a second time. I won't get a chance to close my eyes then, in case she slits my throat to wake me up. I suppose I ought to take advantage of the opportunity whilst I can.

“Seen Tenichi?”

Juushirou paused in the penning of a letter, turning to stare up at the young woman in surprise and consternation.

“Kikyue, why would you think that? Tenichi's a member of Seventh squad now — why would he have spent the night here?”

“I don't know, but I'm running out of places to look.” Endou Kikyue, third seat of the Seventh Division sighed, sinking back against

the wall of the Ugendou with a look of frustration on her sharp features. "I'm sorry to trouble you like this, Ukitake-taichou. I didn't miss him at first light, and nobody mentioned his absence at breakfast in the mess hall. Some of our members were on dawn patrol with my brother, and so everyone assumed he was part of the group. When Souja-nii returned, though, there was no sign of him. I spoke to his bunk-mates and they all agreed none of them had seen him since last evening. There's no evidence he returned to Seventh at all yesterday — and I've had recruits searching the place high and low ever since."

"I see," Juushirou rubbed his chin, looking concerned. "That's surprising... I wouldn't have thought of Tenichi as the kind of lad who'd easily break division curfew and roam around Seireitei after hours without good cause."

"I wouldn't put anything past a young man pretty near his prime," Kikyue said categorically, folding her arms across his chest. "Only last week I had to go beyond Inner Seireitei's bounds to drag two of my lower seats from a brothel. Literally from the arms of the courtesans, if you please — as though they had no other cares in the world than to show off their swords and seek pleasure from fallen women."

Juushirou eyed the indignation in his companion's eyes, and hid his smile, amused despite himself at the image of her flying into one of the local houses of pleasure to retrieve her red-faced young recruits from the clutches of their paramours.

She was barely more than twenty one summers, and slenderly built, her height a good half head or more below Juushirou's own when the two stood face to face. She was not well muscled or, at first glance, a particularly strong individual, but one look at the glittering ferocity that burned in the depths of her pale blue eyes told anyone who happened to look her way that the soul within was strong.

She was dressed properly in the black and white of a squad shinigami, the crest of the Endou family hanging in a silvery pendant about her throat, and her thick dark hair tied back from her face in a long, strictly regimented braid. Stray wisps had pulled themselves free from it already, framing her face and softening her sharp, hawk-like features. The Endou were known as hunters, their sword spirits taking the form of various birds of prey, and, glancing at her now, with angry frustration bubbling in those silvery blue eyes, Juushirou felt certain he could see that predatorial spirit shining through. Though Third seat, Kikyue was as abrasive and caustic in her use of words and blade as her older brother was calm and reasoned, and, although it was Souja who was both Endou heir and Vice Captain of Seventh Squad, it

was Kikyue whose temper most of the younger members feared. She had held her division rank since the tender age of fifteen, trained by her father's blade and, often, with Juushirou's guiding hand. Her skills had blossomed when she had been only ten or eleven, too quickly and violently for her to be educated as her brother had been at the great Spirit Academy that still dominated First District, and maybe it was that fact itself, Juushirou mused, that had always made Kikyue seem more of a lone hunter than a pack animal, keener to keep the rules than make friends.

Kikyue was still very young, younger, in fact, than the shinigami subordinate she had come to Thirteenth seeking, yet in some ways she had never really been a child at all. She acted on impulse, rarely seeing the inconvenience or discomfort caused by her directness, and, as he pondered on her now, Juushirou knew that she would have thought nothing at all of charging into a brothel to reclaim her members. In fact, he realised with humour, she probably would have dragged them still naked back through the streets if she had had to, without even stopping to consider her dignity or theirs at being seen in such a position.

Yes, as Clan *hime* went, Endou Kikyue was far from in the normal style.

"That must've been hard," he said now, in reference to her brothel visit, keeping his voice level and turning his gaze back to his letter so that she did not see the mirth in his hazel eyes. "I'm sure, though, that Tenichi isn't that kind of shinigami. In all the time he was with us here in Thirteenth, I never encountered any serious problems with him, either in terms of moral behaviour or discipline. If I had one thing to say about him it was that he was too conscientious — especially where Ketsui was concerned. Because of that, I recommended his transfer, but you already know that much. Otherwise, I can't account for his derelicting his duty. It's very unlike the young boy we trained."

"Please don't think I'm casting any slurs on your division, Ukitake-taichou," Kikyue bit her lip, eying the Captain earnestly, "but I know that Thirteenth has, er, a different way of regulating itself from some of the other squads. I have heard that you are a little more... shall we say... lenient on your subordinates than some places? Perhaps given that fact..."

"Kikyue-chan, your father and I are old school friends, and for that reason, I look on both you and your older brother as an honorary niece and nephew," his humour gone, Juushirou raised his gaze once

more from his parchment. “That doesn’t mean that I’ll allow you to come in here and question the moral behaviour of my squad, nor the methods by which we train and maintain discipline. Tenichi is not the kind of young shinigami who frequents inns or brothels, and of that I am sure.”

“My apologies,” Kikyue reddened, bowing her head before the older man. “I didn’t mean... that wasn’t... I just want to find him, that’s all. Having him go to a brothel would be annoying and would call for discipline, of course — but at least it would be an explanation and one that could be quickly resolved.”

“You came to me to ask me if I knew of any such places he might have visited last night, didn’t you?” Juushirou finished his note with a flourish, setting his brush aside. “You’re really quite concerned about his absence, aren’t you, Kikyue-chan?”

“I am,” Kikyue groaned, sinking down onto the tatami-mat floor of the small, square building. “Truth is, his bunk-mates have said the same. Some of them have tried to lure him out after hours, but he’s never shown any interest in either sake or plying the favours of any woman. He’s diligent and dedicated, just as you said. That’s why it troubles me so much that he’s gone.”

“Have you spoken to Hirata and Souja about this?” Juushirou questioned, and Kikyue shook her head.

“Tenichi’s squad is part of my overall patrol. He’s my responsibility,” she said wearily. “If I had to pass it to my Captain or Vice Captain, it would be shameful.”

“They are your family. They’d want to help.”

“That makes it even more of a humiliation,” Kikyue admitted. “Souja-nii would never lose any of his men, and Father..”

She shook her head.

“Father is a true Endou, even though he governs Seventh District in a different way to any who went before him,” she said softly. “Most of the squad are afraid of him, even though he’s done nothing directly to cause it. It’s a healthy level of fear, Ukitake-taichou — a level that breeds obedience and respect. They’ve seen him unleash Tsumi no Fuuhi against Hollows they could not touch, and they’re all too aware of how easily he could shatter their lives just as sure as he shatters the creatures the darkness of this world spews our way. Troubling him about a matter of this nature would be inappropriate. Father would feel the need to become actively involved... which, if Tenichi was

simply playing truant from barracks, would end in a far nastier punishment than anything I could dish out.”

“Hirata isn’t a violent man,” Juushirou looked surprised, and Kikyue offered a rueful smile.

“To you, his equal and childhood friend, of course not,” she said matter-of-factly. “Sougyo no Kotowari is stronger than Tsumi no Fuuhi will ever be, and besides, there isn’t a single soul in Seireitei who Father respects more than you, I don’t believe. Think of it from the point of view of those who rank way below him, though. Your members are doubtless not scared of you, because of how you treat each one of them like family. If Father did that, Seventh Division’s discipline would falter and collapse. The Endou are a Clan that necessitate governance by fear, and Father knows how to apply it. For that reason, he couldn’t shy away from treating a District member like Tenichi any differently than he would treat a member of his own kin in the same circumstance.”

“I see,” Juushirou rubbed his chin, acknowledging the truth of the young woman’s words to himself as he did so. “Very well, I understand your reasoning. I haven’t seen him here, Kikyue, but you’re welcome to go speak to Ketsui and Kirio, see if they know anything of him. Ketsui arrived late back at barracks last evening with Naoko and Makoto after completing an errand of mine, and I can’t imagine he would have had time to meet with his brother — but Kirio was here all night and she might know something.”

“Thank you,” Kikyue looked relieved, bowing her head towards her companion in gratitude. “I’m sorry if I was informal or implied insult on your squad, Juushirou-dono. I just want to find him as quickly as I can.”

“Of course you do,” Juushirou bestowed her with a warm smile, reaching over to pat her on the head as though she was still a small child of three or four and not a grown woman, the third seat of Seventh Division whose reputation across Seireitei was both fearsome and legendary. “Run along now, all right? Enishi will be taking the younger members for drill at present, but Kirio shouldn’t be involved in that and you can catch her before she has her turn with the recruits.”

“Yes, sir,” Kikyue bowed again then stood up, offering Juushirou a rare but genuine smile. “I’ll do that. Thank you again.”

She withdrew from the little chamber, and Juushirou sat back, pressing his lips together thoughtfully. As certain as he was that

Tenichi would not have strayed into the local town like some division members might, Kikyue's words still lingered in his mind.
You wanted him to be so engaged, so you didn't have to consider something more sinister.

He furrowed his brow, tapping his fingers absently on the wood surface before him.

I wonder what you didn't ask me, in all that you did? There was something else, and you didn't voice it. A reason why you were so worried for Tenichi's safety... a secret tied to Seventh, perhaps? Something that you felt you couldn't disclose to a foreign Captain, no matter what?

He sealed his letter, turning it over to write the name of the recipient on the front. Getting to his feet, he smoothed down the heavy white *haori* that hung about his shoulders whenever he was on duty, padding across the matted floor towards the entrance in search of a handy recruit to use as a messenger. Although some divisions were beginning to test the extent of the Hell Butterfly's usage as messengers as well as *Senkaimon* guides, Juushirou was a traditional soul at heart, and he had far more confidence in the written word than the flitting whims of a scrap of spiritual energy. Many butterflies had become dazzled and distracted by the bright daylight of Inner Seireitei, so foreign was it from the dark claustrophobia of the *Senkaimon* tunnels, and Juushirou privately thought that there was still much work to be done before these small, soulless creatures could be relied on to convey any message of importance.

"Kayashima!"

As he reached the end of the wooden walkway, he caught sight of his young subordinate, who stopped at the sound of his name, turning to salute the Captain smartly. Juushirou chuckled at the boy's enthusiasm, inclining his head to acknowledge the respect and then holding out the letter.

"You're not currently engaged on any errands, are you, boy?" he asked genially, and Kayashima shook his head.

"No, sir. I've just finished drill with Fukutaichou, and was heading back to the dorm to change."

He glanced down at his attire ruefully, and Juushirou's own smile twitched wider at the dust that coated the hems and sleeves of the black garment. Enishi was a hard but fair taskmaster, physical and enthusiastic with his training regimes, and most recruits ended up flat on their face or their backs at some point during each session.

"I see," was all the Captain said now, however. "Well, when you've

changed, I have an errand for you to run. You can't go running around Inner Seireitei looking like that, I quite agree, but I would like this to be delivered as soon as possible."

He twitched the letter, and Kayashima took it hesitantly, glancing at it and then back at his Captain.

"You want me to go to Twelfth Division, sir?"

There was a faint glimmer of apprehension in the boy's eyes, and Juushirou nodded wryly, understanding without asking the deep rooted suspicion most shinigami recruits had of venturing into their neighbour's domain. It wasn't uncommon for loud explosions to be heard from the Twelfth Division barracks at all times of day or night, and though Juushirou knew that his fellow Captain was fully engrossed in Kidou research for the good of Seireitei, to an unsuspecting recruit visiting to carry a message or a memo, it was often a case of dodging bits of falling wall or ceiling to carry out their errand.

"Yes please," he said now. "It's all right — you can hand the message to Michihashi-fukutaichou if you'd prefer — I'm sure Sekime-taichou wouldn't want to be disturbed if she's deep in her research again. It's only the answer to some questions she asked me a while back, relating to kidou properties and my experiences — it's nothing particularly confidential, so it should be fine to give it to Michihashi."

"Oh. Yes, sir," The relief on Kayashima's young features was palpable, and he nodded his head. "I'll see to it right away, sir. Thank you!"

Juushirou watched the youngster hasten off in the direction of the dorm, trailing dust behind him, and he laughed, folding his arms across his chest.

Even outside of Third division, the Urahara are a unique, eccentric bunch. I count us lucky that so many of them are on our side.

A shadow touched his humour as he remembered one Urahara who had quite clearly stated for the other side.

Considering Aizen's work and actions, we're very lucky indeed to have so many of that Clan working for Seireitei. Even if he is a genius, surely he can't prevail over so many hardworking individuals committed to making Soul Society successful and stable? Nagesu-dono has made so many important breakthroughs since he became Head of the Clan, and Sekime's work on Kidou has been invaluable — maybe we will, finally, find a way to form a specialised kidou division. If we could do that, it would bolster Seireitei's forces yet again. That can be no bad thing, surely?

He cast a glance back towards Ugendou, remembering the pile of paperwork that still awaited his attention, but after a moment's thought decided against it, turning instead towards the courtyard that led from the rear of Thirteenth Division's land to the gate which opened out onto the main concourse. Thirteenth's territory was smaller than most divisions, and some of the more uppity Clan Captains had referred to its appearance as 'shabby', but Juushirou saw no reason for unnecessary adornments. It was a military barracks, and that was all it should be.

As he stepped out beneath the wooden hanging that depicted the number thirteen in five concise, black slashes, he paused for a moment, then turned resolutely towards the path that led to the Seventh Division. Whilst Kikyue was occupied with her investigations within the Thirteenth, he had some questions of his own to ask.

"Juushirou-dono!"

As he approached the gates of his destination, a voice hailed him, and he raised his head, seeing a tall, slender figure ambling across the cobbles towards him. This was Souja, Kikyue's older brother, and a man less like his predatorial, sharp-tongued sister would be hard to find. Although both had the same dark hair and pale blue eyes, whilst Kikyue gave the impression of a hunter on the prowl, Souja's genial smile and warm gaze tended to put people easily off their guard. He was known among the Vice Captains for being one of the most cooperative and communicative of their rank, and for that reason, he was often a first choice when it came to choosing someone to lead a combined mission. Souja was not ostentatious in either behaviour or appearance, but his dedication to his duty, his family and his subordinates had made him both popular and well trusted among the lower ranks of his division. Eying him now, Juushirou knew that most recruits, on joining Seventh Division, hoped and prayed to be assigned to Souja's patrols rather than Kikyue's, for although Souja was both Vice Captain and heir, Kikyue was the disciplinarian and taskmaster. Privately Juushirou thought Seventh Division would run a lot more slowly if not for the hawkish young woman shoring up her brother's indulgences, but nevertheless the combination worked.

"Good morning, Souja," he greeted the young man now, reaching out a hand to clasp the Vice Captain's warmly in his own. "I'm sorry to come wandering this way so early, but I had a visit from your sister not so long ago... it put me in mind of something I'd like to speak to you or your Captain about, if at all possible."

"Father isn't here at the moment," Souja looked startled, leaning up

against one of the ornately carved pillars that supported the archway into the Seventh division — a work of Clan ego, Juushirou thought, for it had been engraved heavily with the image of a hunting bird glaring out at the world beyond, one sharp talon curved protectively around the kanji for “seven”, whilst at its throat the badge of the Seventh District Clan. It had been here long before Hirata had assumed the *haori*, back in the days when his grandfather Shouichi had still stalked his prey across Soul Society, and Hirata had admitted to Juushirou that sometimes such an aggressive, arrogant frontage made him cringe. Still, tradition was tradition, and as Juushirou’s eyes strayed to the hawk-like bird, he acknowledged to himself that, at times, he had seen the same predatorial look in his friend’s eyes as he flew into battle.

“Not here?” he echoed, and Souja shook his head.

“He had to attend the District. Something relating to the Endou council and them not being able to cross t-s or dot i-s without his assistance,” he said heavily, shaking his head as though weary of the whole thought of the wider Clan. “Grandfather is there, of course, but there are some things that they won’t pass without Father’s own particular brand of persuasion. Old habits die hard, that’s what he always says — and in the Endou, it seems they die very hard indeed.”

“Rather like the members of the Clan, perhaps,” Juushirou observed, and Souja nodded appreciatively, a ghost of a smile touching his lips.

“Between you and me, I’m happy he didn’t take me back with him this time,” he admitted sheepishly. “Much as it would’ve been nice to spend a day or two with Mother and see my other sister, I have nothing to say to the Clan as a whole. I’m a shinigami, Juushirou-dono, and this is my fit. Every time Father goes back to the Clan to settle some dispute or other, I pray that he comes back unscathed, because Clan leadership is something I don’t want any time soon.”

“It would take a very silly individual to try and challenge your father, let alone attempt to kill him,” Juushirou said wisely, resting a hand on the young man’s shoulder and leading him inside the barracks. “Anyone familiar with Tsumi no Fuuhi knows that Hirata with his sword released isn’t someone you really want to cross. In any case, this isn’t the kind of discussion we ought to be having in the open like this. If Hirata isn’t here, I’ll have to take it to you instead. He did leave you in charge here, I suppose, when he flitted off home?”

“He did,” Souja agreed ruefully. “I’m his Vice Captain, whatever that really means.”

“Probably that he trusts you to hold the fort while he’s gone,” Juushirou eyed the young man speculatively, and Souja shrugged.

“Because I’m a son,” he said matter-of-factly. “Kikyue is far better than I am with keeping everything in line. Still, that’s not important. You said you had something to address with me, Juushirou-dono? Would you like to come to my office and we can discuss it? It isn’t as grand as the Captain’s room, I admit, but I make a rule of not using Father’s quarters when he’s not here. I’m not Captain of this division, not even in an acting capacity, so I leave it locked and bolted when he’s gone.”

“Would he mind so much?” Juushirou was startled. “Surely, sometimes, there are things you need to access in his room when he’s away?”

“I make do as best I can without,” Souja shook his head. “You must have forgotten the way the Endou are, Juushirou-dono. If I were to use the Captain’s office freely when the real Captain was gone, there might begin rumours of dissent and rebellion. Who knows? Some who have grudges against Father’s way of running things might decide there was enough there to use me as a figurehead and rebel.”

“I hadn’t forgotten,” Juushirou rubbed his chin. “I spent some time in Seventh District — when you were first born, in fact, though you wouldn’t remember that far back, of course. I dealt with my fair share of assassination attempts during that time, and so did Hirata. Still, I’d had the impression that things had stabilised. Was I wrong?”

“No, they have. They’re pretty stable, for the Endou,” Souja grinned wryly. “Just, a clan full of hunters isn’t really a family you can take your eyes off for a moment. It’s better not to give them any leeway to doubt or jump to conclusions.”

He led the way across the courtyard, pulling back a door and gesturing for Juushirou to enter. He did so, following the young man through the halls towards the Vice Captain’s office. Occasionally they passed a member of Seventh Division, all of whom stopped to salute their adjutant and his visitor with a promptness born of fierce discipline. Souja waved them back to their duties with a flick of his wrist, and immediately they obeyed, scampering across the barracks and out of sight before he could change his mind. Juushirou watched them go thoughtfully, and Souja cast him a dry smile, opening the door of his office and allowing his companion to step inside.

“It isn’t me they fear. It’s Kikyue,” he said frankly. “Sometimes I think she’d be a more fearsome Captain than Father is, if you want the

truth.”

His eyes narrowed.

“You said she was at Thirteenth this morning? She said nothing to me about leaving the barracks.”

“She came looking for one of yours... formerly one of mine,” Juushirou responded evenly, and Souja’s eyebrows shot up into his fringe.

“For Tenichi?” he asked, startled, and Juushirou nodded, gratefully sinking down onto the cushion his companion indicated.

“Apparently he didn’t return to barracks this morning,” he explained. “Kikyue didn’t want to bring it to you because she said it would be embarrassing to admit she’d lost one of her members, but the fact he’s missing concerns me more than a little. He’s not a careless individual — and I can’t imagine him slipping off through the toll gates and into Outer Seireitei to a brothel or anything like that. He’s not a heavy drinker, and I’ve never had cause to discipline him for that kind of behaviour, not since he was a recruit.”

“I see,” Souja’s expression became grave, and he nodded. “I understand. You’re right, Kikyue wouldn’t have come to me about something like that. Siblings we might be, but there is a certain amount of competition between us when it comes to matters of this nature. Still, it is concerning. I haven’t had as much to do with Tenichi as she has, but my impressions of him have been positive ones.”

He frowned.

“I thought she seemed overly keen to greet my patrol when we returned at dawn,” he added thoughtfully. “She didn’t tell me exactly why, but she was waiting for me at the gates and she seemed... agitated when we arrived.”

“I think she hoped Tenichi had been one of your patrol, though if he’s not usually, I think she was just being overly optimistic,” Juushirou sighed. “Souja, I’ll come to the point. Conscientious as Kikyue undoubtedly is, to come racing around Seireitei in search of a seated officer who — with all due respect — should be able to take care of himself after dark is a bit excessive. I understand that he’s one of her men, and she’s still young enough to take seriously any slight to her authority — but even so...”

He thinned his lips.

“I got the impression she was genuinely worried about his safety,”

he admitted. “She wanted me to tell her that he’d probably gone to this or that inn or ryokan, even though it would mean a disciplinary hearing and punishment. It was as though she preferred that to... something else.”

“And you thought I might know what that something else was?” Souja asked. Juushirou nodded.

“That’s about the size of it,” he agreed. “I wondered what else might have happened to make her feel or act that way.”

Souja was silent for a moment, then he sighed, shrugging his shoulders.

“I imagine she worries he’s been snared by one of the extremist groups lurking in Seireitei,” he said at length, and Juushirou frowned, staring at him in consternation.

“Excuse me? One of the..what?”

“The subject hasn’t come up at a Captain’s meeting?” Now it was Souja’s turn to be surprised, and Juushirou shook his head.

“No. I’ve heard nothing of this,” he responded. “Tell me — what exactly do you mean?”

“It hasn’t really graced a Vice Captain session, either, come to think of it,” Souja rubbed his chin absently. “Just the odd casual conversation between officials. I first heard about it from the Vice Captain of the Eleventh — apparently two of their members were taken hostage on patrol a month or so ago, and held to ransom over the destruction of a particular village in the borderlands of District One. Eleventh tried to find them, but failed. In the end, the Captain of Eleventh was forced to meet the demands — that is, funding the repairs to the destroyed village. When that happened, the two members were released. Both were interrogated, but neither one remembered anything much. Both were kept shackled with spirit draining cuffs and had hoods over their heads the whole time. They saw no faces and felt no reiatsu. Nor could they identify where they were held. Eleventh had to drop it, but I understand the division was livid about it.”

“I see,” Juushirou’s eyes became slits. “That would account for why Minachi-taichou was so vitriolic about the Districts and helping them at the meeting we had the other day. The members were not harmed?”

“No, not at all,” Souja shook his head. “The Eleventh have a reputation for not paying repairs or helping the villagers, so none of

us thought a lot about it at the time. Then there was a rumour that one of Ninth's recruits was also taken in the same manner."

"Ninth, too?" Juushirou looked perturbed. Souja nodded.

"They've done their best to keep it covered up, because it's embarrassing to say the least, so nobody from Ninth has raised it and it hasn't been officially confirmed. Nonetheless, I'm certain that it's a true report," he agreed. "The recruit — a young girl, I think — was returned only after demands for supplies to a region of District Three were met. It doesn't seem to correlate to Clan or location — if there is any connection, it's relating to the squad that was involved in destroying the settlement, even if they killed a Hollow whilst there."

"And now, Tenichi?" Juushirou asked. Souja shrugged.

"I'm sure it's what Kikyue probably thinks," he agreed sadly, "but she hasn't spoken to me, so I can't be sure."

"Seventh don't pay compensation to District settlements they damage?"

"On the contrary, Father is very vigilant about doing that," Souja responded. "He learned from you, and he's always said that a greater army of discontent resides in the Districts if their rights aren't observed than within the core of the Clans themselves."

"In that case, there's no reason for them to abduct one of yours," Juushirou pointed out.

"No, not that I'm aware of, but it's not impossible that these rebels, emboldened by success, have decided any shinigami is fair game," Souja sighed. "The Endou have regained wealth and status since Grandfather reopened the Sekkiseki mining trade and began to repair District Seven's economy. Anyone who knew that might think we were a good target — Tenichi is one of our higher ranking members, with good experience. He's not someone we'd want to lose, so they would probably think we'd pay up to release him."

"The others who were abducted were recruits, though?"

"No, the Eleventh division officers weren't, but they were low ranking," Souja scratched his head, trying to recall. "Tenichi would be the highest ranking officer taken so far, if that really is what happened."

"Could District rebels really overpower an Eighth seated officer?"

"You're District, originally. So are many of your squad," Souja pointed out sensibly. "Being District or untrained doesn't necessarily

imply weakness.”

“No, but still...” Juushirou’s hazel eyes became troubled. “What is being done to root out these rebels?”

“Nothing, as far as I can tell. No personnel, and no official directive to follow,” Souja replied. “If it hasn’t been to a Captain’s meeting, it means the Captains of Ninth and Eleventh were too embarrassed to disclose it and therefore paid off the rebels to rescue their members and hush it up.”

“These are very savvy rebels, though,” Juushirou pointed out. “They have spirit draining technology, they don’t allow their locations or faces to be seen — and they know which squad carried out raids on which areas of Seireitei. Most District people who see a shinigami just assume we’re all the same. To know specifically which squad was responsible for a particular raid... and then impose punishment... suggests a level of understanding of how the Gotei works that you wouldn’t expect to find in your average District village.”

“An inside leak?” Souja looked horrified, and Juushirou shrugged.

“A lot of things are happening of late, and I like none of them,” he said wearily. “Hollow attacks are increasing. The Spiritless Zone is taking up the Council’s attention, and a lot of District people have been left homeless or abandoned by the work of shinigami, even when that work has been saving lives. Now you tell me the Districts are fighting back, albeit on a small and ultimately harmless level. So far no shinigami lives have been taken by these so called rebels, but that might change. If they are gaining in confidence... or if one of their captives was to see too much... who knows? It can’t be hushed up forever.”

“I will talk to Kikyue about Tenichi, when she returns,” Souja promised. “If one of our squad is missing, I won’t take it lightly. Seventh are not at fault for anything, so if he was taken by these rebels, it was with no motivation. Whilst the Endou could pay for repairs, just paying a demand isn’t enough. Besides, no demand has been received here, not yet. I’d know, if it had.”

“The others were forthcoming quickly after the abductions?”

“Within twenty-four hours,” Souja admitted. “We have a little time yet, I suppose, before one such message comes here.”

“Mm,” Juushirou was silent for a moment, then, carefully, he got to his feet. “Souja, if one such message does come, I would like to know about it, please. Eleventh and Ninth may be happy keeping this under

the carpet, but Tenichi was one of my recruits, wherever he fights his battles now. If he is in danger, I'd like to make sure he's safely retrieved, and I'm not afraid to raise this with the Captains or the Council of Elders if need be. His brother is still my concern, and I wouldn't have Ketsui say I'd washed my hands of Tenichi just because he's now part of another squad."

"I agree," Souja's expression became one of relief. "I'll say the same to Kikyue, when I hear her report. There may be other cases, and I'll try and find out what I can. So far as I'm aware, this is the first time it's happened in Seventh, but there are a lot of Divisions we haven't reached out to yet."

"True," Juushirou bit his lip. "If the Districts are acting of their own accord, we need to nip it in the bud. It just underlines even more urgently how the Gotei needs to have a firm policy in place for compensation and rehousing... the last thing we want is an underground war beginning between those who wear the *shihakushou* and those we're sworn to protect!"

He was in a small, square room.

Tenichi opened his eyes, blinking against the sudden rawness of the bright sunlight that trickled in through the cracks between the wooden slats and beams that formed the ceiling above his head. There were no windows that he could see, yet the chill edge of the breeze told him that he was not below ground. Nor, with the exception of the spirit cuffs, did he appear to be in any way restrained. Obviously whoever had brought him here had trusted that he would be too lost and disorientated to try and escape on his own, lacking as he was the ability to properly defend himself. He reached down to his waist, discovering that the dark scabbard and the weapon it contained were no longer hanging there, but even as panic began to well up inside of him, he caught sight of the *zanpakutou*, propped up against the chamber wall.

He frowned.

What kind of abductor left his prisoner alone, unguarded and with his weapon at his side?

I'm a ranked Gotei Shinigami, not a raw-necked recruit. I don't need spiritual power to slash my way to freedom, if need be. I trained long and hard with that sword, and whether I can hear its voice or not, I can make it cut just as sure as any other blade would. Surely whoever brought me here must know that. Why not take my zanpakutou from me?

His fingers went cautiously to his throat, touching the skin where that strange, rope-like tendril had fastened itself, threatening to cut off his breath. He could feel no wound or scarring, but the skin was tender to the touch and he felt sure that ugly purple bruises probably mottled his throat, an unpleasant reminder of the unexpected late night rendezvous.

But with whom?

He got slowly to his feet, listening all the time for any sounds of life or company. Outside, he was aware of the occasional pad of footsteps, and maybe the soft murmur of voices, but it was all too indistinct for him to settle on clearly, and at length he gave up, turning his attention instead to the chamber's one obvious route of exit.

It was fastened shut, barred, he suspected, from the outside with wood or metal. If it was the former, his sword might cut through it, the latter would be more of a challenge. Still, it was the only thing standing between him and freedom, and he had confidence in his sword skills to cut through a ramshackle wooden divide. What faced him outside was unknown, but he would rather know and be in danger than linger here not knowing or understanding the reason for his abduction.

The night before was a blank, and that troubled him more than he liked to admit. The sensation of falling into a deep, dark hole lingered with him, but try as he might he could not recall anything after that fact.

He inched across towards his discarded blade, trying to make as little sound as possible in order to make any guardsman standing watch outside believe he was still out cold. He would probably be outnumbered, so at the very least he needed the element of surprise if he was going to try and make a break for it. Inwardly he cursed his lack of spiritual awareness. It would be so much easier, he reflected ruefully, if he could pick out how many of them there were, and whether there was any sign or scent of the strange individual who had accosted him outside Thirteenth Division's barracks the previous evening.

He hesitated, debating his chances of making a clean break for it, and as he stood there, gaze fixed on the door, he heard the sound of a bar being pulled back. The next moment, the door he had been mentally negotiating slid back, and Tenichi found himself face to face with a young man of approximately his years or a little younger, dark hair pulled back lazily from his face in a haphazard tail and brown eyes, guarded and impassive, sizing him up from across the room.

Instinctively he tensed, trying to work out if this had been the man who had snared him.

The stranger seemed to know what Tenichi was thinking, for a faint, humourless smile twitched at the edges of his lips.

“I wouldn’t try to attack me,” he said quietly, and Tenichi knew at once from the voice that this was not the individual he had met the night before. “I’m only the messenger, I didn’t bring you here. You’re to come with me now.”

“Come with you?” Tenichi echoed, a derisive note in his normally genial tones. “And you think I’ll just follow you, without explanation or apology for being brought here against my will? Kidnap of a shinigami is a serious crime within Seireitei, you know, and...”

“We aren’t in Seireitei,” the young man seemed unbothered, bending to pick up Tenichi’s discarded sword and handing it to him without a moment of hesitation. “Here, this is yours. You shouldn’t leave it lying about.”

“You’re giving me my weapon?” Now Tenichi was suspicious, and the young man shrugged his shoulders.

“Why? Are you going to hurt me with it?” The question was almost mocking him. “I thought shinigami used their swords to purify souls in distress, not to attack people they know nothing about.”

Tenichi bristled, snatching the sheathed sword away from the stranger and reattaching the loop to his belt before his companion could change his mind.

“Who are you? Where is this? What am I doing here?” He demanded. “I want some answers — where are you taking me? Who are you taking me to?”

The stranger, who had been making his way back outside paused, turning to fix Tenichi with calm pale brown eyes.

“Don’t get me wrong, I don’t really care whether you’re here or not,” he said dismissively. “It’s nothing to do with me, I’m just running an errand here. If you come with me, I’ll take you to the person who really wants to see you. You might not like how you came here, but I don’t think he intends to hurt you.”

He gestured to the sword.

“You got to keep that. It generally means he likes you, so when he’s done with you, he’ll probably let you go.”

“And I’m supposed to just go along with this?”

“If you don’t, it’ll be a lot of hassle for everyone,” the stranger sighed, turning back towards the door and daylight. “Look, just take my advice and do as I say, all right? Really, it’ll all be much quicker and more painless for everyone if you do.”

Tenichi’s eyes narrowed and he strode across the chamber, grabbing the other man by the shoulder and forcibly pulling him around to face him. At this range, he realised, his companion was not as well built as he was, standing an inch or two shorter. His appearance was unremarkable, the straggly dark hair that flopped across his brow and down his back in a lazy tail had not been cut for some time, nor had the owner bothered to take particular care of it. He was shaven and clean, but his attire was rumpled, as though he had slept in it, and, Tenichi thought derisively, quite possibly swum in it as well. A knotted length of ugly grey fabric wound itself around his waist, pretending to be an *obi*, but miles from the smart white cloth that shinigami wore, and as he gazed his companion up and down, Tenichi realised with a jolt how much fortune he had had joining the Gotei.

But for that calling, he remembered grimly, he too might have cut so unimpressive a figure.

At his appraisal, the young man smiled, another humourless twitch of his lips which did not reach his eyes.

“Let’s go,” was all he said, however.

“I didn’t say I was going to come with you,” Tenichi protested, and the other man shrugged.

“You didn’t say you weren’t going to, either,” he pointed out sensibly. “You wanted answers to your questions, and this way you’ll get them. Everything will work itself out and I can go back to reading my book. It’s a nice day in Rukongai for once, and there are no screaming children by the stream — if it’s all the same to you, I’d like to get this over with so that I can go back to other things and get on with my day.”

“Ru... kongai?”

Tenichi stared at his companion in disbelief, and the other man smirked, reaching up to remove the shinigami’s hand from his robe.

“Kurotsuchi brought you here,” he said off-handedly, leading the way outside and, against his better judgement, Tenichi found himself following. “His methods are unorthodox, and so is he. Probably he

whacked you or dosed you with one of his concoctions to put you out, so you wouldn't struggle on the way — you look like the kind of person who'd put up a pretty good fight, if given a chance. You were like a corpse when I looked in on you last night, so if he did something odd to you, I apologise. He gets the job done, but he's not great at leaving good first impressions. If he abducted you, he probably didn't see any other way to bring you here. He isn't here right now, though, so if you're thinking of gutting him, forget it. He's already a gutless weed of a man most of the time, anyway — and catching him is more trouble than it's worth."

"If you think I'm going to be let go, should you be telling me that?" Tenichi challenged, and the man shrugged.

"I don't suppose it matters," he said casually. "You won't be telling anyone about it, when you go back."

"You really think that's the case?" Tenichi snorted, stepping out into the daylight proper and immediately glancing around him, taking in as much as he could of his surroundings.

There was not much to see.

The hut stood in a little clearing, isolated by the dead stumps and withered trunks of what had once been a forest but, with dry winds and draught, had long since become a wasteland. A dusty, uneven stone path wound its way through the remains of the woodland towards another cluster of ramshackle sheds and buildings, many formed from propping up one panel of decaying timber against another with a battered stretch of waxed fabric as a roof. In the distance, Tenichi thought he could see the curve of what might be a stream, though to his eyes it looked more like a muddy trickle and what little grass had managed to grow was in patches, yellow and struggling for nutrients.

At his dismayed gaze, the other man offered him another empty smile.

"You haven't been to Rukongai before, have you?" he asked matter-of-factly, as slowly Tenichi shook his head. "No, I suppose you wouldn't have been. The Gotei don't like sending people here — only those healer types, in their fenced off area to the north of this land. This whole stretch is designated no-man's land — nobody and nothing can live here, so nobody really pays it any mind."

"*You* seem to be living here." The words slipped from Tenichi's lips before he could stop them, and his companion let out a low chuckle.

“I suppose we do,” he agreed pensively, “for what it’s worth.”

“You say ‘we’, but I don’t see anyone other than you and I.” Tenichi sized up his companion again, inwardly wondering if he could jump him and overpower him long enough to find a way to escape. The whole area seemed deserted, and though he had been sure he had heard the footfalls of others beforehand, there was no sign of anyone else abroad now.

“I already told you, attacking me would be a bad idea,” the other man didn’t even bother to look at him. “I’m not fond of fighting, and I’d rather not give you more bruises to go with the pretty necklace of them you’re already wearing.”

“Can you read my mind?” Tenichi demanded, and his companion snorted, shaking his head.

“Don’t be stupid,” he said calmly. “I don’t need to read your mind, only your aura. You might be wearing spirit damping bracelets, but I’m not.”

“If I’m wearing spirit draining cuffs, you shouldn’t be able to read my reiatsu at all!”

“I said aura, not reiatsu,” the young man looked faintly amused. “Besides, whatever you say or do, it doesn’t really make a difference. I already know you won’t attack me, so there’s no sense in making like you will.”

“What makes you say that?”

“We’re wasting time,” the other man shrugged dismissively, “and someone is waiting to see you, Tenichi-dono.”

“You know my name!” Tenichi stopped dead, and the other nodded.

“Of course. No point in bringing someone here without basic information,” he said carelessly. “It’s not a secret, is it? Your name isn’t all that remarkable, and with all due respect, you don’t look like a secret operative to me. You were taken down far too easily — no member of the Onmitsukidou would’ve been snared by Kurotsuchi’s wiles quite so quickly.”

Tenichi bristled indignantly, but no stinging retort came to mind, and instead he growled, shaking his head in frustration.

“Fine. Tell me *your* name, then,” he said at length. “If you’re dragging me around the place and I’m meant to follow you, I’d at least like to know who’s my guide.”

He half expected his companion to refuse, but to his surprise the young man turned, nodding his head as if this were a reasonable request.

“They call me ‘Koku,’” he said frankly, sketching the kanji for “black” absently in the air with a pale, grimy finger.

“Just Koku?” Tenichi’s brow furrowed, and the other man inclined his head slightly in acknowledgement.

“This is Rukongai,” he pointed out. “Why would it need to be any more than that?”

Tenichi glanced around him at the sorry, forlorn landscape once more, and grudgingly saw that his new acquaintance was right. This was the forgotten land, beyond even the confines of the Spiritless Zone, if Koku’s account was to be believed. This area was visited by shinigami but rarely, for nothing was thought to prosper in this dank, water-parched stretch of land. Plus souls had been evacuated from here during the construction of the Spiritless Zone, but even before that, it had not been a place where many had lingered. The idea that a forgotten settlement of such people still existed here was a ripple in Tenichi’s understanding of the Gotei’s reality. Did the Council of Elders know there were still people living on this land, he wondered absently, as his companion took him by the arm, guiding him across a dip in the road towards one of the less rickety buildings the unimpressive huddle of wood and thatch presented. Surely if they had, they would have provided protection and support for them long ago?

“Why are you living here?” he asked at last, and Koku sighed.

“Why would we not?” he returned evenly. “Where else is there to go?”

“The Spiritless Zone, I would’ve thought. That’s where most of the Plus souls are now. The barriers are designed to let Plus souls through automatically — there’d be no reason for you not to cross into better land and I know there’s water in plenty in those areas of Rukongai.”

“For Plus souls, yes,” Koku said cryptically. “Here. We’re at our destination. You’re not going to do anything silly like try to run away now, are you? We’ve come this far, and it would be a lot of bother if you created a fuss about it now.”

He raised a dusty fist, rapping neatly on the door of the small building, and after a moment’s interval, a voice called them in. Koku slipped his finger through the loose loop of twine that had formed the structure’s only lock, pushing back the door with one hand and giving

Tenichi a nudge into the darkened room beyond with the other.

“In there,” he said brusquely. “You’ll find your answers, and I can stop babysitting you and get back to my book.”

With that he was gone, and Tenichi found himself staring blankly into a dimly lit chamber, the windows hung heavily with thick fabric as if to keep out the light of day. In the furthestmost corner of the room, a man sat huddled behind an old-fashioned desk, piles of parchment and fragments of old books scattered around him and a brush in his hand. Tenichi’s urge to run was quelled by curiosity, and, as the man set his brush aside, he found himself compelled to come closer, taking one step then another into the heart of the stranger’s lair.

A man with books and brushes did not seem at all dangerous, and now Koku was gone, they were apparently alone.

“Welcome, Tenichi-kun,” the man was getting stiffly to his feet now, pulling his fading grey cloak more firmly around his shoulders and approaching his nonplussed visitor with a slightly limping gait. “I’m sorry about the manner of your invitation, but there was no other way to summon you here without creating trouble for you and for Ketsui. I wanted it to be as subtle a move as possible — but my agents are sometimes a little overly enthusiastic and take my instructions a little too strongly to heart.”

“Who are you?” Tenichi blinked into the gloom, and the man moved to push back the heavy cloth curtains, allowing sunlight to filter into the small, shabby room. As he did so, Tenichi caught sight of his companion’s features for the first time and he gasped, disbelief and dismay flooding his features.

“Keitarou-san!”

“You’re surprised to see me,” Keitarou smiled in acknowledgement, bowing his head mock-formally towards his visitor and gesturing for him to make himself comfortable inside. “I don’t suppose you expected me to be the one to call you here — perhaps since your mother’s death, you haven’t given much thought to my actions or whereabouts at all?”

“I shouldn’t be here.” Tenichi took an automatic step back, but Keitarou, despite his limp, was too quick for him, circling his hand around the shinigami’s wrist and guiding him gently but firmly into the heart of the chamber.

“You haven’t ever told anyone about my visit to your home, have

you?" he asked softly, and Tenichi shook his head, eying his kinsman warily.

"Nobody would benefit from it," he said bluntly. "Ketsui and I are shinigami and the last thing we need is people remembering we have a blood connection to a wanted outlaw. I haven't talked about it with my comrades, and nor has he. Mother left this world not long after you came, and since we're both in squads now, neither one of us have laid claim to her house. We assumed you probably wouldn't come back again, and you didn't. A lot of time has passed since then."

"It has," Keitarou agreed pleasantly, pulling a motheaten cushion from beneath the table and indicating for Tenichi to settle himself down on it. Tenichi did so reluctantly, tension still coursing through his body as he tried to gauge his kinsman's motives.

"Why did you bring me here, now, of all times?" he demanded. "We may be blood kin, Keitarou-san, but the past is the past and our paths are headed in different directions. I don't know why you wanted me brought here, but..."

"I was thinking a lot, recently, about your father," Keitarou's words came out of the blue, and he sat back down on his own cushion, rubbing his rheumatic leg absently and meeting Tenichi's greenish eyes with muddy brown ones of his own. "I suppose Ketsui looks even more like him now than the last I saw him — well, he must. He'd be a full grown young man, now, I suppose — you said he was a shinigami in his own right."

"My brother isn't your concern and nor am I," Tenichi said stiffly, and Keitarou chuckled, nodding his head.

"True," he agreed merrily, "and I didn't bring you here simply to exchange family pleasantries. I wanted you to come and see this place for yourself, since I don't suppose you've had much cause to come here, have you?"

"I didn't really ask to come on a Rukongai sightseeing tour, if it's all the same to you," Tenichi said coldly. "This land is supposed to be abandoned, condemned and devoid of all natural resources. There's no point in bringing me here, since it's a place nobody can live and therefore, not a place anyone has any use for. You might be hiding here — probably it's the only place you could hide, in fact, to avoid being found by the shinigami from Fourth that are currently patrolling the Spiritless Zone — but aside from telling me where you're located, bringing me here serves no purpose at all."

"This land is supposed to be abandoned," Keitarou echoed Tenichi's

words, a faint, mocking note in each of them. “Is that what the Council of Elders has decreed, Tenichi-kun?”

Tenichi stiffened.

“What is this all about?” he demanded. “Why am I really here? Why did your... your Kurotsuchi come take me? Why did you want to see me so badly? What is your real motive for taking me from Seireitei, Keitarou-san? I’m not a rebel and I have no sympathies with someone who murders and lies for a living. We might be kin, but as I said before, we walk separate paths.”

He patted the hilt of his sword.

“You shouldn’t have left this with me if you thought you could keep me here in some way against my will,” he added. “I might not be able to use my spirit power, but I can still fight if I have to. As a member of the Gotei, I...”

“Shh,” Keitarou hushed him, shaking his head in reproach. “I didn’t call you here to make you angry with me. It seems Kurotsuchi must’ve handled you more than a bit roughly and I’m afraid you’ve got the wrong impression of my summons. You have to realise that making contact with anyone on the other side of the Rukongai divide is dangerous for one in my position. Crossing into Seireitei is a highly risky endeavour, and what would your superiors think if they discovered you were meeting with me? Your family history is known to all of them, and they’d hardly be likely to believe it was all my doing. You already protected me by not revealing my visit to you when poor Irie was so ill. If your superiors knew that, you would probably be arrested at the very least, or worse, struck from the Gotei completely, branded a traitor and executed by Council justice. No, I didn’t want to risk that. I have no intention to cause you harm, Tenichi-kun. I never did, I never have, and I promise you, I never will.”

“Then what’s to stop me leaving here right now, of my own accord?” Tenichi demanded. “If you aren’t going to hurt me, how will you stop me?”

“I sent Kurotsuchi to pick you up last night for a reason,” Keitarou seemed unflustered. “His particular talent is that he can move almost undetected through guard patrols and he will have left no evidence of your abduction anywhere in Seireitei. If you were to go back now, and tell everyone I kidnapped you, how would you prove it? It would look like you’d derelicted your duty and absconded for a night — perhaps with a pretty town courtesan?”

Tenichi's eyes widened, and Keitarou chuckled.

"I'm not trying to bait you, my boy," he said softly. "Nor am I trying to damage your position in the Gotei — on the contrary, I want to protect it and maintain it as best I can. You are Daisuke's sons and you've struck out for yourselves. You and Ketsui both deserve to reap the rewards of your own hard work, and I'm pleased to see that you're both managing to do so."

"You... *want* me to be a shinigami?" Tenichi was suspicious. "I thought..."

"That such a thing would be unpalatable to an exile? Perhaps," Keitarou nodded his head. "I admit, I haven't had good experiences with shinigami over the years. Well, you know better than me how the Gotei view my name and my actions. I won't try to defend them to you — why should I? They're past and I can't change them. None of us can."

"Then why *am* I here?" Tenichi's eyes narrowed. "You still haven't explained it to me, and that boy — that Koku — he didn't tell me anything about it, either."

"No, I don't suppose he would have done," Keitarou reflected. "All right, then I'll come to the point. Will you walk with me a while in the sunlight, Tenichi-kun? My limbs are stiff and my leg isn't the best to walk on for great distances, but I can manage a short stroll if you'll accompany me."

"A stroll... where?"

"Around this area of Rukongai," Keitarou offered him a smile. "Your Gotei told you that this land was abandoned. I want to show you that it isn't — more than that, though, I want to show you how much the people here are suffering because of the Council of Elders' apparent disinterest in their plight."

"The Council of... Elders?" Tenichi's brow creased in consternation. "But this land is deserted. You might be here, and your servants too, but I saw nobody else when Koku was bringing me here."

"I came here a long time ago," Keitarou said slowly, getting to his feet once more and beckoning his companion to his. "Even then, people here were afraid and wary of shinigami. They had good reason to be, you know."

He pushed back the door of the hut, stepping out into the sunshine and indicating for Tenichi to follow him.

“You can’t sense them, because you’re still wearing spirit draining cuffs,” he said apologetically. “I can’t take them off, unfortunately, because it would put too many people at risk. When they heard you were here, most of the people who live hereabouts went into hiding. Many of them slipped underground, in order that you didn’t see them. They’re terrified of shinigami... just the sight of your black and white uniform is enough to make them disappear into hideouts and hovels until the danger is past.”

“But... why?” Tenichi looked confused. “The Gotei came here, and they evacuated Plus souls into the designated Spiritless Zone, to protect them from marauding Hollows. Why would people here fear them? I don’t understand.”

“No, you don’t,” Keitarou said with a sigh. “You’re not Clan, Tenichi-kun, but you’re still Seireitei born and bred. You can’t possibly understand the level of suffering and poverty that exists in this part of Soul Society.”

“Poverty and...”

“I admit, until I was forced to shelter here, I didn’t know it, either,” Keitarou admitted solemnly, as they began to make the slow decline down the rocky, winding road towards what might have been a village. The muddy trickle of what might have been the stream rippled past to the right, and out of the corner of his eye Tenichi could make out the familiar form of Koku, curled up against the trunk as he thumbed through some battered, falling apart volume with genuine interest. “Things like food, water, shelter aren’t always easy to come by in Seireitei, but when we have them — even a little — we take their existence for granted. You and your brother faced high odds, escaping from Seventh and beginning a new life in Eighth — but thanks to Irie’s resourcefulness, you were always able to find those three things. You lived, grew and strengthened, and now you and he are both men to be proud of. Imagine not being able to do that for your children, though.”

“Plus souls don’t have children.”

“Children can be Plus souls too, you know,” Keitarou tut-tutted, and despite himself, Tenichi felt ashamed. “Families here are not blood kin, not usually, but they band together and form alliances because nobody likes to spend their time alone. Plus souls also need water, even though they don’t need food. This region was always dry and desolate, even before the Gotei started to build here, but once the Spiritless Zone was completed, resources here almost entirely dried up. You said that the Gotei evacuated Plus souls to the Spiritless

Zone?”

Tenichi nodded.

“Indeed they did,” Keitarou agreed. “I had to go underground when they were here, constantly ferreting around places looking for individuals to uproot and relocate. This evacuation did happen — but you do understand, I suppose, what the Spiritless Zone really represents?”

“It’s a place where Plus souls can exist, safe from the dangers of spiritual corruption and the attacks of Hollows,” Tenichi said matter-of-factly. “The plan was devised by the Urahara and completed with help from the whole of the Council of Elders. The Unohana now guard it and make sure nothing untoward happens there. The souls are far better off than they were fending for themselves in the wilderness before, Keitarou-san. Uprooting and separation might have happened, true, but those things can be survived. Ketsui and I survived them. What you mentioned before — shelter and water — so long as those are there, the Plus souls can survive.”

“What about those souls who weren’t evacuated, Tenichi-kun?” Keitarou paused to look at him, his features partly shaded by the overhanging branch of what, in life, had been a willow tree, but which was now a ghostly skeleton of its former self, it’s long, drooping limbs like fingers reaching out to beg Tenichi for alms as he passed by.

“Not evacuated?”

“Not evacuated,” Keitarou confirmed.

“But all the Plus souls were...”

“The Spiritless Zone is for Plus souls who have no native spirit power. The very nature of the environment is designed to try and prevent corruption of these souls, to reduce the number of Hollow transformations — correct?”

“Yes, but...”

“What about the souls who were already, as the Gotei put it, ‘corrupted’? What do you think became of them?”

“I...”

“The answer to that question lies just beyond this rise, Tenichi-kun,” Keitarou turned to gaze out over the village, a frown on his clever face. “They live here, or in places like it — ghettos of drought and emptiness dotted all around the outside of the Spiritless Zone. The Gotei have left them here to die. I don’t know whose orders it was on,

or what paperwork passed through the Council's hands to authorise such a thing — but only those Plus souls without spirit power can, ostensibly, pass through the barrier into the Spiritless Zone. Those who possess spirit power are locked out. Their needs are greater — food as well as water, to fuel their strength, but the Gotei does not acknowledge spirit power within Plus souls. They cannot enter Seireitei, because they are not from Seireitei. They linger here, in no-man's land — until the lack of resources drives them to Hollowfication or death."

Tenichi's heart froze in his chest but, before he could raise any protest or defend his superiors for their decisions, the tattered cloth flap that formed the doorway of one of the makeshift shelters was pulled back and a small girl of no more than six or seven poked her head out, cautiously stepping out into the sunlight and glancing all around her before hurrying down towards the miserable muddy trickle that Koku had called a stream. Her arms were little more than pale sticks, her flesh pulled to them so tightly that there was no evidence of muscle whatsoever, and her fair hair hung long and limp down her back, her features gaunt and eyes wary and dull from hunger and neglect. Despite himself, flashes of memory penetrated his brain.

There had been children like that at the refugee camp in District Eight, when he and Ketsui had fled there with Irie so many years before. There had been people so thin and desperate for food that they would do literally anything to grab a morsel, even if it was stale or thick with mould. Tenichi remembered clearly the fouled, disease ridden water of the lake that so many had bent eager, frantic heads to, drawing what sustenance they could into their thin frames in order to prolong their lives a day or two more. Those recollections would linger with him forever, pushed to the back of his mind, but here, in this village, the sight of one scrawny young girl brought them rushing back.

At his pallor, Keitarou gave a solemn nod.

"I am here, so these people will not die," he said softly. "I am not like them, nor are they like me. However, when I was injured, the people here sheltered me. They gave me what little food they could, and little by little, my broken body mended. When the Gotei came looking for me, they did not betray me. So, when the Gotei took away their meagre resources, I decided to repay their faith in me and protect them. Kurotsuchi is my main go-between to Seireitei. He brings back food, news and other supplies, so that the people here do not die the way people died in District Seven, for want of a good meal.

The Council may have forsaken this place and these people, but I have not. What I can do, though, exiled here like I am, is limited indeed.”

Tenichi swallowed hard, his eyes never leaving the form of the young girl as she struggled to scoop up dirty brown water in tiny, pathetic hands, cupping it to her mouth in order to take a few sips.

“Everyone here has spirit power,” Keitarou continued slowly. “They will not come out while you’re here, because they are afraid of you. Since the Spiritless Zone began, others have been exiled from it, increasing the population in areas like this. It is a growing problem, and I am not able to resolve it on my own.”

“The Fourth Division are stationed within the Spiritless Zone,” Tenichi’s words came thickly, as though being spoken through the vocal chords of a stranger. “Surely the Unohana wouldn’t sanction anyone being thrown into a situation like this. I mean, if they knew...”

“I have no evidence to suggest the Fourth Division know anything about what happens in this area of Rukongai,” Keitarou said simply. “I told you, I don’t know who thought of it, or who passed paperwork through the Council... perhaps it was simply an oversight on their part, who really knows? All I can tell you is the reality of the Spiritless Zone’s existence. So long as it continues, more and more people will be thrown out to fend for themselves in a world that has no place for them. Plus souls with spirit power are not abnormal. They occur more often than the Council would like to think. But — as you know to your family’s cost — the Council are slow to recognise spiritual potential in any area outside of their own comfort zone. They have taken a good while to recognise what exists in the Districts, and Rukongai is another step ahead again.”

“That’s why I’m wearing these,” Tenichi raised his hands, glancing at the cuffs with new eyes. “You don’t want me to know the spiritual signatures of these people, in case I decided it was my duty to remember and track them down.”

“No, that’s not why,” Keitarou offered him a slight smile. “I don’t think you would do that, not given the past you and your brother once shared. No, Tenichi, I insisted on the cuffs for another reason. Whilst you wear them, nobody can discern your spirit power in this area. That protects all of us, don’t you think? Your superiors will never know you broke bounds and came here, and nobody will hunt for you here, meaning that the people here are also as safe as I can keep them.”

“You... are really protecting these folk?” Tenichi eyed his cousin

doubtfully. “Your reputation wouldn’t seem to suggest it.”

“I reward loyalty and despise betrayal,” Keitarou said briskly. “Souls in this settlement helped save my life, and also helped to deliver my first child into this world when no other support was available. These people have become like family to me, and I to them. They and I, we are all exiles together. Past sins and crimes are irrelevant, when it comes to a matter of survival. I do what I can for them, and they would rather die than betray me. It is a good arrangement — and I am not so young as I was.”

“I see,” Tenichi pursed his lips thoughtfully, then, “your first child?”

“He isn’t here at present, so you won’t have the fortune to meet him,” Keitarou said casually. “I sent him on another errand, because he has an unusual ability to slip into places that others dare not go.”

“You have children?”

“Are you surprised?”

“I... maybe I am,” Tenichi admitted. “I mean, I had heard... I knew that you had fled with... but...”

“The less you know about me and about them, the better for all,” Keitarou took him by the arm, steering him away from the small village. “Those things are not currently important.”

“Then what is?” Tenichi eyed his companion quizzically. “Why am I really here, Keitarou-san?”

“I want your help, of course,” Keitarou smiled. “You are on the other side of the divide. You live there, and you have easy access to many things that I don’t. Even if I send Kurotsuchi through the barrier, it’s difficult to know what he can scavenge without anyone being suspicious. Your position is far more enviable — and I need someone on the Gotei side if anything is ever going to change for these people.”

“Wait a minute,” Tenichi held up his hands, and Keitarou patted him gently on the shoulder.

“I am not asking you to abandon your principles or rise in rebellion against your chosen vocation,” he said calmly. “I am not asking you to betray the Gotei or act against their wishes. All I am asking you to do is help me smuggle food and water through the barrier to the people who so desperately need it. Their survival is in the balance, and, like the Kyouraku helped you and your family, I’m the only one who can

help them.”

“If I were to raise this before the Gotei, maybe they’d look into it. Perhaps...”

“It’s hard to know who among the Gotei is most heavily involved in all of this,” Keitarou shook his head briskly. “I can hide from shinigami if need be, and I’m not afraid of them coming here. Trusting the wrong person might bring you under suspicion and into danger, though, and that is not what I want. I am doing my best to find another way to get across the plight of these people to the whole of Seireitei, and I will do so, with the risk being entirely on my head. All I ask of you is some support in terms of requisitioning supplies. As a kinsman of your father, I am asking for your help. As a former refugee, can you turn your back on these people and let them die?”

Tenichi swallowed the lump in his throat, remembering the little girl at the stream side. Slowly he shook his head.

“I can’t, and that’s why you brought me to see them,” he said darkly. “Just telling me wouldn’t have had the same effect... I had to come and see for myself in order for it to sink in. Someone told you that I’m a man of morals, didn’t they, Keitarou-san? That’s why you had me brought here. You knew I wouldn’t just turn away.”

“Maybe I was underhand,” Keitarou was apologetic. “That brief meeting of ours, so many years ago, told me that you were far more like Daisuke in character than your brother. Whilst I might have appealed to him, his caution would have slowed him down. You, like Daisuke, believe in things and go forth to defend them in a heartbeat. I needed that strength, and when I saw it in you, I was heartened. I hoped that, when the time came for me to speak to you, you’d understand. I trusted you wouldn’t be angry with me — the world is a dangerous place, and I am in no position to advertise my needs to anyone.”

Tenichi was silent for a moment, then,

“If the Gotei really are trying to block supplies from getting to those people... if they are really leaving them to die, ignoring that fact will be hard to do,” he said at length.

“True, but you only have my word that that’s the case,” Keitarou pointed out. “I can offer you no written evidence — it’s all my supposition, based on what people have told me and what I’ve seen. You can hardly burst into a Council session and demand answers based on my testimony, can you? It would make a mockery of both of us — and without me, these people would be doomed.”

“I wasn’t going to do anything of the sort!” Tenichi looked indignant. “I’m not a silly adolescent running around doing reckless things without a moment of thought, Keitarou-san! I’m the eighth seat of the Seventh Division...”

“Seventh Division?” Keitarou’s eyes glittered with surprise. “Not Thirteenth? Were you not a member of the Thirteenth Division the last time we spoke?”

“I was, but not now,” Tenichi frowned. “I transferred — it was better that way.”

“Better to serve a Captain from the family who killed your Father?” Keitarou was incredulous, and Tenichi shook his head impatiently.

“Endou-taichou isn’t like his ancestors. Everyone has said that, and District Seven isn’t how it was before,” he said frankly. “Besides, so long as I’m in Seventh Squad, I have a chance to find out what really happened to my father. So far, I only have your word for it that he was tortured and murdered in the way you said he was. If he’s really buried in Seventh somewhere, maybe now I’m part of this squad, I can find him. I might never know if you’ve told me the truth or not — but Mother never got to visit Father’s grave, and I’d like to do it in her place.”

“Daisuke’s grave, huh...” Keitarou’s eyes became nostalgic for a moment, then he smiled sadly, inclining his head.

“Very well,” he said evenly. “I’ll make an agreement with you, then, Tenichi-kun. In return for your help in bringing supplies to these people, I will tell you what I can about your father’s final resting place.”

“You... know where that is?” Tenichi looked suspicious, and Keitarou nodded.

“It will be risky, but I’ll take you to it,” he said matter-of-factly. “I was the one who buried him, so I ought to remember where he lies.”

“If Shouichi-sama killed him, why did you bury him?” Tenichi demanded, and to his surprise, genuine pain crossed his companion’s features.

“Daisuke died for me,” he said sadly. “The least I could do was rescue his body and give him proper rites.”

He gestured back up the rise towards the small shack that provided his own humble shelter.

“Let’s go back,” he suggested. “I’ll pour tea and we’ll discuss your

father some more.”

“People in Seireitei will be looking for me,” Tenichi protested, and Keitarou smiled.

“You’ve been abducted,” he said simply. “Your Captain will receive word to that effect, and demands of food and coin will be made. In a day or two, providing your ransom is met, they’ll find you, bound and shivering but unharmed in an undisclosed location in District Seven. When asked, you’ll tell them that you were kept blindfolded and remembered nothing. Such abductions have happened in the past and will probably happen again in the future. There are rebel groups all over the Districts, using shinigami as bait to get donations to rebuild villages and towns destroyed by Hollow raids. You will simply be another among them — nobody need ever know that you came to Rukongai.”

Tenichi eyed his companion doubtfully, and Keitarou’s smile widened.

“I see,” he said thoughtfully. “So the Captains of Seireitei choose not to discuss those happenings with their members?”

“Nobody said anything to me,” Tenichi said warily, “so why would you know about it? Unless... you’re also involved?”

“I am here in Rukongai,” Keitarou dismissed this with a flick of his hand. “Unless the circumstances are extreme, I don’t leave the safety of this unwanted place.”

“But your man... your Kurotsuchi, he does.” Tenichi’s brain was working quickly now. “And you said your son was the same — slipping in and out of places. It isn’t as though you couldn’t...”

Keitarou laughed.

“One thing I have always been good at is deflecting suspicion,” he said evenly. “I am not your enemy, even if I am enemy to the organisation you serve. Even if I have organised the abduction of one or two shinigami, I have released all without harm once the ransom has been paid. The supplies rebuild broken villages and the food fills empty stomachs — would you call such an endeavour evil? These are things the Gotei ought to be providing already — is it so wrong to demand it where it isn’t forthcoming?”

“I...” Tenichi faltered, and Keitarou rested his hands gently on the other’s shoulders.

“I won’t hurt you, you have my word on that,” he said softly, “and I

believe, now you have seen my cause, you won't betray me. You understand I am not working against Seireitei's people, but to aid them... and I have killed nobody with my actions. The assassination of a Clan heir is a notorious crime, but it was a long time ago, and much water has passed under many bridges since. I have a family to protect, and people who depend on me just to stay alive. I won't bring them into danger, Tenichi. You do believe that, don't you?"

Tenichi eyed his companion long and hard for a moment, then he sighed, nodding his head.

"You haven't brought Ketsui and I into harm's way, not even though you knew where to find us," he said softly. "I know you came looking for us — Kirio told us that you'd spoken to her, at the refugee camp, and paid her coin for her information. You said you were our father, but I know and so does she, now, that that was a lie. Father was already dead by that time — he never crossed into District Eight at all. You came to see we were safe, but you never made our life dangerous, even though you could have done."

"Daisuke wouldn't have forgiven me," Keitarou shook his head. "So you did know about that encounter, then? I wondered. The girl, Kirio, is also a shinigami with you, is she?"

"We were students together, at the Academy," Tenichi bit his lip. "She's the only person I told about your visit, Keitarou-san. Ketsui doesn't even know I discussed it with her, because he was with mother when I did. Kirio's someone I trust like a sister, more than just as a friend. She remembered meeting you that day, and we put the pieces together."

"I'm glad," Keitarou seemed genuinely relieved. "You understand my bond with your family is far deeper than any grudge I have against Seireitei, then? Good. So long as that arrangement exists, nothing will go wrong."

Tenichi felt something lurch uncomfortably in his stomach, as though protesting Keitarou's simple, sweeping logic — but there was something in the mud-slurried eyes that told him agreement was the safer option. He did not know where he was, or how far he was from the nearest *Senkaimon* — and besides, everything Keitarou had said was true. If his superiors knew he had come to Rukongai, no amount of excuses would protect him. Keitarou was a wily character who had outsmarted the Council for years — he would cover his tracks and leave Tenichi vulnerable and alone to face the music. Wary as he was of his kinsman, to defy him now would be reckless.

Slowly and in defeat he nodded his head, allowing his companion to lead him back up the hill.

As they passed the stream, he felt eyes on him and he turned, realising that Koku had lowered his book, his dark eyes now trained intensely on the young shinigami. Despite himself, Tenichi shivered. There was something in the young man's glance that had thrown him right on edge, but the next minute Koku's gaze was once more buried in the pages of the ancient tome, and the moment passed.

"Don't concern yourself with him," Keitarou advised, catching sight of Tenichi's expression and offering a smile. "Koku likes to read, and prefers his own company. You probably won't speak again before you leave... I don't think he's very interested in you."

Tenichi remembered that brief, intense gaze, and privately thought that Keitarou was mistaken. He said nothing, however, merely making a mental note to observe and remember as much about his visit here as he could.

He had no intention of betraying Keitarou to his superiors... at least, not at present. He would find out what he could and see whether Keitarou's knowledge about Daisuke's death was fact or fiction before he acted... first of all, he needed to know whether Keitarou had truly been Daisuke's ally, or the one who had betrayed him to his grave.

Author's Note: The Endou Family since Meifu.

*Anyone who has read Meifu's Gate knows who **Endou Hirata** is. Now Captain of Seventh Squad and Head of the Endou, Hirata has done his best to improve the lot of his people and for the first time in a long time the District is in relative peace. This is partly thanks to Juushirou, since right after graduation, Thirteenth Division were stationed in Seventh District to teach the Endou shinigami how to be a squad and how to respect the District people. Now Thirteenth has its own barracks, of course, and although the Gotei divisions work across a wide and varied area, for the most part the Seventh Squad has direct control over Seventh District.*

*Hirata's father **Misashi** is still alive, but passed the leadership of the Clan to his son when Hirata became Captain of Seventh Squad. Hirata was also married not long after graduation — an arranged match with a hime from a distant Endou strain out of favour with Seimaru and Shouichi's administrations. Hirata's mother **Sumire** is also still living, and **Endou Riku**, Seimaru's mother, is still firmly confined within the northern fortress, Hokujou.*

Hirata currently has three children — twenty four year old son **Souja** 総社 and twenty one year old daughter **Kikyue** 喜久絵 are the Vice Captain and Third Seat of Seventh Squad respectively. Hirata's younger daughter, seven year old **Sayuri** 小百合, has no discernable spirit power and lives largely with her mother, well away from the violence and drama of the Shinigami front line. For this reason, Juushirou has had little if any contact with her and so far as he is concerned, Hirata may as well only have two children.

Hirata and his wife **Ai** 愛 respect one another but are not in love and live fairly separate lives without any rancour between them, as Hirata is often busy with Clan or Squad business. They are united in their affection for their children, and Hirata went against the Endou grain by ensuring Kikyue was trained as hard as Souja to be a shinigami. Though Kikyue can never inherit the Clan, her skills are accepted by all of Seireitei, including a reluctant Endou-ke.

It must not be forgotten that Hirata's only sister **Eiraki** absconded with Keitarou to become his wife in exile, some considerable time before this story opens.

Also, the **kanji for black** looks like this: 黒. It can be read as "**Kuro**" or '**Koku**' depending on the type of reading and circumstances. Tenichi questions Koku's usage of it because normally this form of reading only appears as part of a word, not as word on its own. When on its own, the reading "kuro" is more common.

6. Sakaki

Chapter Five: Sakaki

“Why didn’t you tell me one of your patrol had gone missing, Kikyue?”

As the third seated officer slipped back into the division compound, the sound of her brother’s voice made her start, turning guiltily to face his quizzical, impassive gaze. It was already late, the sun having set some hours before, and Kikyue had spent the whole time canvassing Seireitei looking for her missing waif and stray. In her preoccupation, she had forgotten to send a message back to her own barracks to notify her fellows of her prolonged absence, but even so, she had clearly not expected to find Souja waiting for her, still uniformed and awake despite the late hour. Glancing at her, the Seventh Division Vice Captain could see the mixture of emotions that ran through her gaze — apprehension, guilt, and finally, resignation as she realised she had been caught.

“Well?” he asked her now, walking towards her with his arms folded casually across his chest. “It’s not like you to hare off without leaving a word to anyone, but even less like you to cover up something that might be of considerable importance to the squad as a whole. What happened, Kikyue-chan? Why didn’t you alert me the moment you realised Tenichi was missing? As your superior officer, and with Father away, you should have followed proper procedures.”

Kikyue’s eyes narrowed for a moment, then she sighed, dropping back against the wood panelling of the sheltered walkway with a weary look on her young features.

“Juushirou-dono?”

“He was here,” Souja agreed, nodding his head. “He was concerned about the boy, and, when I heard, so was I. I realise that he’s one of yours, and you want to take responsibility for him yourself, but in a situation such as this...”

He hesitated, his jaw twitching slightly in agitation.

“You know about the others,” he said, lowering his voice. “Eleventh, Ninth, and what happened there. There’s every possibility that Tenichi was the latest person to be abducted — that being the case, do you realise how much time we’ve already wasted because you

didn't come through the proper channels of command?"

There was nothing more than the barest reproach in the young shinigami's tones, but despite that, Kikyue looked crestfallen, colour surfacing in her pale cheeks as she dropped her gaze to the floor.

"I know. I'm sorry. I hoped it was something... I wanted to find him, and I didn't think..."

"Tell me what you've discovered." Souja was not given to long lectures or scolding, and, at his sister's obvious contrition, he rested a hand gently on her shoulder, steering her towards the Vice Captain's office, where kidou lamps were still burning brightly despite the late hour. "You've spent every waking moment looking for him, I'm sure, so we might as well make up for lost time by eliminating what isn't possible. I know you went to Thirteenth, but other than that..."

"I did," Kikyue confirmed, obediently trudging behind her brother to the secluded office located towards the rear of Seventh District's compound. She glanced around her, making sure that the coast was clear of any stray recruits sneaking around after hours, but the halls were silent, and once they had slipped inside the study itself, Souja slid the door shut, fastening the lock to prevent any untoward interruptions. He gestured for his companion to make herself comfortable, and Kikyue sank down onto one of the deep crimson cushions that lay before the low-slung desk, resting her hands in her lap.

"Well?" Souja took his own seat, cocking his head on one side and eying his companion critically. "I can tell you don't want to report this to me as your Vice Captain, so how about you tell me as your brother? We can cover the gaps and the loopholes later — right now my concern is locating the boy and, if I can, putting your mind at rest for whatever's led us to this point."

"You always go soft on me," Kikyue's eyes glittered with frustration. "Behind closed doors, Aniue, nobody sees but you do. You'll listen to me as your little sister, but I'm not... here, I'm not that. I'm your subordinate and if I do wrong, you... you discipline me. That's how it works. I lost one of my men — you should be interrogating me on why, not talking to me as though it's something that can be swept aside and brushed over as learning experience."

"Tenichi's safety is my priority," Souja said lightly. "We've had this conversation before, and I know how you want to prove yourself, but at the moment, we have other things to do than strip you of privileges. Besides, if Tenichi is the latest victim of the kidnappers,

you're probably heaping blame on yourself that isn't yours to take."

"This doesn't fit the pattern of the others," Kikyue objected. "Father's strict about us repairing damage we've caused, and nobody would dare argue with him about it."

"True, and I've had no word from anyone that Tenichi has been seized," Souja admitted. "That's why I want to rule out all other options. Whilst I appreciated Juushirou-dono giving me the heads-up, earlier, I would have rather it had come from you. It should have been kept a Seventh Division matter, if possible... you know that."

"I do," Kikyue agreed reluctantly, "but Tenichi came to us from Thirteenth, and... that's why."

"I know," Souja offered her a smile. "All right. I know Juushirou-dono is as clueless as we are as to where our officer might have got to, and he seemed to know less than even I do about the abduction incidents. He said you'd stopped to speak to Kirio-dono and Ketsui, though — did you have any luck there?"

"I didn't see Ketsui," Kikyue shook her head. "I did speak to Kirio-dono, though. She was a little reticent to begin with, but when she realised he was missing, she did tell me that she'd seen him, late last night. She wasn't sure on the time, but he'd called by to see his brother, and found him out on patrol. He stopped to speak to Kirio-dono a while, then left. She thought he was returning back to base, but obviously, he never arrived."

"Late last night, but at an undetermined time," Souja's brow creased in contemplation. "That probably means it was after our curfew order — or at a time he should have been somewhere else, since Kirio-dono wouldn't get him deliberately in trouble with us if she could prevent it, and if he hadn't broken any rules, she would've been much more clear-cut. Still, that's not important now. It was evening and he visited Thirteenth for a brief while. Then he left, and there's no suggestion he came back here at all last night?"

"No, sir. None," Kikyue agreed miserably. "His bunk-mates said they didn't see anything of him, and his bed hasn't been slept in. I spent most of the day scouting out areas of Inner and Outer Seireitei, hoping for a clue or an eye-witness, but nothing."

"Aside from the lack of motive, it is just like the other abductions," Souja's expression became grim. "Unlike the other divisions, though, Seventh have no reason to hide in shame. We've done our duty, and so if we've been targeted, there's no reason for us to keep quiet. I'll wait till morning — we'll see if a note or communication of any kind

appears. If not, then I'm going to take it to the Vice Captain's meeting."

"Are you sure?" Kikyue looked doubtful. "Tenichi's life might be in danger, if you make a fuss."

"Tenichi's life is in danger so long as he's at the whim of rebels we know nothing about," Souja pointed out. "Besides, keeping it quiet is impossible, now. I told Juushirou-dono all that I'd heard from Ninth and Eleventh. It wouldn't be the first time the subject had been hinted at in a Vice Captain meeting, but I suspect it will go one step further, now. I thought the Captains would have discussed it, but apparently not."

"What about Father?" Kikyue asked quizzically. "If it goes through all those channels..."

"Yes, it will have to go to Father, but he is someone I've had word from today," Souja replied succinctly. 'He sent word to say he'd be back tomorrow afternoon, and I replied by return to say we'd be ready and expecting him at any time. Oh, don't worry, I said nothing about any of this then,' as Kikyue's eyes widened with dismay. "That doesn't need to be passed through the ears and mouths of messengers when it can be done as easily from source to target when he gets back. Maybe he'll have ideas of his own about Tenichi's whereabouts — in the meantime, you should get some rest. This is my problem now, and I intend on taking it by the scruff of the neck. If these rebels have got brazen enough that they'll grab a high ranking shinigami from a squad who's been treating the Districts pretty nicely, they'll soon realise they messed with the wrong Clan."

"You sound a little like Father, talking like that," Kikyue sighed, stretching her hands over her head. "I'm sorry I didn't report to you sooner, Oniisama. It was foolish, but I wanted to find him. I thought he had just snuck out, and, well..."

"You wanted to avoid a disciplinary for both of you, I know, but I think this is more than just breaking squad rules," Souja eyed her keenly. "I mean it, Kiki. Go to bed. Sleep. Leave it with me. I'll look into whatever I can and I'll report to Father tomorrow if a report needs to be made. It's my job as Vice Captain, and since you reminded me that you're my subordinate, I'm now releasing you of responsibility for this particular matter."

"You're still just protecting me," Kikyue objected, but she got to her feet, and Souja could tell she was too tired to fight his instructions with her usual sparky wit and determination. "All right. I'll help,

though, when the sun rises. Don't cut me out of it, please. Tenichi is still mine, and I want to make sure he's safe."

"I know," Souja agreed. "We can talk about that in the morning — for now, leave it here and get some rest."

Kikyue shot him a glance, but she did not demur, and as she left the office, Souja let out his breath in a rush, relief coursing through his veins. He had expected a battle, but Kikyue's genuine preoccupation with Tenichi's disappearance had overridden her normal desire for independence, and he would take advantage of that so long as it lasted.

Besides, there were some things she wasn't ready to handle. Loyal as she was, ruthless and decisive, she was still young and lacking in the experience that five years at the Academy had given Souja. Unlike his sister, his idealism was rooted in reality, and as he pulled himself to his feet, he cupped his hands together, summoning the stray particles of spiritual residue from the chamber to gather against the warmth of his skin. They mingled there, migrating towards his touch in search of the warm, comforting glow of his aura, and as he drew them together, he watched them take form, the dark, spectral wings of the butterfly spreading out over the narrow body and flapping once, twice, three times before launching into giddy flight.

Summoning a Hell Butterfly was a talent that most shinigami still struggled to master, but Souja had learned to do it almost by accident. Once, as a twelve year old boy, he and some Clan friends had been playing in a ravine near to the main Endou estate when one of the children had slipped and fallen, breaking his leg. Though they had tried to move the youngster, none of the children had been strong enough to manage, and in his impulse to help his friend, Souja had found himself drawing stray *reishi* towards him, his fingers forming and grooming them into hazy insect form without even stopping to think. He had sent the butterfly, drunk and feeble though it was, fluttering back to the manor for help and, within the hour, a rescue party had descended upon them, ready to bear the half-fainting patient to a place of safety.

Hirata had been with them, but as his guardsfolk had supervised the rescue, he had taken his son aside, eyes anxious as he had plied the young boy with questions. The result had been specialist training with the Urahara of District Three, and, by the time he had begun at the Academy, three years later, Souja had perfected the art of Hell Butterfly summoning to a high level of sophistication. He was the only Vice Captain in Seireitei with the dubious distinction of being able to

send a butterfly across two Districts before it faltered and disintegrated, the message still being comprehensible up to forty eight hours after it had first been released. This message, however, was going to somewhere far more close at hand.

Briefly he closed his eyes, transmitting his thoughts into the insect's ghostly form, before releasing his hold on it's aura and allowing it to fly free from the window into the midnight sky. For a moment he watched it, its fleeting silhouette barely visible against the darkness, but then it was gone, and he could sense no more than the faintest buzzing of its life force at the back of his thoughts.

He turned back to his desk, rummaging through the papers there until he found the one that he wanted.

The response message would take a few hours to come, and in the meantime, there was plenty more work for him to do. His eyes narrowed slightly as he scanned the fading report document, taking in the crest of the Eleventh Division that had been inked in by hand at the top of the missive. The kanji for "Secret" was scrawled across the back in red ink, but he paid it no mind, reading carefully and conscientiously through the three short paragraphs of information and committing the tiniest detail to memory as he hunted for any clue that might help him in his quest.

Thank goodness for being on good terms with all of the other Vice Captains in Seireitei.

He ran his tongue ruefully across the tips of his teeth as he set the piece of paper down.

When I asked Ikata for anything he had relating to the abduction of his members, he didn't even stop to question why I'd want it. He pulled it right out of his division reports and handed it over without even hesitating. There's something for cultivating friendships with my comrades. I know I'll owe him a favour later, but I'm sure that I'll repay it somehow. I'll offer to have Seventh take over patrol duty around the garbage disposal units for him, probably. He hates sending his men there, and they hate going, but no other squad is interested in changing territories or rotating shifts. It might not go down well with the Endou to begin with, but they've learned that questioning me is questioning Father, and that's something you only do once in your life. No, I'm sure I'll find a way to repay Ikata's helpfulness.

He sat back on his heels, contemplating.

Kikyue's right, though. This is different from those encounters. Although the abductees from Eleventh remembered nothing about their experience, the ransom notes were quickly forthcoming, and written in printed hand.

The notes weren't submitted for proper analysis, so there's no way of finding out whether the incident in Eleventh and the one in Ninth were done by the same group or coincidentally by two, and it's harder to convince a Kuchiki-led squad to divulge information about such things if there might be a question of threat to their honour. The Ninth are jealously protective of that, far more so than Sixth, probably because they're so far from the core of Kuchiki command and therefore have to prove themselves with everything they do. Eleventh, fortunately, aren't so reluctant to talk, providing you equal their rank and their birth. I outrank both Minachidono and Ikata in terms of my birth level, and sometimes that helps.

His eyes narrowed to near slits.

Tenichi disappeared last night, between leaving Thirteenth and the time he should have arrived back here. Nobody at Seventh saw him yesterday evening, which means that twenty four hours have already passed with no word from any would-be abductors. The note Ikata told me about named and shamed particular members of the Eleventh Division for being lax in their duties to Seireitei, and from the whispers I've heard, I got the impression that Ninth was the same. Seventh aren't guilty of District neglect, though. There's been no claim for ransom, no name and shame — not yet. Tenichi might just have gone of his own accord... yet...

He shook his head impatiently.

No. No, Kikyue searched, and there's few as determined as my sister when she gets going. She would have found him, if he was hiding out somewhere here, and there's only so far he could have got in the space of a day. Kikyue's shunpo is superior to Tenichi's, and her senses are sharp. She would have picked up on where he was very quickly, which means that wherever he is is not somewhere she can find him. Shinigami don't just vanish without a trace, but this is looking suspiciously as though Tenichi somehow has.

His glance flitted towards the half-open window, his mind on the buzzing presence of the Hell Butterfly as he felt it reach its destination, scattering spirit particles to the wind as it conveyed its message.

I suppose we'll see what my other sources have to say about all of this. If this is part of a bigger organisation, maybe they'll have heard something of use. It's worth a shot, if nothing else... and there's not much more I can do until Father gets back and until I attend the Vice Captain's meeting on the morrow.

I'd rather know what I was launching myself into before I launch into it, so let's hope that the reply comes before dawn this time.

“I’m afraid I have nothing to report back to you, Ukitake-taichou.”

Naoko bowed her head in apology before her Captain, raising her head to meet his pensive gaze with her frustrated green one. “We canvassed the area you instructed, and Ketsui was very good about talking to several of the locals, but nobody had anything they could tell us. We found no trace of any Hollows, and as far as we could see, no obvious dissent against what was going on in Inner Seireitei.”

“I see,” Juushirou set down his chopsticks, reviewing his Third Seat’s words with careful concentration. “Don’t look so down, Naoko. You did your best, and that’s all. If I was wrong in sending you, then I apologise for the wasted time. I just thought it important we check that nothing negative was going on in Lower Seireitei. Trekking out two nights in a row is excessive, and you’re probably tired — but nonetheless, I feel reassured that we’ve covered as much of the local terrain as possible and found nothing amiss.”

“You don’t look very reassured, if I may say so,” Naoko said astutely, taking the cushion he indicated and smoothing her *hakama* across her legs. “You look quite the opposite. What’s wrong?”

“You’re far too perceptive, but I suppose you’re right,” Juushirou offered her a wry smile. “I am concerned. It’s like being ill without a diagnosis. You know there’s a problem, and you can’t shake it off, but everyone is telling you that you’re fine and it must be in your imagination. This is like that. I know there’s something amiss at work here, but I can’t pinpoint what and it bothers me.”

“Perhaps if we’d asked harder... pressed more...” Naoko grimaced. “We didn’t want to make enemies of the locals, though, not given the current situation. Thirteenth has a good reputation among District people, and we were aware that reputations are easier to break than mend.”

“Mm,” Juushirou agreed. “Yes, you’re right. No, you’ve done nothing wrong. I’m grateful to you — and soon, when I dismiss you, I want you to take time to rest. I’ll assign your usual patrol duties to someone else for a change, as you look ready to drop and I won’t have any harm come to you, not when the division needs you to be on the ball.”

Naoko opened her lips to protest, but before she could get a word out, there was a thudding knock at the door of the office, and Juushirou’s expression lightened slightly, his gaze flitting towards the divide.

“Come in, Enishi,” he called, raising his voice, and the divide slid

back, revealing the broad Vice Captain, who cast Naoko a startled look.

“Shikibu? You’ve come back, then? Anything new to report?”

“Nothing, which is what I’ve just been telling the Captain,” Naoko’s expression was one of bitter frustration. “Two nights in a row we’ve patrolled, but come up empty. It’s so annoying, not knowing what exactly is going on.”

“This has something to do with the Hollows and all that business, doesn’t it, sir?” Enishi turned a quizzical gaze on his superior officer, who nodded his head

“Close the door,” he said with a sigh. “While it’s just the three of us, let’s drop the formality and brainstorm in a more even way. I have something I want to share with the two of you, and it may be important that it doesn’t go beyond these walls — at least, not yet.”

“Sure,” Enishi was surprised, but did as he was bidden, thudding back across Ugendou’s hollow floor and dropping down with a thump on an empty cushion across from Naoko. “What’s up, Ukitake? You don’t usually look like that unless you’re about to start a *haibyou* fit — and I can’t say I’ve heard you coughing at all lately, so I don’t suppose that’s it.”

“No... no, I’m actually quite well, at the moment,” Juushirou shook his head. “It’s about something else. Enishi, you know that Kikyue from the Seventh was here yesterday, don’t you?”

“Yep, sure do,” Enishi nodded his head quickly. “She was here on some errand, and wanted Hikifune and Ketsui. Couldn’t help her with the latter, being that you’d got him busy with other things, but I pointed her in the direction of Hikifune, and so far as I know, they spoke and then she left.”

“Kikyue-dono was here?” Naoko’s ears pricked up. “Just on a whim, or for a particular reason? I didn’t think she and Kirio were particular friends.”

“It was business,” Juushirou admitted heavily. “I haven’t made a big deal of it, but Kikyue came here looking for Tenichi. It seems he’s gone missing, and she wanted to check all the places he’d most likely show up.”

“Missing?” Identical shock registered on the faces of both officers, and Juushirou nodded.

“I haven’t told Ketsui, and I don’t intend to, yet. Not while I don’t

know what's happened," he said carefully. "I pulled Kirio in here after Kikyue left, and I told her that she wasn't to talk about it with anyone until I gave her leave. She's not happy, of course, but she agreed. I found her plenty to do yesterday, and she and Ketsui didn't see each other for more than a few minutes, since he'd know at once if she was upset about something like this."

"But he's really missing?" Naoko's brain was clearly working at speed. "He hasn't just got himself tied up in something stupid?"

"Doesn't seem that way," Juushirou shook his head. "I know he's not our problem or our responsibility any more, not directly, but I'm not inclined to brush it off and let it go. I went to see Souja, at Seventh's headquarters, and he said something to me about a spate of abductions among some of the other squads, by suspected disgruntled District rebels trying to force Clans to pay for repairs on damaged villages."

"I heard something about that," Enishi's eyes lit up with remembrance. "Least, not much that was of any use, and I didn't think a whole lot about it, not at the time. Ikata was spouting off about some dictum of Minachi-dono's at one of our Vice Captain meetings, and he was less than pleased about it at the time, I'm telling you. Ikata's not the kind of person who keeps it to himself or his squad when he's got a grievance burning, and he had one that day. I didn't get all the particulars, but I got the gist that a couple of his lower officers got themselves tangled up with District troublemakers and because of it, Minachi-dono was being doubly strict on security and so on."

"You didn't think to report any of this to Ukitake-kun?" Naoko arched an eyebrow, and Enishi shrugged sheepishly.

"I don't usually do that, not when a loudmouth like Ikata's just sounding off," he admitted guiltily. "Maybe I should, if it was important, but I didn't really think it was. He blows things out of proportion — and as I understood it, nobody was hurt, right?"

"Yes, but it wasn't an isolated incident," Juushirou replied. "Souja believed it had happened in Ninth too, though they're more tight-lipped with the details. Souja thinks Tenichi might be the next victim, and that the rebels, emboldened by their successes, have widened their net to include any shinigami as fair game."

Enishi muttered a curse, and Naoko let out a heavy sigh.

"Souja-dono seems very well informed," she murmured. "I wonder if that means he expected something like this to happen?"

“Anticipated it?” Juushirou glanced at her quizzically, and Naoko shrugged.

“Maybe not in his own squad,” she said pensively, “since Seventh are almost as strict as we are on paying compensation to villagers who have lost homes and livelihoods in our raids. No, not that, I’m sure. It’s not impossible, though, that he thought it might happen in one of the other squads and was gathering intelligence in case there was a pattern between them.”

She shot Enishi a sidelong glance.

“Perhaps you should take more notes at Vice Captain meetings,” she suggested acerbically, “or, alternatively, spend more time talking to your colleagues, in case you learn something useful.”

“Naoko, this isn’t Enishi’s fault,” Juushirou chided, as the tall Yamamoto flushed an uncomfortable red. “I didn’t know anything of this, and nor, as far as I can tell, do any of the Captains except those who have been directly affected. If Souja picked up extra information, it was only by some fluke he obtained it, and Enishi isn’t at fault for missing the clues when they were so sparsely scattered. What concerns me now, though, is that we get word out and find out who’s behind this.”

“The same people as the ones messing up the Hollows?” Enishi recovered himself, shooting Juushirou a quizzical look, and the Captain nodded.

“I think it’s likely, but proving it is a problem,” he responded. “There’s absolutely no smoking gun anywhere we’ve investigated, and even less to identify potential kidnapping groups, let alone brooking a connection between the two things. It makes me uneasy, but I’m having trouble drawing the lines and pulling the whole picture together.”

“Meanwhile, what’s happening to Tenichi?” Enishi looked troubled. “I understand not telling Ketsui, but isn’t there something we can do to try and find him?”

“I imagine that Seventh are already covering those bases, with Kikyue’s visit and Souja’s apparent information on the subject,” Juushirou shook his head. “Right now, we don’t know for sure that he has been abducted. The other kidnappings left a ransom note, but so far I’m not aware that this has happened here. We’re waiting on that kind of information — at which point, Ketsui should probably be told. Right now, though, he’s not to know anything. I don’t want him unnecessarily distressed. If Tenichi is in danger of his life, and loses it

before we can find him, there's no sense in causing the boy more stress than need be — and if he turns up safe, well, so much to the good. Either way, Ketsui's the kind who will fret about things he can't change, and that's no good for anyone, least of all his brother."

"Tenichi would be the first to say he should be kept in the dark," Naoko admitted. "It's all right, we won't say anything — will we, Houjou-kun?"

"Nope, not a word," Enishi agreed gravely. "If you want me to go tackle Ikata about this kidnap stuff, too, I will. He's kin, so he might talk to me — it's worth a shot."

"If you don't mind," Juushirou responded. "I don't believe there's much he can tell us, but I do intend on taking this to a Captain's meeting. I had word from Unohana-taichou this morning, telling me that she'd succeeded in getting my concerns on the agenda for the next Captain's Meeting, and that'll likely be in a day or two's time, she's hoping. I'll raise this there, then... and considering I'll be upsetting Minachi-dono by bringing it up, I want to be as informed as possible on what happened to his members."

"Consider it done," Enishi saluted, and Juushirou grinned, relief in his hazel eyes.

"In that case, Naoko, I'm dismissing you and you are forbidden from doing anything like work until you've had a proper meal and a good few hours sleep," he said firmly, gesturing towards the door. "Anything else, Enishi and I will handle from here. Understood?"

Naoko's expression was rebellious for a brief moment, but at length she got control of herself, letting out a sigh.

"Yes, Captain," she said flatly. "I understand."

"She'd work herself to death, if you didn't tell her to go rest up from time to time," Enishi remarked, once the redhead had left the chamber, and Juushirou nodded his head.

"She would," he agreed, "which is why I make sure it can't happen. This is bothering me, though, Enishi. It's as though something is coming, and even though I can feel it, I can't stop it. It's there, gathering pace behind the scenes, and by the time we see it..."

He pressed his lips together, his gaze flitting to the peace and calm that lingered beyond Ugendou's walls.

"By the time we see what it is, and where it's coming from," he murmured softly, "I'm very afraid it might be already too late."

The sky was a hazy blue, clouds drifting lazily across it as though they had all the time in the world. A bird on the wing let out a cadenza of notes, rising and falling as it soared and swooped over the landscape, its form reflecting in the glittering surface of the lake water below. Among the trees, children could be seen playing, their feet bare and their clothing damp at the hem from paddling in the lake shallows, yet their eyes were bright and eager, their laughter carrying across the clear air like music on the breeze.

Katsura stepped over the uneven stone pathway, pausing to perch on the edge of a boulder to watch the young ones play. They had everything they needed here, he realised, a smile touching his lips as he observed their reaction to his appearance. Instead of cowering away in fear and apprehension, they raised grass-stained hands in a wave, identical grins wreathed across faces already sticky from the berries they had picked from a nearby bush.

So intent was he on the scene, Katsura almost missed the flash of black and white at the periphery of his vision — almost, but not quite. He turned, almost overbalancing off his stone as he caught sight of the shinigami he had met at the river, her thick dark hair bound back from her face in a neat braid. She had not seen him, bending to pick flowers from the water's edge, and, as he watched, the children ran over to her, greeting her with warm hugs. As they chattered to her merrily about their game, her delicate lips spread into a gentle smile, and she plucked flowers from her basket, slipping one blossom into the hair of the nearest little girl, whilst patting one of the small boys on the head with a word of reassurance and encouragement. The children gathered around her as though flocking to a mother figure, and, as Katsura watched, the shinigami settled herself on the ground, paying no heed to the damp grass. The black fabric of her shihakushou spread out around her, and the children crowded in, eager and willing to hear whatever she had to say.

For a moment, Katsura badly wanted to be a part of that group, and at that moment, the shinigami raised her gaze, soft, velvety grey eyes meeting his startled ones across the lake.

“Mitsuki,” her lips parted, and though she was too far for him to hear her voice, the word resounded in his skull as though she had been standing next to him. “Edogawa Mitsuki.”

“I might have known you’d be skipping off your duties, if nobody was there to watch you.”

With a jolt the image jerked and faded out, as the harsh words broke through his consciousness, rousing Katsura rudely from his sleep. He blinked, struggling for a moment to get his bearings, but as he brought the world into focus, he saw two cool blue eyes staring

down at him, and he groaned, pulling himself into a sitting position and brushing the leaf litter from his clothing.

It had been a dream, then. He had dreamed about the shinigami, but she wasn't really anywhere nearby. Instead it was Sakaki who had dropped down on the ground in front of him, her eyes impatient and her fingers already curled around the dagger that she carried at her belt, behind her katana. A moment longer, Katsura knew, and his companion would have resorted to using one or other of the weapons to wake him up, and he inwardly shuddered at the thought. Sakaki took far too much pleasure from causing gratuitous pain, and she had no qualms about who she maimed, not even her own flesh and blood.

"You got here all right, then," he said wearily, rubbing his eyes and glancing the young woman over from head to foot. She was robed almost entirely in black, in an outfit that would have made the most stealth-conscious Shihouin jealous, for it was designed to blend easily into her surroundings and allow the most silent of movements even when travelling at speed. Her black hair was tied in a tail behind her head, her spiky fringe sticking out all ways from her brow as though refusing to be fully tamed, and Katsura did not need to meet her gaze to know that the anticipation of the hunt was already rippling through her young form. Those blue eyes were feral, the gleam in them the look of a predator about to corner a particularly delicious piece of prey, and Katsura thanked his lucky stars that, not for the first time, he was off her menu. Sakaki would not hesitate to draw blood from him, or indulge one of her sadistic games under the guise of waking him from his sleep, but she knew that killing him would carry far reaching consequences.

She set the dagger aside, clearly disappointed that she had not had a chance to use it, but she nodded.

"You're not hard to find, not when I know what to look for," she said simply. "I have my orders, and I can memorise a map. *He* said you'd be in this area, and so I scouted around the perimeters before I actually tracked you down. The sun rose about an hour ago — I had just about decided to wake you using force when you came to."

"Thankfully, I didn't need your particular brand of morning wake up call today," Katsura said dryly, and Sakaki pouted.

"You're such a wuss," she needled him. "A little blood and gore wouldn't have killed you, and it would've made a neat warm up to the main act."

She licked her lips, and Katsura half wondered if she was imagining

his blood spilling across his arm, pooling on the grass around them. He shivered inwardly, shaking his head.

“You’re not to draw unnecessary attention to yourself, or to us,” he warned her, holding up his hands. “You know what you’re here to do, and that’s all you need to worry about. Follow your orders and we’ll both get back safely, all right? I don’t want to be covering for you because you went beserk and killed more than you were supposed to. Remember, we’re not here to slay innocent civilians. We’re here to...”

“Gut Shinigami. I know. I know!” Sakaki clicked her tongue against her teeth impatiently. “I’m not a little girl, Katsu-nii. I can tell my soul reapers from my plus souls, and I wish you’d give me credit for knowing my target when I see it. I had to repeat my orders three times before I was allowed to leave the village, and you’d think by now I’d be trusted to carry out a kill on my own. That is my speciality, unless you’d forgotten — I’m very good at this kind of work, and I don’t see why I had to be paired with you to complete it, if you want the truth.”

“You’re still a child by most people’s standards, though I can see that ‘most people’ doesn’t really apply to you,” Katsura sighed, getting to his feet and pulling his companion up with him. “You’re still only sixteen, Sakaki, and people worry about you when you’re let out on your own.”

“I can take care of myself,” Sakaki muttered, and Katsura nodded wryly.

“I mean, they worry about anyone who happens to run into you, not about you per se,” he amended drolly. “You know what would happen if you left a trail of death and destruction leading to our door. It’s bad for business and *he’d* never let you out again if you compromised our safety with your blood lust. Kill who you’re supposed to kill, and enjoy it if you must, but for heaven’s sake, no extras, understand?”

“I get it,” Sakaki rolled her eyes. “Oniisama, you’re really no fun when you start sounding like him. Relax. I already staked out the Shinigami’s main camp, and I’ve sussed out how to best get in without creating suspicion. They’re healers, so they won’t know what hit them. I’ll strike hard and fast and be gone before they can raise an alarm.”

She eyed him coquettishly.

“What about you?” she demanded. “The report we had back home was that they’d split into two groups. Are you going to manage to take out the others without me to hold your hand?”

A fleeting image of Mitsuki from his dream, surrounded by the children of the village ran through Katsura's head, and he frowned, quelling the sudden well of panic that rushed up inside him.

"I'll be fine," he said flatly, pushing it away. "I've never stopped to think about or care what happens to a shinigami yet, and I'm not going to start by worrying about a few stray ones just because they're healers and not combat fighters. In fact, that makes my job easier. You take care of the main camp, and I'll handle the others. You'll have enough to do with them, anyway. I'm not sure how many are here, overall, but..."

"Eleven," Sakaki said triumphantly, shooting him a superior look. "I counted. There are four camping down by the river — they're yours, so I left them alone — and seven more up at the main camp. They're mine, so don't even think of interfering or taking my fun, all right?"

"I know, and I'm not going to," Katsura grimaced at her. "If you're so cocky, go take care of your business and leave me to mine, all right? You don't need my help getting through the filtered Gate back to base, so I almost wonder why you decided to come meet up with me at all."

"*His* orders," Sakaki said succinctly. "I didn't choose to, and coming all this way only to go back was a drag, but at least it gave me a chance to check out the potential prey. I got the better deal, so it's all good. I'm happy to leave the stragglers to you — not that I think they'll give you much fun."

She dimpled at him, her smile sending chills down Katsura's spine.

"I got to come wake you up, at least," she pointed out, "although maybe not quite in the way I hoped."

"Believe me, I'm not complaining," Katsura muttered. "Look, I'll see you back at base later this evening, most probably. Complete your half and I'll complete mine. We'll compare notes later and report in, and that's us done for the Spiritless Zone for the time being. We don't want to be caught up in the aftermath, so don't linger around to admire your handiwork. I'm not going to come fish you out of trouble if you're still here when the Shinigami come."

"They won't be able to take me anywhere, so I'm not worried," Sakaki said confidently, "but it's fine. I won't linger. There'll be plenty of time to savour everything later."

She patted him lightly on the shoulder.

"Take care of yourself, Katsu-nii. Don't do anything I wouldn't do

— and make sure you come back in one piece.”

With that she skipped off across the grass, darting into the undergrowth like an excited child just beginning a treasure hunt, and Katsura groaned, a dull ache beginning at the base of his skull.

I hate working with Sakaki.

He turned on his heel, making his way slowly down towards the river to splash water on his face.

I'm sure it's not normal to enjoy the idea of killing things so much. I know she's a teenager, and we all go through funny moments, but even so, she gives me the chills. I can't imagine what part of the family she got that from — whatever it was, I'm glad it doesn't extend to me.

He dipped his hands in the cool water, kneeling to wash his face and arms as thoroughly as he could manage without stripping off to his underclothes. The refreshing chill of the water doused the last remnants of his sleep, and he frowned, reflecting on his companion's words more carefully.

When you have a sister like Sakaki, yeesh, who needs enemies? Given a choice between her in a frenzy and a random encounter with a hostile shinigami in a deserted alley, I'd take my chances with the death God.

Death God.

The word rippled across his senses, teasing and poking at him as memory of his dream returned in fragments.

Edogawa Mitsuki, huh?

A rueful grin touched his face.

What is this? I've never stopped to think about a shinigami before, and now I'm dreaming about one? This is dangerous. If word got back home... thank goodness Sakaki can't read minds, else I'd be in deep trouble.

He got to his feet, drying his face on his sleeve, and as he did so, the humour faded from his features.

Mitsuki was here at this river last night. That means that she's part of the patrolling group that Sakaki labelled strays. That puts her under my remit... which means...

He swallowed hard, quelling his misgivings.

So I saw her do something kind — so what? A one off encounter with what might have been a one off gesture... am I really going to allow all the hard work go to ruin for the sake of that brief moment? I don't know her, and I have no reason to ever know her. She's the enemy, and how many times have I been told what happens if you're soft on the enemy? Pull

yourself together, Katsura. You have a job to do.

His lips thinned, his jaw hardening as he summoned his resolve. Cautiously he stretched out his senses to the surrounding area, feeling tentatively through the layers of reishi for the familiar sensation of a tainted soul. At first, there was nothing, then, at length he locked onto something, absorbing the pain and torment that whirled through the entity's mind, preventing it from processing any form of coherent thought. His eyes narrowed, brow creasing in concentration as he poured his energy into snaring this rage-driven beast, pulling it towards him and meshing his thoughts into its pain, moulding and reforming the creature's chaotic instincts into something more focused and precise.

From somewhere in the distance, he heard the earth-splitting shriek of a Hollow announcing its presence, and a grim smile touched his pale features.

He had got one. Good.

He closed his eyes, bracing himself against the negative lull of the Hollow's mindscape and digging deeper beneath the creature's consciousness towards the core of its being. Knotting a thin wraith of his own spirit power around the creature's core like a noose, Katsura hesitated for the briefest moment, allowing his control over the beast to become firm and complete. Then, as the fluctuating waves of rage and despair began to slip into a dull, rhythmic hum, he inserted an extra command into the beast's psyche, projecting an image of the shinigami *shihakushou* as he did so.

It was just one word, but one strong enough to override all other impulses.

Kill.

Author's Note:

My Christmas break just started, so in celebration, here's a new chapter =D. Introducing Sakaki-chan. O.o.

7. Unexpected Ally

Chapter Six: Unexpected Ally

“Well, it looks like the Buchou’s concerns were over and above the call of duty, this time,” Kazuki leaned back against the trunk of a tree, a pensive expression on his unshaven features. “We’ve come all the way here, but everything looks to be safe and secure. We can go back and put his mind at rest.”

“It’s better that way, though,” Haseyo pointed out grimly. “We’ve seen enough villages taken apart in the last few weeks that to be able to report everything as stable comes as a nice change.”

“No kidding,” Seri grinned. “I like that kind of report. True, it makes for a boring mission, but at least there’s no more damage to tell him about.”

It was morning in the Spiritless Zone, and, along with her three companions, Mitsuki was packing up to return to the main Fourth Division camp in Hokutan. Their patrols of Junrin’an’s borderlands had revealed no new signs of trouble, and, though none of them had voiced it, each felt a little uneasy being far from their base just in case their skills were needed elsewhere. Eleven people were not many to cover three secured districts, but Madeki’s words still lingered in Mitsuki’s mind, and despite the inconvenience, she was glad they had come.

“It looks like it’ll be a nice day to walk back, at least,” Haseyo remarked now, fastening her *obi* more tightly and pulling her sword up from its resting place beside a tree, hooking it neatly over her sash so it hung at her side. “We can track along the river for part of the way, make sure that none of the settlements here have any other concerns, and then cut across the narrow part of Nakaken to Hokutan before it gets dark. The flowers are quite pretty in the valleys hereabouts, so it seems a shame not to enjoy the view.”

“You’re not supposed to be thinking of flowers,” Kazuki grimaced, rolling his eyes. “Yeesh, this is what I get when I come patrolling with girls. I should’ve known there was a short straw.”

“You didn’t complain when Mitsuki asked you to tag along,” Haseyo snorted, giving her companion a playful shove. “Besides, there’s nothing wrong with admiring the flowers. We see too much of

the other when we're rescuing villagers from burnt out settlements — you can't begrudge me a few moments somewhere pretty on our way back, surely? We've done our job, so there's no harm in it. Mitsuki's in charge and she won't object if we take that route back — right, Mitsuki?"

Mitsuki opened her mouth to answer the light-hearted banter of her comrades, then paused, as something chilling rent through her senses, sending a shiver down her spine. She swung around, her eyes canvassing the surroundings for any sign of the source, but she could see nothing but grass and trees, beyond the rise the roofs of another settlement village located nearby. She glanced at her companions, but Seri was focused on fastening the ties on their equipment, and though Kazuki and Haseyo were both alert to their surroundings, neither one of them had reacted. Mitsuki bit her lip, inwardly wondering if tension was finally getting to her, for try as she might she could not shake the sensation that something dark and evil had spread its tendrils across the peaceful landscape.

"Mitsuki?" Seri's nudge at her elbow made the young healer realise her friend had been trying to communicate with her and she turned, preoccupation in her gaze as she tried to focus on what the older girl was saying.

"Sorry? I wasn't listening."

"I'll say you weren't," Seri tut-tutted impatiently, finally managing to tie the last knot on the lengths of cord that tied together their travel equipment and brushing her hands together to remove the dust. "I asked whether we were ready to set off back. Buchou wanted to reconvene in three days, didn't he? Kazuki's right that we've found nothing hereabouts, and there doesn't seem to be a point in lingering. If we set off now, we should make it back to base camp before dark, and then we can debrief. Whatever he sent us out looking for, it's not here, and so long as we are, we're not taking care of other problems in other parts of the Zone."

"Mm, I suppose so," Mitsuki nodded absently, her gaze still scanning the horizon, and Seri snorted, grasping her companion by the shoulders and giving her a short, sharp, shake.

"What is wrong with you this morning?" she demanded, eyes bright with curiosity. "You look and sound like you're on another planet, and your face is as white as a sheet. Don't tell me you've taken sick from all this pottering around the place? You can't catch diseases from plus souls, no matter how much time you spend in their company, so..."

“Seri, can’t you feel it?” Mitsuki turned anxious eyes on her companion. “Something dark and sinister spreading itself across the horizon?”

“Dark and sinister?” Seri pressed her lips together, then shook her head. “Unless you mean Buchou in a temper if we get back late, then no, I honestly can’t. You’re letting your senses go into overdrive, girl... calm down and see things rationally for a moment, all right?”

She patted her friend lightly on the back.

“If there were Hollows here, we’d have found them. It’s good to be on the alert, but you can take it too far.”

“Maybe,” Mitsuki admitted reluctantly. “I’d feel better if we checked on the local people one more time, though, before we left.”

She turned to Haseyo, raising her voice slightly so that Kazuki, at the perimeter of their campsite could also hear her voice.

“Haseyo, Kazuki, can you do me a favour and take a walk down to the river’s edge? It might seem odd, but I’d just like to make sure that everything is in order there, before we haul sticks and move on out.”

“To the river?” Haseyo shot her a quizzical look. “You mean the village there, where you met that young girl the other night?”

“Yes, if you don’t mind,” Mitsuki nodded her head, a sheepish look in her grey eyes. “I know, it’s probably nothing, but...”

“We can spare a minute or two to do that,” Kazuki cast Haseyo a playful grin, then nodded his head, saluting Mitsuki’s orders with a wave of his hand. “We’ll only be a few minutes. You and Seri finish up clearing the campsite, and we’ll meet you at the fork in the road where the river bends in about fifteen minutes from now?”

“Yes. That’ll work. Thank you,” Mitsuki felt relief flicker through her body, and she grinned. “You can call me over-protective if you like, but it’ll nag at me otherwise. I thought I felt something from that direction, and I wanted to be sure nobody was in danger.”

“Consider us on it,” Haseyo shrugged her shoulders, glancing at Kazuki then nodding. “See you at the crossroads, then.”

With that she shunpoed out, and, after a moment, Kazuki followed her, leaving Mitsuki and Seri alone in the woodland.

“You know, you didn’t need to do that,” Seri chided. “There’s nothing out there, Mi-chan. If there was, don’t you think, as healers, we’d have felt it? I know your senses are better attuned to these things

than ours, but at that kind of proximity, if there was a Hollow...”

“I don’t know that it was a Hollow I felt,” Mitsuki owned, kneeling down by the campfire and sweeping the cooled ashes into the grass with her hands. “It was something dark and sinister and it was coming closer, but I didn’t say it was a Hollow.”

“Then..?”

“I can’t pinpoint it,” Mitsuki admitted, frustration in her tones. “It ought to have been a Hollow, but it wasn’t a reiatsu that I locked onto, nor was it a particular spiritual footprint. It was more... a sense of something? It’s hard to explain, but... what I sensed was like... the instinct to kill?”

“You sense instincts now?” Seri let out a low whistle, amusement clear in her gaze. “That’s impressive, even for you. Seireitei ought to be careful, if that’s the case — you’d be ferreting out conspiracy just by walking down the main street!”

“Don’t tease me,” Mitsuki scolded. “I know how mad it sounds, but that’s what it felt like. Here, in such a pure, clean area, things that aren’t so clean carry much more easily. It may be nothing, but it’s worth checking it...”

She froze, eyes widening with alarm as a crackle of unmistakeable reiatsu spiked through the clearing, the trees juddering almost to their roots at the sudden vibrations.

“Mitsuki?” Seri’s own features drained of colour, and her fingers closed around the hilt of her sword, half-drawing it from its sheath. There was no need for Mitsuki to ask if her companion had felt it that time, for the whole copse was suddenly thick with it, a dark, stifling layer of spiritual energy that identified the interloper as a Hollow.

“That was what you felt, wasn’t it?” Seri’s words were strained, her earlier humour no longer in evidence as the toxic *reiryoku* rattled against her healer’s wits, and Mitsuki nodded grimly, her own fingers dusting against Yuuyugo’s sealed hilt.

“The village,” was all she said, however, camp equipment forgotten as she slipped into shunpo, racing as quickly as she could through the seams of reishi towards the river where she had met the young girl such a short time before. Kazuki and Haseyo were gone before them, she remembered with a jolt of relief, for Kazuki was proficient with his sword and Haseyo’s Kidou was also of an impressive level. Those few moments in which she had sent them ahead may well mean the difference between saving the village and searching for survivors, and

in a situation like this, every second counted.

Seri would follow her, of that she had no doubt. For all her casual remarks and light-hearted banter, her friend never wasted a moment when it came to serious danger, so Mitsuki focused her entire attention on pinpointing the Hollow's location, following the choking threads of mangled *reiryoku* as they led her closer and closer to the flowing river.

Could the Hollow pollute the water with its tormented aura? Mitsuki had no idea, but she wasn't about to wait and find out.

She dropped out of shunpo at the water's edge, just as a blood-curdling, ear splitting shriek of defiance roared through the surrounding area. She took a deep breath into her lungs, fighting against the beast's emotional anguish as it threatened to seep through her sensitive wits and distract her from her purpose. She had never liked fighting Hollows, understanding far too well what they were thinking and feeling, but as she got her bearings, she realised that this one was unlike most of the creatures they faced as a matter of course.

Hollow thoughts were normally garbled, projecting out into the ether such random snippets of grief and agony that even the most dense of healers could pick up and follow its train of thought. This one was different, though, for instead of the stray fragments of the Hollow's pain polluting the atmosphere, all Mitsuki could sense was a driving urge to kill.

"Onesasan!"

A shriek from across the bridge made her start, and her heart leapt in her throat as she recognised the little girl who such a short time before she had helped carry water back to her village. The child was frightened, now, her cheeks streaked with tears of panic, and as Mitsuki took a step towards her, the child ran pell-mell across the wooden planking of the bridge, flinging herself on the startled shinigami with a whimper of fear.

"The monster's here, the monster's here!" she sobbed. "Please, Onesasan, make the monster go away?"

Mitsuki held the child tightly to her, casting her gaze around to try and pinpoint the location of the beast, but despite the stifling waves of *reiryoku* still polluting the air, she could not see anything.

"It was here?" she asked softly. "You saw it?"

"I saw it," Yukio nodded her head, terror glittering in her bright eyes. "It came here and it roared and screamed and everyone was

running away.”

“That was the right thing to do,” Mitsuki swallowed her fear, patting the girl lightly on the head. “Did you see where it went? If you can tell me where it is, I’ll go and look for it.”

“It went to the trees. To the road, over there,” Yukio pointed towards a thicket that spanned the far side of the bank. “The shingami went there, and it went there too.”

“Shinigami?” Mitsuki’s eyes narrowed. “Shinigami were here?”

“Mm,” Yukio nodded, still clinging tightly to Mitsuki’s shihakushou. “A man and a woman. They came and so did the monster. They led it away and it followed them, but it might come back, and Oneesan, I’m scared. I don’t want to be eaten by a monster!”

“You won’t be. You won’t, I promise,” Mitsuki soothed the child gently, but her mind was racing.

Haseyo and Kazuki. I sent them here just in time, but now...

“Mitsuki!” Seri materialised on the bank a few feet away, making the young plus soul jump, and at the sight of her, Mitsuki made up her mind.

“It’s heading towards the crossroads!” she exclaimed, gesturing in the direction that Yukio had indicated. “Haseyo and Kazuki lured it off, but it’s sending out serious signals and they might need help. Go after them and give them a hand, will you? I’ll follow just as soon as I’ve made sure nobody here is hurt, but you’re better with your sword than I am, and they’ll value that more than Yuuyugo at the moment.”

Seri hesitated for a moment, then nodded her head, disappearing back into shunpo as she went to obey her companion’s commands. Mitsuki slipped her fingers into Yukio’s shaking hand, leading her back over the bridge towards the settlement.

“Nobody is going to let you get eaten, I promise,” she murmured, as the young girl hesitated. “My friends will get rid of the monster, and so will I, when I’ve made sure nobody here is injured. That’s why we were sent here, and we won’t leave until it’s safe, I swear.”

“Oneesan,” Yukio merely clung to her saviour’s hand, and Mitsuki felt the weight of the girl’s trust in the tight squeeze of those young fingers.

“Shinigami-san!” As she entered the settlement proper, an old man hurried up towards her, identical fear and panic in his own rheumy eyes. “Shinigami-san, the monster...”

“It’s all right. We’re going to get rid of it, and everyone will be safe,” Mitsuki spoke soothingly, hoping that none of the souls could hear the racing beat of her heart. The Hollow’s killing instinct had increased since she had stepped off the bridge and into the settlement, and though she knew there was still some distance between it and her, it was impossible to ignore the waves of angry determination as they crashed over the whole of the surrounding region. No wonder Plus souls were being tainted, she mused darkly, if this was how the Hollows acted before they struck.

“Is anyone here hurt at all?” she asked now, glancing around her for any sign of Hollow devastation. At the far end of the main street, she could see smoke and, as they drew closer, it was clear that the Hollow had made its presence felt, smashing up two or three of the shack-like houses on its pathway through the centre. Mitsuki could sense the faint residue of a Kidou spell here, and she knew it had been Haseyo. So this is where her colleagues had headed off the Hollow — and just in time, too, she realised, for although there were a group of shivering, shuddering, crying Plus souls huddled beneath the broken overhang of their home, she could not detect any signs of serious injury among them.

She let out her breath in a rush.

We got here in time, this time.

“Is anyone hurt?” she asked again, realising that in their distress, none of the settlers had managed to answer her. “It’s all right, I promise. The other shinigami have chased the creature away, and will make sure it can’t come back. That’s what we’re here for, so you needn’t look so afraid. I’ve come to help anyone who’s injured.”

“Just scratches and bruises, shinigami-san,” a woman pulled her shawl more tightly around her shoulders, and Mitsuki recognised Yukio’s obasan from their previous encounter. “Your comrades were here oh, ever so quickly. As though they’d seen it coming, it was. The monster didn’t care much for us when it saw them, so it followed them out of the village sure enough.”

And that’s how it should be.

Mitsuki nodded her head in acknowledgement of the woman’s words.

“Yukio is frightened,” she said softly, gently disentangling her fingers from the child’s determined grasp. “Please, take her home and let her rest. She isn’t in any danger, but the monster gave her quite a shock.”

“I will. Thank you for bringing her home once again,” the woman inclined her head in a bow. “You look after us well, and that’s a fact, shinigami-san.”

Mitsuki opened her mouth to say that they did their best, but before she could voice even the first syllable, a paralysing sense of fear and pain rocketed through her healer’s wits. She gasped, stumbling under the weight of the sensation, and from somewhere in the surrounding area she could hear Yukio calling for her, suddenly seeming miles away. She took a few unsteady steps, reaching out desperately for the beam of a nearby shelter to steady herself as a second wave, just as intense and disabling as the first ripped her wits apart. Terror and agony mingled for a moment against her senses, tears glittering on her lashes as she fought not to drown in these foreign emotions, and then, just as soon as it had come, the feeling was gone.

“Shinigami-san?” Yukio’s obasan touched her arm, and from somewhere she had acquired a cracked mug, holding it out to Mitsuki with a concerned look on her face. It contained water, probably from the river, and as Mitsuki gathered her wits, she realised just how close she had come to passing out. Those two overwhelming rushes of energy had all but knocked her off her feet, yet now she felt nothing but emptiness, a hollow, aching sensation lurking deep within her heart.

“Shinigami-san, please, drink this. You went so pale, and you look quite ill,” the obasan pressed the mug on her, but Mitsuki’s body had already begun to put together the threads of what had happened, and she shook her head, offering the plus soul a harried, empty smile.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to worry you,” she murmured. “I have to go. My friends need me. They need my help. Yuuyugo...”

She ran her fingers around the hilt of her weapon, drawing it from its sheath. At the sight of it, the gathered villagers drew back, a mixture of awe and alarm on their features, but Mitsuki could not focus on this now. Unease knotted up inside of her as she interpreted what the source of those rushes of darkness had been, and, whilst she kept telling herself such a thing was impossible, deep down she knew that no matter how swiftly she moved, she might already be too late.

Haseyo. Kazuki.

As she slipped back into shunpo, racing into the eye of the Hollow’s maelstrom, she felt the tears trickle down her cheeks, brushed away by the speed of her movement but quickly replaced by more. Although it had been some several years now since she had last attended a

scene of violent shinigami death, the bubbling nausea lurching through her stomach told her all too clearly what she would find when she reached the copse. Yuuyugo's voice whispered at her senses, trying to calm her, but Mitsuki could not focus on her *zanpakutou's* kind, gentle nature right then. She had felt it, but until she saw it, she would not let go of the tiniest shred of hope that she had somehow been wrong.

Maybe it wasn't what I thought. Maybe they just lost consciousness. Perhaps, with Yuuyugo, I can...

Her words failed her as she reached the crossroads, dropping out of shunpo and registering the bloody scene that lay before her.

The Hollow was a scorpion type, its long, spiny tail curling and weaving around it in an agitated kind of war dance. Its chalk-white pincers waved wildly from left to right, beady, glittering eyes full of such bitter hatred that Mitsuki felt giddy just by glancing at them. On the ground before it, like broken rag dolls lay the red-soaked forms of two familiar figures, the black of their *shihakushou* concealing what Mitsuki now knew to be fatal injuries, for both shinigamis' white obis were deeply stained. Kazuki's sword, sealed and abandoned lay embedded in the ground a short distance away, and Mitsuki's stomach rocked again as she registered the blood that streaked all the way from hilt to blade. The Hollow's white pincers were also stained with crimson, their sharp tips gleaming with the freshness of the liquid, and Mitsuki knew that the monster had impaled her companions, flinging them aside as though they were no more concern than an insect who had flown into its path.

There was no sign of Seri.

The Hollow roared, pounding its tail against the trees as it set its gaze on its new victim, and Mitsuki swallowed hard, her grip tightening around Yuuyugo's hilt. She was not a fighter, and, in such close proximity to the monster that had slain her companions, she knew that she was not at her best. Her body still hadn't recovered from the intense shockwaves her comrades' deaths had subjected her to, and as she feverishly tried to remember the words to a spell — any spell — she felt her mind go completely blank.

"*Seri!*" she screamed, forcing the two syllables through her vocal chords as she searched the surroundings desperately for any sign of her missing ally. "*Seri, where are you? Where are you?*"

There was no reply, and the Hollow dug its spiny, pointed legs into the ground, readying itself for another fatal unleashing of its attack. Mitsuki steeled herself, forcing her mind to cooperate with her body's

needs. She was the last line of defence between the Hollow and the Plus settlement. Her comrades had died bravely trying to protect the innocents, and now, with Seri missing, perhaps hurt and unconscious somewhere, Mitsuki knew that it was down to her alone. Instinct drove her to raise Yuuyugo, though her hand trembled, and inwardly she wondered whether or not she could manage to use her sealed blade to slice through the creature's mask.

It had already killed twice. It would surely not balk at killing more.

"Hadou no Sanjuu-ichi! Shakkahou!"

A voice came from the trees beyond, followed by a blinding flare of red light, and Mitsuki stumbled back as the spell connected with the Hollow's body, knocking it off its balance and forcing it to scramble its ungainly form around to regain its footing. As the light faded, Mitsuki caught sight of a blessed figure silhouetted between two trees, and she inhaled a shaky breath of air into her lungs, relief coursing through her.

"Seri," she whispered, and her companion nodded grimly, her hands already raised to fire another spell.

"Get at it from the other side," she called. "Put Yuuyugo away, Mitsuki, we need your Kidou here. If it's just the two of us, we have to take it off guard. It can't attack two ways at once... and the only way of hitting it is to take it by surprise!"

Mitsuki nodded, obediently sheathing her weapon, her mind locking on at last to the incantation for spells she had learned so many years ago at the Academy, and, as the words rippled past her lips, she felt her determination rising, overtaking her fear and grief at her colleagues' deaths. She could process this later, when her life and the lives of others weren't in danger. Right now she had a job to do, and, even as a healer, she had no choice but to fight.

"Hadou no Sanjuu-san, Soukatsui!" she exclaimed, barrelling the blue cannon spell into the Hollow's pincer and cracking it clean across from left to right. It shattered, and the beast let out a shriek of agony, but Mitsuki closed her mind to the creature's suffering, focusing her thoughts on nothing else but the next spell.

"Hadou no Sanjuu-ichi! Shakkahou!" A second blaze of red came from Seri's part of the forest, and the Hollow wheeled back, apparently confused by this dual-pronged attack. Seri's aim was true and the spell glanced off the monster's mask-like face, breaking away some of the edge and causing it to scream once more, thundering its tail against the trees with such force that one of them splintered,

shuddering for a moment before toppling to the ground below.

“We’re getting there!” Mitsuki exclaimed, pressing her hands together to fire the next spell. Adrenaline pumped through her veins, obliterating everything from her mind except the need to protect the villagers that had shown her such trust and kindness. “Seri, we’re getting there! If you can take your sword...”

She faltered, as, for the first time she caught sight of her friend across the glade. Seri’s hands were locked together, determination fixed in her eyes as she readied herself for the next spell, but it was the colour of the other’s *obi* that made Mitsuki’s heart falter in her chest. Like the threads of fabric that entwined the corpses of her companions on the ground, Seri’s *obi* was stained with red, and, as she registered this fact, waves of pain and confusion began to penetrate through the adrenalin haze, telling her that Seri was injured and that the wound was serious.

“Seri, you’re hurt!” she exclaimed, dismay in her eyes.

“You’re not, though, and Yuuyugo can see to me after,” Seri did not move from her stance, although Mitsuki could now see that the shadow at her friend’s feet was not caught by light or the trees but by the steady stream of blood trickling down her companion’s body. “We need to take this one down, Mitsuki. Then we can worry about anything else.”

She winced, and Mitsuki was aware for the first time of the grey pallor in her friend’s cheeks.

She’s been bleeding for a while. She took injury when Haseyo and Kazuki were killed.

The realisation shot through her like a bullet from a gun.

I was so focused on protecting the village, I didn’t even notice. How could I not feel it? Was I that shaken by Haseyo and Kazuki’s deaths that I didn’t pick up the thread of a wounded comrade?

Her gaze flitted to the Hollow.

I’m going to need to kill it. Yuuyugo and I... are going to need to kill it. I don’t know if I can do that... but Seri’s barely conscious and using up all of her strength trying to hold it at bay. I’m not injured, so it’s down to me. I have a zanpakutou, surely... surely somehow, I can use it to take this Hollow down?

“Mitsuki, don’t do anything stupid!” As though she had read Mitsuki’s thoughts, Seri’s warning came from across the other side of the copse. “Charging at it, blade drawn only gives it an incentive to

use those pincers. You've shattered one but there's still one left and it's handier from the right than the left. We've tried attacking directly with blades and it doesn't work. Keep your distance from it. Use Kidou. Your sword skills aren't... aren't good enough to fight it any other way, and I don't w... want to see you go the s... same way as H... Haseyo and... K... Kazuki."

Her words faltered and spasmed across the clearing, laced with pain despite her attempts to hide it, and Mitsuki knew her comrade could not stand and fight for much longer.

"Don't talk!" she instructed. "That's an order, don't say another word! You're not fit to be fighting, you'll kill yourself! Let me make the decisions — Buchou left me in charge, remember? If I have to take the Hollow down myself, then I'll take it! If I have to use Yuuyugo..."

Her words faltered, and Seri's slender form swayed slightly, the girl sinking to her knees with a gasp of pain. The Hollow loomed over her, seeming to sense that an easy victory was at hand, and without thinking about it, Mitsuki lunged forward, fingers glittering with Byakurai as she charged bodily into the fray.

"I won't let you kill her too!" she shrieked, her words more than half hysterical as the pounding waves of the Hollow's instinct mingled with Seri's pain and confusion and the empty grief of the other shinigami deaths. "I won't let you hurt those villagers, either! They've done nothing to you, and you don't belong here! I'm not going to let you hurt anyone else!"

The Hollow swung around, its interest in Seri's limp body waning as it detected the determination in Mitsuki's aura, and it opened its mouth, emitting another earth-shuddering scream of defiance. Its eyes rolled and glittered in its head, malevolence sparking from deep within the bony sockets, and then it swung its torso around, bringing the unbroken pincer down towards its new prey.

Hands trembling, Mitsuki fumbled at her waist for her sword, pulling it out just in time to push it between her body and the oncoming claw, but sweat made her palms slick as she realised she really had no idea how to wield her weapon against such a beast as this. The Hollow had the advantage in size and power, and though she held firm to her blade, it was taking an awful lot of her strength to force the creature back. It withdrew its pincer, a lazy, sweeping gesture that made her realise it was toying with her, like a bored cat playing with an unfortunate mouse. Unlike Hollows who, in the past, had simply lashed out without rhyme or reason, this one was cognisant of its actions and more, it was dragging out the hunt, giving

her a moment to catch her breath before swiping down towards her again. She had never encountered a Hollow who had been able to make such complicated judgements before, and a deep sense of unease settled in the pit of her stomach as she realised something else.

Hollows normally killed to feed, sating their thirst for spiritual energy on the *reiryoku* of their fallen victims, but this creature was ignoring Haseyo and Kazuki's bodies completely, disdaining Seri's wounded form for the thrill of chasing a less injured shinigami around the dirt-track crossroads. It was as though its intention was to kill, rather than feed — but Hollows couldn't do things like that. They were instinct-driven, impulse-guided creatures, incapable of cognisant thought and certainly unable to control when they attacked and why. Anything else was impossible.

Wasn't it?

Mitsuki got a grip on her imagination before it threatened to run away with her. This was not the time to be debating things like that, not when she was in mortal danger of becoming the creature's next victim.

It already killed two people. Seri is hurt, and I should be using Yuuyugo to heal her, not to fight off this monster. I'm all that there is between it and Yukio's village... I can't stand down, not even if it kills me. But if I die here...

Her gaze flitted to Seri, who had given up her fight to stay conscious.

If I die here, Seri dies too. If it's really driven by the thrill of the hunt and the kill rather than a thirst for spirit power, Yukio and her companions might die, too. Everyone might be killed, if I can't hold this creature off.

Tears of frustration and terror flowed down her cheeks, blurring her vision and making the Hollow's monstrous form seem little more than a morass of black, white and red. If she couldn't see it, she couldn't aim straight, but with the entire area thick with death and distress, Mitsuki was not confident of holding onto her wits long enough to strike a blow, anyway. Try as she might to regain focus, the seeping tendrils of the monster's emotional energy slipped into her thoughts, overriding her common sense. No matter how hard she tried, she could not remember a single thing from the two years of Ouyoudou she had taken when at the Academy, and the words and names of spells fragmented and merged together, preventing her from launching an attack.

As the Hollow swung down again, Mitsuki's body braced itself for the pain of the impact, shuddering as she imagined the sharp claw piercing through her vital organs before it had even brushed against her *shihakushou*. Any minute now... any minute now...

But the blow didn't come.

Drawing shallow gasps of air into her fear-ravaged body, Mitsuki blinked back the tears, struggling to see why the monster had not run her through, tossing her aside as it had done to her comrades.

Through the haze of her tear-sodden vision, she could make out a shape, faint but unmistakably real, standing between her and the Hollow. It was a person, robed in black from head to foot so that she could not even distinguish whether it was a man or a woman who stood before her, but whoever it was had raised their hand towards the Hollow, and Mitsuki felt the soft ripple of some kind of energy passing between them.

The Hollow faltered. It stopped. It lowered its one remaining pincer and let out a moan of pain and grief as though acknowledging its game was over and it had been somehow thwarted. As Mitsuki watched, detached and disbelieving, the creature shuddered then fragmented into dust, the black remnants of spirit ash raining down onto the grassy floor.

As the figure turned towards her, Mitsuki felt her grip on consciousness waver, her vision dipping in and out of focus as the adrenalin abandoned her to her fate. She sank to the ground, the world around her spinning, and though she tried to form words, nothing coherent would come out. The black-robed blur was coming towards her now, speaking to her, but she could not make out either features or words. As her body succumbed to the strain of the battle, Mitsuki allowed herself to slip into the darkness, relinquishing her consciousness and sinking into black.

It was morning, and another day had begun in the parched spread of terrain that constituted Rukongai's abandoned wasteland.

Tenichi pushed open the door of the small hut cautiously, glancing around him for any sign of life, but the streets were once more devoid of inhabitants. Despite the quickly rising sun, the brownish trickle that comprised the local stream was deserted, and from somewhere he was sure he could hear the faint murmur of voices, but try as he might, he could not lay eyes on a single soul.

He glanced at his wrists, inwardly berating the metal bands that

still clung tightly to his skin. Although he had agreed to play by Keitarou's rules, he had done so more as a survival tactic than anything else, and he had hoped, with the extension of the man's trust, that the spirit draining cuffs might have been removed. He had been disappointed, however, for although Keitarou had been gracious and charming since their conversation about Rukongai's people, he had made no attempt to raise the subject of the cuffs again. Tenichi had been unsure how to broach the topic without giving the impression he planned to escape, and so he was stuck with them, feeling half-blind and semi-deaf in a world where he could not read the spiritual auras of his companions.

How much time had passed now?

He sighed, leaning up against the roughly slotted together lengths of wood that formed the hut's outer wall. It had been more than a day, he was sure of that, and though Keitarou had assured him that a ransom note would be sent to his Captain, as far as he knew, no such memorandum had been released. Nor had the scientist said any more about returning him to Seireitei, and Tenichi curled his lip at this.

If he wants me to trust he's on the level, he needs to start by keeping his word about things like that.

His mind flitted back to the abduction. He had not been far from Thirteenth when it had happened — had Kirio or her comrades seen or heard anything? Whoever had taken him — the boy Koku had called the kidnapper Kurotsuchi, he remembered — had used strange skills and illusions to throw his target off guard, and, from the carefree way in which both Keitarou and Koku had discussed it, Tenichi felt sure that nobody else would have witnessed the event. He had yet to meet this mysterious Kurotsuchi, but he had already made up his mind that when he did, spirit cuffs or no, he would teach the man a lesson for dragging him here against his will.

"You're up early," a voice interjected from across the dusty track that passed as a thoroughfare between the rows of broken homes, and Tenichi raised his gaze to see Koku a few feet away, watching him. The dusty old tome he had seen the young man reading the other day was once more clutched beneath his arm, and Tenichi frowned, absorbing the dichotomy of a Rukongai wastrel with a passion for literary pursuits. At the shinigami's gaze, Koku's lips twitched into a faint, humourless smile, and he strode forward, holding the book out for his companion to see.

"It's just a book," he said off-handedly, as Tenichi took it carefully in his grip, turning it over so that he could read the title. "Nothing

dangerous, just something to read. There aren't many of them, not here, but occasionally Kurotsuchi brings one or two back for me. He knows I like them, and he's good at brown-nosing if he thinks it can get him an advantage later."

"Kurotsuchi again," Tenichi murmured, his gaze running over the archaic kanji that made up the book's title. With a jolt he realised that he could only understand maybe half of them, and at his bewilderment, Koku laughed, reaching out his hand to claim it back.

"It's an old volume, written in outdated script. I suppose they don't teach Shinigami that at your famed Academy," he remarked casually. There had been no snide edge to his tone, yet Tenichi bristled at his words all the same.

"I'm surprised they teach it to Rukongai vagrants," he snapped back, pulling the book out of Koku's reach and flipping it open to view the first couple of pages. "I can see that being very useful in a place like this, being able to read all the ancient characters when the people around you are dying of thirst and malnutrition."

"Ah, so you do have a political standpoint," Koku did not seem perturbed by his companion's ire, merely walking around to Tenichi's other side and plucking the volume calmly from his grip. "This one is a book of ancient prose and poetry, as it happens. It came from the library of one or other of the Clans, I think — I'm not really sure, and it's a bit dry in places, but some of it makes for interesting literature."

"What the hell has that to do with politics?" Tenichi stared at him, and Koku let out a low chuckle.

"I see," he reflected. "So the Academy teaches you how to bruise, fight, and kill Hollows — but it doesn't teach you how to get into the minds and hearts of the people making the rules?"

"Don't speak like that about the Academy!" Tenichi shot back. "You have no idea what it's like, and you don't know what we're taught and what we're not. I have no idea why stupid stories written centuries ago would have any relevance to anything here, nor what the hell you get out of reading them, but that doesn't give you the right to mock me or the job that I do."

"Probably not," Koku acknowledged frankly, glancing at the volume then shutting it with a snap. "Only, the best way of getting inside the heads of people you know nothing about is to read what comes out of those heads."

He smiled.

"I've never met anyone from the Clans, nor really spent much time thinking about Seireitei," he added casually, "but if I read these, I feel I know a little bit more about them and how they work. It's interesting, that's all. A hobby. In a place like this, you have to have a distraction or you go mad. There's not much to do, so learning characters and how to read them is a good way of killing time. That's all it is."

"You learn Clan politics by reading archaic literature?" Tenichi arched an eyebrow, and Koku shrugged.

"Unlike you, I don't have the chance to meet the real thing and study them in person," he said dismissively.

"Is that why you're talking to me? So you can study me, too?"

"No. No, I don't want to study you," Koku shook his head. "I'm interested to meet you, being that you're the son of Daisuke-san, but that's all."

"Keitarou-san's talked about Father?" At this, Tenichi was taken aback.

"Often," Koku inclined his head, "and about you and your brother. He seems very fond of you — and it's rare for him to be fond of anyone, hence my curiosity. I hope you'll forgive it — I suppose us Rukongai vagrants don't get proper guidance in Seireitei manners."

Tenichi pressed his lips together, his jaw tightening at the cryptic snub in the other's voice, but this time he did not rise to it, instead gesturing to the street and stream that lay beyond.

"Are they still hiding from me, or did Keitarou-san tell them that I'm not about to hunt them down and slaughter them to turn into new *shihakushou*?" he asked frankly. "I don't like it, you know, not being able to feel when people are about — I get the sensation folk are watching me, and try as I might, it's hard to shake."

"You're probably being watched very carefully," Koku said pensively. "New faces aren't really welcomed in these parts. Well, you can understand it, can't you? They've been through plenty of bad things, and you're a shinigami. That's not going to endear you to them, even if you do seem bothered about their predicament. It's interesting that you are, by the way," he added off-handedly, "since I would've thought that after going to your Academy and being ranked up in one of the Gotei squads, you'd not spend much time dwelling on the place you came from. Not that I'm passing judgement or anything," as Tenichi frowned, "but it would be easy to do. Natural,

even. You fell on your feet — nobody would begrudge you turning your back on the Urahara and that legacy completely.”

“Urahara, huh?” Tenichi’s brows knitted together. “I’m not an Urahara, Koku. I never have been, never will be. Father was, sure enough, but he wasn’t exactly wanted by them. I’m a District shinigami and I’m not ashamed of that fact. Sure, my brother and I came through some tough times, but we survived them. We worked hard to be where we are now, but forget about it? No. You can’t, not when you’ve been in a place where you’re driven from your home and forced to beg for shelter from a foreign Clan in a crowded, disease-ridden refugee camp. It’s exactly things like that which made Ketsui and I become Shinigami in the first place. We wouldn’t want to forget it.”

“I see,” Tenichi thought he saw a flicker of respect cross his companion’s dark brown eyes, though the next moment it was gone and the impassive, unreadable expression was back in place. “I didn’t expect that, but I stand corrected.”

He indicated the stream.

“Keitarou-san wants me to keep charge of you for the time being,” he said frankly. “You probably resent that, being marshalled around like you’re a child of six, but it’s necessary. If you’re going to go back to Seireitei, it’s better you see as few faces here as possible. Safer for you and for them, you see — better you don’t know more than you have to about where we live.”

“I’ve seen your face, but you don’t seem bothered by that fact,” Tenichi pointed out, nonetheless falling into step with the younger boy and allowing him to lead the way along a winding, narrow path that cut through the back of some of the delapidated residences to a place where the stream had managed to rouse itself to more than an empty trickle. “Are you so sure of Keitarou-san’s protection or my silence that it doesn’t bother you if I know who you are?”

“Mm, something like that,” Koku shrugged his shoulders. “Or more like, I’m someone he expects to keep a proper eye on you without causing too much of a scene. Besides, you already saw me the other day. There’s no point me hiding from you now — it’s not as though I can wipe your memory, so I might as well be the one to keep charge of you.”

“Will you answer my questions?” Tenichi asked, and Koku looked amused.

“That depends what they are,” he said cautiously. “If it’s about

people here, then no, I won't. Questions about me and about Keitarou-san, too, I probably won't give you much to chew on. But if you want to try me, go ahead. I'll tell you if I can tell you, and not if I can't. That's the best I can do, so it will have to do."

"Hmm," Tenichi cast his glance back at the uneven properties, half-thinking he had seen a child's face peeking out behind the dirty weave of cloth that sufficed as a door before it had been hurriedly withdrawn. "How long am I going to be here? Keitarou-san said he'd send a ransom note to my Captain, but at this rate, they'll think I left of my own free will. That won't do you or him or me any good, since if they come looking and they managed to find me..."

"They won't come here. They'd have absolutely no reason to look for you in a place like this, nor any will to look, I imagine," Koku seemed unconcerned. "As for the note, it will be delivered. Keitarou-san's been busy with another matter — one that concerns you too, as it happens. He did make an agreement with you when you spoke, didn't he?"

"An agreement?"

"About finding Daisuke-san's grave?"

"Yes. Yes, he did," Tenichi clenched his fists slightly at the mention of his father's final resting place, digging his nails into the soft flesh of his palms. "Does he really... can he really tell me where Father is?"

"If he says so, I suppose he probably can," Koku replied thoughtfully. "He wouldn't make a bargain like that if he didn't mean it, but I wouldn't know for sure. I never met Daisuke-san, and I certainly never visited his grave. I'd think, though, that it's somewhere in Seireitei, rather than here in the Rukon Valley. That being the case..."

"It wouldn't be here," Tenichi shook his head quickly. "If Father was killed by an Endou, if he was..."

"Well, then taking you to where he was buried is a bit of a dangerous gamble, isn't it?" Koku pointed out patiently. "Keitarou-san isn't exactly the kind of person who can be seen jaunting around Seireitei, so I imagine he's drawing you up a plan of how to find it for yourself. For that, he needs to study the old maps of Seireitei, since he's not lived in District Seven for a very long time. I guess he thinks that's more important to you than a ransom note to your Captain — so he's giving that his full attention first."

"I hadn't thought about that," Tenichi admitted. "I suppose it would

be bad for me, too, if I was seen with Keitarou in Seireitei.”

“No kidding,” Koku snorted. “You’d sign your own death warrant. It’s funny, though... Daisuke-san must’ve been quite important to him.”

“Meaning?”

“Well, normally he doesn’t bother about the deaths of people, not that much,” Koku said pensively. “Never really has, it’s not his way. He cares for the folk here all right, but that’s different... still, he seems quite firm about not putting you or your brother in harm’s way. He could’ve had you here long before this — he’s talked about it, but this is the first time he worked out a way to do it that wouldn’t bring you into danger. Daisuke-san must’ve been someone he cared about, else he wouldn’t go to such lengths to protect someone he barely knows.”

“Keitarou-san was Father’s closest cousin. When we were children, he’d often visit, and he was always kind to us then,” Tenichi remembered with a sigh. “Maybe that memory means more to him than I thought it did — I suppose I find it hard to dislodge the image of the Clan killer from my mind.”

“I don’t suppose he’d care if you didn’t,” Koku reflected. “So long as you’re alive and well, I think that’s all that bothers him.”

“You seem to know Keitarou-san well,” Tenichi sent Koku a suspicious look. “Theorising on his thoughts and feelings like this, it makes me think you must be someone quite important, too. Someone high up in his circle of trust — am I right?”

“I already told you those questions aren’t allowed,” Koku shook his head impatiently. “We get along all right. He knows I won’t betray him, because I’ve nowhere else to go — no route to escape and no prospects either, beyond this wasteland. If you call that trust, then I suppose that’s trust — but more than that...”

He shrugged, and Tenichi ran his gaze over his companion once more.

I wonder what kind of reiryoku I’d sense from him if these cuffs were off. He doesn’t seem dangerous, and he doesn’t look like a fighter, but Keitarou-san left him alone with me and that means he must be able to at least defend himself against my bare blade.

Out loud he said,

“I’d like to know how much longer I’m going to be kept a prisoner here. I don’t mind smuggling food and supplies to your contact — but

I can't do anything of the sort if I'm here, not over there."

"You'll go back, pretty soon, I imagine," Koku told him frankly. "Meantime, you should just sit tight and wait. Don't try and learn too much about this place — it'll be harder for you to lie if you do. It's better you keep your curiosity to a minimum."

He patted the cover of his book.

"We can talk about literature, if you like," he suggested. "Or, if that's not to your taste, something else. I have a few other books, and you can take your pick when we get there."

"There?" Tenichi asked sharply, and Koku nodded, ducking between the broken bough of a long dead elm tree and gesturing for his companion to follow.

"Didn't I explain myself?" he asked, surprised. "Keitarou-san asked me to mind you. If we stick around out here, we'll stop people from getting on with their lives. I thought we'd go back to my shelter and wait there — if there's any news, people will soon work out where we are."

"I'm glad you didn't say 'house'," Tenichi stopped dead, eyeing the construction with alarm. It had been built with the trunks of dead trees, some of them hacked in half by clumsy hands and then pushed together to make what passed as walls on three sides, whilst the side that faced them was covered in a length of thick brown cloth. Squinting at it, Tenichi could faintly make out patterns against the dull colouring, and he realised that it had once been a tapestry of some kind, abused and trampled so deeply into grime that it was now stiff as cardboard and barely recognisable. The roof was a meshed together mass of branches packed with mud to keep the elements out, and at his expression, Koku smirked.

"It's not a house. It's a shelter," he said matter-of-factly, leading the way forward and pushing back the grimy fabric, beckoning for his companion to follow. "I didn't say I lived here, only that this is where my books are. I like privacy, normally, and folk don't bother me here unless they have to. It's not much, true, but it does the job. There's enough light between the tree trunks to read by, mostly, and if I'm careful, sometimes I can light a small fire on a dark night. Come on inside, anyhow. There's nothing much here but a couple of rugs to sit on, but if you haven't forgotten what it was like to live as a refugee, you should be able to make do."

With this flippant remark, he disappeared inside, and Tenichi gritted his teeth, not wanting to be shown up by his offhand

companion. He obediently bowed his head to slip beneath the fabric, finding himself in a small shelter no bigger than four tatami mats square at the absolute extreme. It was sparsely furnished, as Koku had said, there were some old rugs but nothing much else to pass as seating, but a wooden frame in the far corner supported five or six more heavy volumes in the same style as the one his guide was holding. At his gaze, the young man nodded, returning the missing book to the rest of the pile.

“In Seireitei, they’d call that a bookshelf,” he said ironically. “It keeps them safe and off the ground, if nothing else. I made it out of stray bits of timber when one of the houses not far from here blew apart in a storm. There were lots of bits and pieces that were useless for building a replacement, so I kept them for this.”

He sat down on the nearest rug, crossing his legs and indicating for Tenichi to follow suit.

“Well? I don’t usually bring folk here, so I’m not really kitted out to play host. Still, if the wind gets up later, it’ll act as a break if nothing else.”

Tenichi gazed around him at the barren walls, remembering the grimy hovel that he, his mother and his brother had sheltered in after their flight from District Seven.

“You all really live like this?” he asked softly, and Koku spread his hands.

“There’s not a lot to work with, given the landscape and the lack of natural anything,” he said simply. “We get water and food, of course, through Keitarou-san’s channels, but a lot of that goes to the villagers to make sure they stay alive. There isn’t much opportunity for bringing more extravagant items through the divide. We’d get caught very easily, if we started stripping Seireitei of all its goods — besides, you make do, don’t you, with what you have?”

His gaze flitted to the makeshift bookshelf, and a faint, genuine smile touched his lips.

“I have my books,” he said honestly. “It might seem stupid to you, but they’re important to me. They’re pretty much the only thing I have that belongs just to me... so I take good care of them, and read as much as I can. I like to read — its a way to see the world beyond what’s right in front of you.”

“I suppose that’s true,” Tenichi was taken aback. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to...”

“You’re from Seireitei, so it’s hard for you to understand,” Koku dismissed his companion’s awkwardness with a flick of his hand, shaking his head. “It’s not important. I’m not looking for your pity — save that for the villagers you’re going to help us feed. It might not be how you planned to spend these few days, but its best to go along with what we say and not make too much of a stir, if you can help it. Keitarou-san probably knows what he’s doing, getting you involved in this — try and trust in his judgement, all right?”

“Do you trust in his judgement?” Tenichi asked softly, and Koku laughed.

“Canny question, but one I’m not at liberty to answer,” he said lightly. “Like I said, we do all right. Besides, I’m not you. You’re Daisuke-san’s son, so he views you in a different way. He won’t do anything to hurt you, Tenichi-dono — he’s far too fond of you for that.”

There was no bitterness or envy in the young man’s tones, just casual acceptance of the facts, and Tenichi sighed, sinking back against the wall of the shelter.

“If you say so,” he murmured darkly. “All right. For now, I’ll play by your rules. I’ll give it a little time, and see what transpires. I need to go back to Seireitei, though, and I can’t linger around here forever.”

“Agreed,” Koku nodded his head. “Shinigami don’t belong in this part of Rukongai, and it’s far better for everyone here if none come.”

He pursed his lips thoughtfully.

“If need be, I’ll talk to Keitarou-san myself about it,” he decided at length. “For now, though, what’s it to be? Classical literature, scientific evolution theory, astrological star patterns, basic medical procedures in extreme wildernesses or the flora and fauna of lower Seireitei?”

He gestured to the bookshelf, his eyes lighting up with amusement at Tenichi’s expression.

“I have a diverse collection,” he said comfortably. “Pick whatever you like. Keitarou-san usually prefers to do things by night, so we’ve time to kill till then. No doubt someone will come find us when there’s something to eat — till then, let’s change the subject to something more educational.”

She was coming around.

Katsura perched on the edge of the broken tree trunk, his gaze never leaving the still form of the shinigami for one moment. She had not moved an inch, yet, but he could feel it, the swell and ripple of her mind as it began to waken from its shock-induced slumber.

He eyed her warily, in two minds about what he should do.

He had not intended on following the Hollow to its killing ground. Though he had given the orders, unlike Sakaki, he had no real desire to see his puppet spill even the blood of those he considered his enemies. It was a necessary job as part of the bigger plan, and therefore he had carried out his instructions — but now, sitting here in the silence of the forest, he knew that he had failed.

Why had he come here?

He rested his chin in his hands, remembering the moments before he had emerged onto the scene. Her thoughts had summoned him, he realised bitterly. In her fear and hysteria, she had projected them out for miles around, loud enough for anyone to hear them in startling, painful clarity. Her fear and worry had jerked at his heart, drawing forth memories of their brief meeting by the river, and although he had known he was acting against his better judgement, he had not been able to resist her call.

Edogawa Mitsuki.

He groaned, burying his head in his hands.

What had possessed him to come to the aid of a registered shinigami? She was Gotei, and she belonged to *them*. However kind she had been to the young girl and her kin, he had no reason to trust her. If she knew too much about him, it would be dangerous — not just for him, but for all of them. It wouldn't be Sakaki leading a trail to their door, he realised with a rueful grimace. At this rate, it would be him, sabotaging his own strategies and saving the life of someone he hadn't known existed until a few days before.

At the very least he should leave her — disappear from this place before she woke up. Yet still he sat there, watching the rise and fall of her chest as if unable to abandon her in such a vulnerable position.

When she had fainted, he had not been able to prevent hearing the cacophany of her thoughts, each one striving for dominance until her brain had overloaded. As she had lain on the ground, unconscious, he had picked up their residue, seeing with unmistakable clarity her overriding concerns.

She was worried about the village. She was worried the Hollow would

go there, and kill the people who lived there.

Katsura chewed down on his lip, tasting blood. *She was fighting to stop that happening. Two of her colleagues were dead, and she was terrified of holding that sword — but even so, she faced the Hollow to protect the village. That's why I came here, isn't it? She was protecting the Plus souls, just like she was when she helped that young girl in the village. How could I let her die, when she was willing to sacrifice her life for theirs?*

He sighed, letting his breath out in a rush. She would open her eyes soon, blink and bring him into focus, and he would have to field questions he did not want to answer. He had already disobeyed a direct instruction, and had let his impulses rule his head. He knew nothing about this shinigami, but despite that, he knew with ever-growing certainty that he did not want her to die.

Maybe she's the only one among the whole of Seireitei who really cares about the fates of those who can't fight back. Perhaps she's the odd one out, the plum in the apple barrel. Probably I wouldn't be able to convince anyone at home of the logic of saving her, but even so, I'm not going to be the one to cause her death. She might be dressed in black and white, but she's not my enemy. Somehow I can feel that..though if anyone back at base ever found out, I'd never be allowed to leave there again.

“Where... where am I?”

Her words were soft and blurry, her lashes fluttering to reveal confused grey eyes, and Katsura got to his feet, moving slowly and carefully across the battle-scarred ground. There was a lot of blood, he reflected absently, splattered up trees and pooled on the grass, and some inexplicable instinct inside of him made him want to shield her from it — conceal from her the shock of her companions' deaths until she was better able to deal with it.

Or maybe, just to hide from her what you've done.

The little voice of his conscience nagged at him, but he pushed it aside, focusing instead on her. Slowly and with shaking hands she pulled herself into a more upright position, her black hair muzzy and tousled and her face still streaked and blotched from her tears. The other night, when he had seen her, she had seemed serene and beautiful, deserving of her name's meaning, but at that moment she seemed vulnerable, the gentle elegance erased by the shock of the encounter.

Glancing at her, Katsura was struck by a sudden thought.

She was not used to being involved in a fight.

Her thoughts were no longer so open to him, not now she had fully regained consciousness, and as she began to gaze around her in confusion, Katsura coughed slightly, alerting her to his presence. She gazed up at him, fear momentarily sparking across those grey eyes, but he held up his hands, offering her a sombre smile.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” he said lightly. “You were passed out, but you seem to have come to all right now.”

“You...” Recognition flashed into her expression, and despite himself, Katsura took a step back. “The man from the river, the soul with tainted *reiryoku*. You... were here? Why are you here? Who are you, and why...”

She drew breath sharply into her lungs, glancing around her as if remembering that she had not come here alone. The still forms of the two dead healers lay where they had fallen, black *shihakushou* fluttering in the breeze, and she let out an incoherent whimper, scrambling to pull herself upright. She staggered and swayed, her body not yet ready for what her mind wanted to do, and without thinking about it, Katsura came to support her, holding her body firm until she had properly regained her balance.

“You’re not up to doing that,” he chided. “I didn’t come to help you to see you flop and flounder all over the place. Take a moment and breathe. The Hollow is gone and it won’t come back.”

“The Hollow...” Mitsuki gazed at him blankly, then. “You... it was you! You did something to the Hollow, you...”

She closed her eyes, swallowing hard again, and from the greyish green colour of her skin, Katsura realised that the shock had not completely cleared her system.

“Seri,” she murmured, more than half to herself, pulling away from his hold and stumbling across the grass to where the third shinigami lay in a pool of congealing blood. From where Katsura was standing, the woman appeared as dead as the other two, her skin ashen and colourless from loss of blood. He had not expounded much energy trying, but he had not picked up even the faintest murmur of a thought from this crumpled, *shihakushou*-shrouded heap, and so he had assumed that, like the two corpses already cooling beneath the shade of the trees, she had succumbed. He opened his mouth to say as much, then realised it was a futile gesture, for his companion was not paying him the slightest bit of attention. Despite the fact she was in close proximity to an unknown and — Katsura acknowledged dryly to himself — potentially dangerous individual, her only concern was for

her friend's life. Weak and disorientated from shock she might be, but Mitsuki's shaking fingers were already fumbling with the knot of the red-dyed *obi*, tearing it back with strength he hadn't realised she still had in her urgency to reveal the wound within.

"Mitsuki?"

No answer, just the continued, frantic clawing at the still girl's ruined uniform, the sound of tearing fabric mingling with the hum of desperation tingling in her aura.

"Mitsuki, please. You mustn't..."

"I'm a healer. I have to heal her," She cut across him, her words more to herself than in response to anything he had said to her. She was lost in a world of her own, the half-thoughts and broken fragments of emotion that flared from her aura highlighting the intensity of her instincts to help her companion. Katsura had the sudden impression that Mitsuki would give her own life here and now if by doing so she could preserve her friend's, and his eyes widened slightly as he processed that thought. He had never felt such a strong swell of feeling before, but, as he allowed the severed wisps of Mitsuki's escaping thought processes to penetrate his mind, he found himself for the first time exploring the possibility, considering, even if only for the briefest of seconds, whether he would ever feel compelled to do the same.

So that was what a healer was.

For the first time Katsura understood, but as he watched the pale, blood-splattered hands feverishly pulling apart the black cloth, he found himself wondering why he had been sent to target people like this. How could someone like Mitsuki, who wasn't even aware of the danger around her as she tended to her comrade be a threat to him or more importantly, to them? He shook his head as if to clear it. Such thoughts were treasonous, and he was in trouble enough already, having spared at least one life that, by the orders he had been given, was supposedly forfeit.

The gash through Seri's abdomen was exposed at last, red and angry, and Katsura winced at the jagged edge of the wound. The Hollow's claw had torn through her, not sliced cleanly like a well polished blade, and he could only imagine with a shiver what kind of internal wreckage such a blow had left behind. Something that was definitely not skin flapped at the edge of the gaping tear, and Katsura swallowed hard, wondering if he might disgrace himself and lose his stomach contents, but Mitsuki did not flinch for a moment. Instead she

pulled Seri's full water gourd from her friend's belt, loosening the top. Tearing off a strip from her own obi, she damped the cloth, using it to methodically clear away debris and detritus from around the nasty crimson weal. The shinigami's body flinched slightly, as if aware of the sensation of cold against the raw edges of the wound, and Katsura frowned, picking up for the first time the faintest fragments of consciousness.

Pain stimuli. Base and involuntary, but there.

"She's alive."

The words left his lips, surprise lacing every one.

"I know she is. I know, but she won't be if I don't... she's lost so much blood," Mitsuki's words were agitated and disjointed, and to Katsura's alarm, she patted her hand to her waist, fear leaping into her hazy gaze as she registered the fact her sword wasn't in its sheath.

"Yuuyugo!" she exclaimed, spinning around so fast she almost toppled over. "Where is Yuuyugo? Where is she?"

"Who or what is a Yuuyugo?" Katsura stared, completely thrown by this sudden change in demeanour, and Mitsuki let out a cry of frustration, clenching and unclenching her fists as if struggling to keep a hold on her composure. Her fingers were already liberally coated with the unconscious shinigami's blood, but she didn't seem to notice the gore, instead gazing around her frantically.

"Where is she?" she murmured. "Please, I need her. I need Yuuyugo, otherwise Seri will..."

"I don't understand what you're talking about," Katsura said honestly. "There's only us here. You and me, and, well, her, if her life can even be saved. The other girl is dead — if that's Yuuyugo..."

"No! Don't be stupid!" Mitsuki pulled herself to her feet, staggering back towards Katsura and grabbing him by the arms, covering his sleeves with blood before he could pull himself away. The sweet, sickly smell made him feel nauseous once again, and he grimaced, shaking his head as if to clear it.

"I need my sword," at last, Mitsuki spoke again, fixing him with an urgent, pleading expression. "I had it before, when the Hollow was here. You were here then, weren't you? Please, where is it? Where is my sword?"

"I don't think you ought to have a weapon, not babbling and pottering around half-crazed like you are right now," Katsura gathered

his wits, unnerved by the intensity of her gaze. “You might hurt yourself, and that would be a shame, don’t you think?”

“No!” Mitsuki was near tears now, frustration rippling at every corner of her being. “My sword isn’t a weapon! My sword is... Yuuyugo is... without her, I can’t help Seri. Please, tell me where my sword is. If you don’t... Seri...”

She faltered, the tears beginning to slide down her already abused cheeks, and despite himself Katsura felt a lurch inside him as he registered the depth of her grief. Against his better judgement, he sighed, nodding his head.

“You dropped it when you fell,” he said at length. “It’s over there, beneath the broken branch of that tree. I didn’t touch it or do anything with it — but I’m serious. You should be careful. I don’t know much about medicine and wounds and stuff, and if you hurt yourself, I won’t be able to do anything about it.”

Mitsuki did not answer him, instead pushing him away and burrowing like an eager dog among the snapped wood and scattered leaves for the hilt of her sword. At length she found it, pulling it from the undergrowth as though she had discovered buried treasure and Katsura braced himself, unsure what his companion was about to do. Mitsuki seemed once more oblivious to his presence, however, hurrying back across the crossroads to where her still friend still lay.

As he watched, the shinigami skidded to her knees at Seri’s side, resting the blade of the sword horizontally across her companion’s damaged body. Her pale lips moved, too softly for Katsura to hear what she was saying, then the weapon glowed with a sudden ethereal light, fragmenting into tiny particles of shimmering energy. Captivated by the gentle aura the blade exuded, Katsura inched closer, watching as the minute fragments of the sword sank deeply into Seri’s wound, stopping the steady flow of blood and knitting together the organs that had been rent apart beneath. Mitsuki was oblivious to him, and Katsura realised that, had he meant her harm, it would have been possible to snap her neck and escape before she’d even registered he was behind her. Even as he saw the possibility, though, Katsura knew he was not going to hurt her.

The sword is also a way of healing.

Fascinated, he watched as Mitsuki’s brow creased in concentration, her fingers glowing with gentle golden energy that surrounded the wound, locking in the fragments of the scattered sword’s energy. *Nobody ever told me that a shinigami sword could mend bodies as well as break them, either. I’m starting to think there was a whole missing module*

in my “What Shinigami can do and why I should beware of them” training.

For twenty minutes, Mitsuki worked, Katsura watching everything she did with curiosity. Forgetting that the patient his companion was battling to save was one of the shinigami he had been ordered to kill, he found his thoughts resonating with Mitsuki's own, and, little by little, he began to will Seri's colour to improve, the wound to knit and heal and the wounded woman to survive.

At length the light around Mitsuki's hands flickered and faded, and she sank back on the grass, exhaustion etched into her pretty features.

“I didn't know shinigami could do that,”

Katsura broke the silence, and Mitsuki started visibly, turning to stare at him as if she had forgotten completely that he was there. For a moment they held each other's gaze, doubtful and hesitant as to how to continue, then Mitsuki let out a heavy sigh.

“You stopped the Hollow. Thank you.”

Guilt rippled through Katsura's conscience at the weary sincerity in his companion's voice.

I sent the Hollow. You shouldn't thank me. Your comrades are dead because of me — I stopped that beast killing you, but I didn't think twice about them.

Out loud he said,

“Your friend will live?”

“I... don't know,” Mitsuki reached up to brush a piece of stray hair out of her eyes, but before she could, Katsura grasped her loosely around the wrist, pulling her hand before her gaze so she could see the state of it for herself.

“You need to wash this, first, else you'll look like you gored someone yourself,” he said lightly, extending a gentle finger to push the muzzy lock back behind her ear. She flinched at the unexpected contact, and he smiled, touching her briefly on the shoulder before withdrawing his hand from her personal space. “It was very impressive, what you did there, but you need to pay better attention to yourself, too. Anyone could have attacked you while you were helping her — and now you don't have a sword to fight back with, either.”

“Mm,” Mitsuki glanced at Yuuyugo's severed hilt, then shrugged her shoulders. “It doesn't matter. I'm not a fighter. I'm a healer.”

“Isn’t it inconvenient, though, losing your blade inside someone else?”

“It’s not like that,” Mitsuki shook her head. “When I draw back enough spirit power, my weapon will be complete again. That’s all it is — *reiryoku*. If I wasn’t so tired from the fight, I’m sure I would’ve pulled it back together by now.”

She offered him a faint smile.

“I don’t even know who you are,” she realised. “You came and you rescued me, but I don’t even know your name.”

“Better you don’t,” Katsura said matter-of-factly. “Your kind and mine, we don’t mix all that well.”

“Your... kind?”

“Not shinigami,” Katsura’s lip curled pensively over his teeth. “It’s better to leave it at that. I don’t suppose it would do either of us any good if we were to be on first name terms.”

“You know my name, though,” Mitsuki objected. “You called me Mitsuki, even though I’m sure I didn’t tell you.”

“I heard your friends call you that,” Katsura lied easily, knowing that the dead shinigami would never be able to refute his story. “At your camp, before I met you at the river. There’s no mystery in that.”

“You have *reiryoku*,” Mitsuki’s thoughts were coming more concisely now, and she sat back, gazing up at him pensively. “You’re *not* a shinigami, I can tell that, but you’re... you’re not a normal Plus soul either, are you?”

“I guess you could say there’s nothing much normal about me, no,” Katsura hid a wry smile. “You needn’t worry, though. I’m not going to hurt you.”

“I know,” Mitsuki’s gaze drifted across the ground towards the still forms of her two dead comrades, and she sighed heavily. “You could have done that easily, but you stopped the Hollow instead. Whoever you are, I’m not afraid of you. If you wanted to hurt me, I think I’d sense it from you — but I don’t. You wanted to help me — that’s the last thing I remember before I passed out. If you hadn’t been there, then I...”

She broke off mid-sentence, getting to her feet and moving slowly and reluctantly towards the two corpses.

“Those two are beyond your help,” Katsura warned her, and

Mitsuki nodded, kneeling down between them.

“I know, but I’ll have to report this back to my squad leader — maybe even my Captain,” she said solemnly. “I need to know how they died, so I can give a proper report.”

Her words were gentle and even, but the faint tremor in her voice did not escape Katsura’s attention, and he sighed, inwardly feeling guilty for his part in her grief.

“I’m sorry,” he spoke before he realised he was going to, and Mitsuki raised her head, shooting him a startled look.

“Why?” she asked, surprised. “You haven’t any reason to apologise to me. You saved my life — it’s not your fault if you weren’t here before to save theirs.”

She bit her lip, looking pained.

“As it happens, nor was I,” she admitted painfully. “I was in the village, making sure nobody there was hurt. If I’d been here... but I don’t know. The injuries look bad ones... I think they would have been beyond saving, even if I had been here to help.”

Katsura was silent for a moment, his gaze running over her features one by one as he tried to pick up the faintest tendrils of her thoughts. He could not read them clearly, he realised — as before, they were closed to him, but every so often he felt the dull hum of her grief, resonating deeply against his wits. It was not a pleasant feeling, and before he knew what he was doing, he was on his feet.

“You shouldn’t be here,” he said quietly, apprehension in his dark gaze. “Your friend needs proper medical care — you should go back to Seireitei and make sure she gets it.”

“No, I can’t go back there. Not yet,” Mitsuki shook her head. “You’re right, though — Seri can’t stay here. I need to get her back to the base camp, up north in...”

“No!” Katsura’s exclamation startled them both, and Mitsuki stared at him in confusion.

“No?” she echoed quizzically. “Why not? I’m not authorised to open a gate to Seireitei.”

She eyed him for a moment, then,

“If you wanted me to take you there with me, I don’t have that power. Not even for saving my life, I’m afraid.”

“I don’t want to go to Seireitei, and I especially don’t think I ought

to go there with you,” Katsura told her dryly. “I’m pretty sure it’s not allowed, taking people over the divide — isn’t that what those big, repellant walls are all about, keeping folk where they should be?”

“Walls? You mean the Sekkiseki divide?” Mitsuki frowned. “Yes... I suppose so. I guess those affect you too, don’t they? You have *reiryoku*.”

“Yes,” Katsura agreed. “Damn nuisance, to be honest. I can’t get anywhere without one of them getting in my way... it gets claustrophobic.”

“Where would you be going?”

“That’s not as important as getting your friend help, is it?” Katsura pointed out, and Mitsuki bit her lip, nodding.

“True,” she agreed uneasily. “I have to get her back to my squad Captain and let him assess her wounds. Probably she’ll get recalled to Seireitei for proper care, but there’s nothing I can do here.”

“You can’t go back there,” Sakaki’s eager, blood-lust filled eyes haunted Katsura’s thoughts and he shuddered, forcing the image away. “It’s dangerous, on your own, travelling all that way with an injured comrade. Can’t you send for back up from Seireitei from here? Even if you can’t open a... a whatever you call the holes you people walk through, I’m sure you can send a message?”

“It’s not that simple,” Mitsuki shook her head. “I need to go back to camp. It’s the only... I need to take Seri there, if I’m going to get her help.”

It’s the only place where you can make a connection to Seireitei.

Katsura mentally filled in Mitsuki’s unspoken words, adding a curse for good measure, then, out loud he said,

“She’s unconscious. She can’t walk. You’ll put yourself in danger and any other Hollows... any other creatures out there...”

“I don’t have any choice,” Mitsuki shook her head. “It’s my duty. My responsibility. I have to take her back. I’m grateful for what you did, but I have to return to camp. If I don’t...”

“There’s danger there, too,” the words were out before Katsura could stop them, and his eyes widened with alarm as he realised what he’d said. He clamped his hands over his mouth, but Mitsuki had heard him.

“Danger? In Hokutan?” she whispered, her face draining once more of colour.

“Yes,” Katsura reluctantly lowered his hands, his thoughts racing as he tried to work out what he could tell her. He could not let her go north, and risk running into Sakaki and her blood-thirsty blade. He had not saved her life just to make her one of his sister’s victims, yet nor could he betray the young assassin by telling Mitsuki the truth. She would pull away from him if she knew he had been involved in the slaughter of her colleagues, and despite his intention to stay detached, Katsura felt suddenly certain that he could not bear to see her fix him with reproachful, accusing eyes.

He’s not going to forgive me, if he ever finds out about this.

Katsura ran his fingers agitatedly through his thick dark hair.

“Tell me what you mean?” Mitsuki pressed, her grey eyes anxious. “If my companions are also in danger, I need to warn them. I have to take Seri back, but...”

“Let me come with you,” at length, Katsura made up his mind, his gaze flitting reluctantly towards Seri’s unconscious form. “Let me carry her back.”

“But...”

“I know. You know nothing about me, and you don’t know what my motives are. I’ll be honest, I don’t really know that myself, not right now,” Katsura said bleakly, “but you’ll just have to trust me. There’s no other way you’ll get back there without putting her life and yours in danger.”

“What do you know about Hokutan?” Mitsuki asked quietly. “Why do you say there’s danger there? I’ve had no communication from my squad chief — why would you know something I didn’t?”

“There have been Hollow sightings in that area recently,” Katsura said vaguely. “I don’t like them any more than you do — they go after me because I’m different, just like they go after shinigami. I don’t have a shiny weapon to fight them with, but I have learned to deflect their attacks and destroy them. You’re tired and you have no sword. Your companion is half dead. If you let me come with you, it’s true that I might be an enemy, and I might betray you. Maybe I’ll try and kill you — you can’t be sure. If you don’t let me come with you, though, and a Hollow attacks you...”

He let his words trail off, and Mitsuki sighed, shrugging her shoulders.

“If there’s reports of Hollows in the north, I need to get back as soon as possible,” she said frankly, tucking the hilt of her weapon into

her *obi*. “I don’t know who you are, and it’s hard to trust someone with no name — but you’re right. I can’t carry Seri on my own. Besides, I believe you. You could have killed me several times already — its not as though there’s anyone here to witness it. You have spirit power and if you’re caught by shinigami, you could be in trouble for being here — so you’re putting yourself in danger by helping me. That danger increases the closer we get to my camp and my comrades. The question is, why would you take that risk at all?”

“You wanted to protect the little girl,” Katsura shot her a crooked smile, shrugging his shoulders. “I’m a sucker for things like that — a softy, underneath all this black creepy fabric. It keeps the draughts out and it’s cheap, but it doesn’t convey the real me.”

Mitsuki arched an eyebrow, and Katsura held up his hands once more in surrender.

“All right. I’ll be serious,” he said frankly. “I grew up in a village like the one by the river. When I saw you help the little girl, I was surprised. I didn’t realise that shinigami and Plus souls could be like that with each other, and it opened my eyes. My experiences with shinigami have been limited, but I’ve never heard many good stories about them, especially in Seireitei. Now I’ve met you, though, I’m intrigued. You’re not like I expected. You’re kind, and you care about them. Shinigami like that deserve to be helped — so I’m helping you. Good enough?”

“You come from Seireitei,” Mitsuki deduced sharply, and Katsura laughed, shaking his head.

“No, but nice guess,” he said playfully. “I come from here, just like that little girl and her neighbours do. That’s why it matters to me, keeping people like them alive. If it matters to you too, we’re on the same wavelength. Let’s leave it at that, shall we? We’re wasting time, and your friend needs help — doesn’t she?”

“She does,” Mitsuki agreed, shooting Katsura a pensive look, but to his relief she nodded, moving to check Seri’s wound one last time.

“If you can lift her, I’ll lead the way,” she said matter-of-factly. “It’s not a short walk, so the sooner we begin, the better.”

I hope Sakaki’s nowhere near the Shinigami camp by the time we arrive there.

Katsura did as he was bidden, scooping the unconscious Seri up into his arms and falling into step with his shinigami companion.

*Explaining this to myself is proving hard enough, but if **he** were to find out...*

He shuddered, shaking his head.

He can't find out. He won't. There's no need for him to know. So one or two healers survived, so what? They can go back and report on what happened and that'll do just as well as leaving their corpses scattered all over the Spiritless Zone. Yes, that'll do. That's what I'll tell him. If he finds out some of them lived, I'll tell him that. It'll get things moving more quickly, and that way, Mitsuki doesn't need to die.

He shot her a sidelong glance, taking in the preoccupation in her grey eyes and the lingering pallor of her cheeks. She was still exhausted, he could tell, but fully in command of her wits now, and the aura of vulnerability he had felt earlier had slowly slipped away. Still, he would not forget it. In that moment, he had been driven to protect her, and he frowned, admitting to himself how dangerous a game he was playing by letting his heart rule his head.

Still, I don't want her to die.

He pressed his lips together, tightening his hold on Seri's limp form.

Edogawa Mitsuki is a person of interest to me now. Shinigami or otherwise, I don't want to let her die.

Author's Note: December 21st, 2011 — Ukitake Juushirou's Birthday =D

This chapter -though it isn't very cheery, sorry Juu — is in honour of Juu's birthday and the third anniversary of the Meifuish world, too.

And, a very Merry Christmas to all who celebrate it!

8. The Vice Captains

Chapter Seven: The Vice Captains

The meeting room was empty when Souja reached it that morning, pushing back the sliding door and glancing pensively inside for any sign of life before slipping into the room and moving to take his usual seat at the table. The Seminar Chamber was located in the heart of Seireitei's governing complex, in a compound adjacent to the main halls that housed the Council of Elders, and from the window, Souja knew that there was a clear view across to the front courtyard of their administrative building. Though the Seminar Chamber was occasionally used for other purposes, these days it was almost entirely given over to meetings of squad officers, and, as the Captains generally preferred to gather within the Council complex itself, it had almost become an unofficial Vice Captain base.

Despite its grandiose name, the room was not a big one, narrow and long, with a carved table set in the centre. There were enough spaces to seat fourteen officers, but nobody ever sat at the far end, and the head of the table generally belonged to whichever Vice Captain was nominated speaker for that meeting. This was not as democratic as it sounded, for there were frequent spats over the distribution of power, and Souja had soon learned that there was little to be gained except resentment by pushing himself forwards. He was not as assertive in his manner as his younger sister, who, he had no doubt, would have faced down all comers, and he found it more useful to sit and listen rather than lead and speak.

"You're here early today,"

A warm voice from the doorway made him glance up, a smile touching his features as he recognised the broad, friendly features of the Thirteenth Division Vice Captain, Houjou Enishi. Souja liked Enishi a good deal, admiring the other officer's straight dealing and honest demeanour. Coming from a Clan like the Endou, it was sometimes hard to believe there was a world beyond intrigue and manipulation, but Enishi was a quick reminder that another school of thought did exist, and more, flourished in some quarters of Seireitei. A Clansman like himself, Enishi had sacrificed any plans for Yamamoto honour to help lead Seireitei's Thirteenth and newest division, and he had proved an excellent choice, steady and easy-going with scared new recruits, yet firm in his discipline and his subordinates always

knew where they stood.

“I rose with the sun,” Souja answered now, gesturing for the other man to come and join him. “I wanted to be sure I was in good time, though, as I have things I want to discuss today.”

“Me too,” Enishi pressed his lips together, squeezing his considerable frame behind the table, then, “Did you find the kid?”

“Kid?” Souja frowned, stalling for time, and Enishi laughed, clapping a hand to his forehead.

“I’m sorry,” he said sheepishly. “I forgot, to you, he’s not a kid. Tenichi, I meant. Taichou was pretty concerned, and so were the rest of us when we heard he’d gone missing.”

“Oh,” Souja’s eyes darkened, and he shook his head. “No. There’s been no word, not from anyone who might have abducted him. I’ve been looking into some potential avenues of information, but not much has come back from it. I won’t pretend I’m not worried — and also, angry. I’ve got to report this to my father, when he returns this afternoon, and I can only imagine his reaction.”

“Tisn’t your fault. Hirata won’t hold you responsible for it,” Enishi said reassuringly, and Souja sighed, rubbing his temples.

“There aren’t many people even of Father’s rank in Seireitei who’d dare to drop the honorifics and call him just by his first name,” he mused, and Enishi shrugged.

“Force of habit,” he said easily. “Comes from spending five years of school together, then being his Vice Captain when he was Thirteenth’s Third Seat. Hard to call him anything else when if I think on it I can still see that scared little mite huddled on his bed, glasses slipping down his nose and body trembling as though we were all going to eat him. There’s no slight meant, I promise you. He’s used to me and my lack of formality by now.”

He spread his arms, making himself more comfortable.

“You intend to talk about Tenichi at the meeting today?”

“I had thought to raise it, yes,” Souja inclined his head. “Kikyue’s going out of her mind about it — she feels to blame, since he’s one of her men, and it’s generally upset the squad that he’s not shown up. I want to know more about what happened in Eleventh and Ninth — I assume that Juushirou-dono mentioned those things to you, too?”

“Yes,” Enishi’s features became grave. “I was going to ask Ikata if I could come chat to his abducted juniors after the meeting, see if I

can't find out anything from them. I know that it's said the abducted kids don't remember what happened, but it's worth a shot, and Ikata's my kinsman, by a long and convoluted path. He might let me try."

"Ikata's not overly discreet with his opinions," Souja said carefully, and Enishi sighed.

"You could say that about me, too," he remarked. "Must be a Yamamoto thing."

"No... no, it's not the same," Souja rested his chin in his hands. "Ikata's not fond of Minachi-dono, is he? You can tell, whenever he's called on to talk about squad business. He's not that fussed about letting us know the kidnappings happened, either... which is surprising, given that Minachi-dono apparently didn't raise it with the Council of Elders or the other Captains."

"Not liking someone doesn't mean you can't work for them," Enishi rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "I know what you mean, but to be honest, whilst it's just you and I, Minachi-dono's not the easiest person to work with anyway. Like as not, Ikata needs a moment to let off steam sometimes. Minachi-dono wants everything his way and he wants it done before he's given the order. It keeps life challenging — I wouldn't choose it."

"As I hear it, you didn't choose it," Souja said dryly, and Enishi grinned.

"Too true," he said philosophically. "I found a damn fine Captain and I couldn't be more settled with the Thirteenth. But that's beside the point. About young Tenichi. Do you think there's a serious risk his life's in danger?"

"Not having received a ransom, it's possible," Souja grimaced. "I'm hoping not. The only thing worse than a missing shinigami to relate to my father when he comes back from the Clan is the death of one. He's never in a great mood when he comes back from the heart of Seventh District, and this won't help at all."

"What's all the doom and gloom so early in the morning?" The breezy greeting of the Eighth Division Vice Captain, Shiba Sora prevented Enishi from making any kind of response to Souja's words, and both turned to see the young woman, green eyes bright with curiosity and dark curls fastened back from her face with a band that seemed ready to burst at any moment. Sora was the youngest child and only daughter of District Five's illustrious Shiba Clan, but her naturally gregarious, inquisitive nature had driven her to seek responsibility outside of her homeland, and though it had caused some

tension between her and her eldest brother, the Vice Captain of the Fifth, for the most part Seireitei had accepted her choice with equanimity. As Shunsui's second, she often found herself with a challenging workload, torn from pillar to post trying to keep up with her Captain's eccentricities and lackadaisical manner, yet she had thrown herself into it with enthusiasm, and, at a glance, Souja could tell that she relished the opportunities working in Eighth had given her.

"You both look like someone spoiled your birthday dinner," she said now, resting her hands on the surface of the table and glancing between one and the other as if hoping to be let in on the secret. "You're also both much earlier than you usually are — I was surprised to hear voices when I came down the hall. What gives? Did someone change the time of the meeting and not tell me?"

"You're here pretty early yourself, Sora," Enishi pointed out good-naturedly, and Sora snorted, dismissing this observation with a careless shrug.

"I get up early," she said matter-of-factly. "I always allow an extra hour for pounding Shunsui's head against the wall, just to make sure he's up and around in time for division inspections and things like that. It's become a pattern now, I hardly even notice any more — but that's beside the point. What's got the pair of you gloomy and chatting with your heads so close together? I thought I heard Ikata's name as I got here — did that buffoon do something stupid again?"

"No, not as far as we know," Souja found it impossible to suppress a smile at his companion's casual terminology. "Shiba-dono, we were talking about the incidences of abduction in Ninth and Eleventh. You remember that Ikata brought the subject up with a few of us a short time ago?"

"I remember," Sora transferred her strength to her arms, vaulting herself over the table and landing neatly beside the seat she usually used. "He was pretty ticked off that anyone would dare encroach on Eleventh's territory and I'm pretty sure I heard him monologue for a while about what he'd do to the culprits if he got a hold of them. The kids were returned safely, though, weren't they?"

"Yes, they were," Enishi agreed, "but now Souja-dono's missing someone, and we're trying to figure it out."

"Seventh had someone abducted?" Sora's eyes widened in surprise, and Souja sighed, nodding his head.

"Kotetsu Tenichi," he admitted heavily, and Sora's eyes became

even bigger.

“One of Juushirou... I mean, Ukitake-taichou’s transfers?”

“Yes,” Enishi confirmed. “You’re well up to speed on things like that, Sora — anything you can tell us that you think we don’t already know?”

“About the Kotetsu boy? Not much,” Sora shook her head, her green eyes becoming thoughtful. “He has a brother, doesn’t he? Sometimes comes and spars with our Tenth Seat, since they’re of rank and almost of the same age. As for Tenichi, Shunsui’s mentioned him once or twice, but that’s all. Apparently he has promise, maybe even to be a division leader one day, if the Council were to consider him. He’s District, of course, but I seem to remember he went to Seventh because you had a lack of specific combat strength and he filled the gap?”

“Mm,” Souja nodded. “Father arranged the transfer with Juushirou-dono, but that’s how I understood it. Juushirou-dono was worried Tenichi was being held back in Thirteenth, and Tenichi didn’t seem to object. Quite the opposite, he was keen to take the challenge, and he slipped into our squad just fine. Then this happens. It’s been almost two days now since he disappeared. The others had ransoms before a day was out, correct? At least, Ikata said so — but we’ve had nothing at all.”

“Ninth was the same way,” Sora rested her chin in her hands, and Enishi shot her a look of surprise. “Oh, yes, I know all about that. They’re neighbours of ours, barracks-wise, but also, it’s not hard to pick up snippets of information if you know where to look. Anabomi-taichou likes to run a close ship, but occasionally whispers leak out. One of the Ninth’s recruits was abducted, wasn’t she? Apparently she was an Academy classmate of a couple of our newer members, and so bits and pieces came across that way. Kaoru-chan heard our recruits talking and got curious. As it happens, a former classmate of hers, Takaoka Sakura is a ranked officer in the Ninth, so she asked some questions and found out the bare bones of what had gone on. She reported it back up to Shunsui and I, but since we didn’t want to get her friend in any trouble, we’ve kept it pretty much to ourselves to see what transpired. Probably, if you asked Anabomi-tai directly, he’ll claim that nothing of the sort happened in his division and that we’re mistaken — but it’s for sure that it did. Still, the ransom note came within twenty four hours and the kid was returned to Ninth safely, if a little confused. I spoke to the girl myself, just casually, when she came by the barracks with a message for Shunsui, but she didn’t seem to

remember anything much about where she'd been or what had happened to her."

"They probably kept her drugged," Souja said wisely, "but it doesn't help our cause if we don't have any leads."

"This is different, though, isn't it?" Sora pointed out. "Your squad aren't guilty of desecrating land and not repairing it. Seventh has one of the higher records for compensation, after Thirteenth and Eighth — I've heard Shunsui talking about it. That means there's no motive to take one of your members at all."

"Right. No motive and no note makes us uneasy," Souja agreed. "I've mentioned it to Juushirou-dono and I'll talk to Father as well in the hopes this will be brought up at a Captain's or even a Council meeting — in the meantime, I want to make sure people are aware the targets aren't just from squads who are shirking their responsibilities. If everyone's aware that one of Seventh's members has been abducted, then maybe they'll be more vigilant over their own people and we'll find something else out."

"You think Tenichi is dead?" Enishi looked alarmed, and Souja shook his head.

"No, I'm trusting that he isn't," he said cautiously. "Until we have a lead to go on, though, searching for him is pretty futile. Whoever took him knows Seireitei — and they know more about us than we do about them."

"I guess Thirteenth don't have anything to add on any of this?" Sora shot Enishi a glance, and the tall shinigami shook his head.

"We're as foxed as anyone," he responded with a sigh, rubbing his brow absently. "It's all a mess, if you want my opinion."

"Thank you for the information about Ninth, though, Shiba-dono," Souja reflected. "I'll take a more direct approach, now that I know for sure the incident did occur."

"The others are coming," Sora turned towards the door, as the sound of footsteps and voices heralded the arrival of the other squad deputies. "If you want to raise it as a point of discussion, Houjou and I will back you up. It's important, since it implies we could all be under threat."

"...Like I said, I'm claiming Chair for this meeting," the unmistakeable tones of Ikata Jintarou broke through the divide, then the door was flung back, revealing the Vice Captain of the Eleventh Squad. He strode into the room with his usual swagger, chest forward

and black hair gleaming with whatever slick substance the officer had used to fix it firmly in position. A man in his middle thirties by appearance, Ikata was the kind of person whose presence in any room was difficult to ignore, for he exuded confidence that bordered on arrogance, a demeanour that demanded to be noticed, even if that notice was derision. He sported a beard, which added to both his age and his swarthy appearance, and, when asked about it, he had once boasted that he grew the hair to conceal the scars of battle that criss-crossed over his chin. Another scar over his left eye indicated that the boasting may not have been idle exaggeration. He was combat proficient and a weapons aficionado, disdaining the more tactical skills of Kidou for a direct, all out sword barney, and among the lower ranks of the Gotei there were numerous rumours of recruits who had been cut to pieces on division initiation due to his hard training regimes. In truth, Souja knew that Ikata had never so much as scratched a recruit with his own blade, let alone maimed them, but he had allowed the stories to promulgate anyway, certain it added to what he was hoping was a fearsome reputation.

Although a Yamamoto, like Enishi, Ikata had come from the fringes of his Clan and had begun in Eleventh at a low rank, working his way through the levels with single-minded obstinacy. He had never made any secret of his intention to hold high office there, though his Captain, Minachi had rejected his candidacy for Vice Captain on several occasions before finally relenting and allowing his subordinate to take the badge. Relations between Vice Captain and Captain had never been harmonious, and Ikata, after a few too many sakes, was not above badmouthing his superior officer to any who should pass by — but, Souja reflected, he had heard similar stories of Minachi's ranting behind closed doors about his second officer's ways. They were a funny pair — a strict Clansman drilled in Gotei tradition and a thug who happened to be born just the right side of the line to make his rise in rank acceptable — but of the two, Souja felt far more comfortable dealing with Ikata. Minachi was a cold and often spiteful man — whilst Ikata, for all his thuggery, was easier to read.

"Ikata, you held Chair last meeting," Urahara Shiketsu, Vice Captain of the Third Squad and heir to Third District's scientific clan put in evenly, moving calmly across the chamber to take up his own seat. "That position is meant to pass between each of us equally — it seems fairer, therefore, to allow someone else to have a turn."

"Some Vice Captains haven't had a shot at Chairing a meeting at all, or not for a long time," Shiba Ryuusei, Sora's elder brother and Vice Captain of Fifth agreed with a nod. "We ought to take a proper ballot on it this time, Ikata. True, you had something to address us

with the last time, so we made you Chair, but...”

“None of the other namby-pambies get to the point, and we’ll be sitting around on our asses doing nothing for the whole meeting if we let them take control,” Ikata’s words barrelled into Ryuusei’s, rudely preventing the other man from finishing his sentence. “If you want to lead, you take the lead. That’s how it works, Shiba! I’m good at holding together things like this. Besides, I’ve got plenty to bring to a meeting, and...”

“Has Ikata got going already?” Souryou Kanshi, Vice Captain of the Tenth Division poked his head tentatively around the sliding door, an amused expression on his features. He met Sora’s gaze, exchanging wry grins with her, then brought the rest of his body into the room, leaning up against the wall as he watched the power play take place. Kanshi was a wry humoured, sharp-witted individual, whose true motives Souja often found difficult to read. Half Shiba, half Kuchiki by birth, he had grown up mostly on the District Five side of the equation, making him both well connected and well-known, but he was not one to give his agreement to things lightly, preferring to sit back and observe before offering an opinion.

“As you see,” Sora said now, gesturing towards the other side of the table, where Ikata had already plunked himself down in the leader’s seat, folding his arms across his chest belligerently as if challenging anyone to remove him by force.

“We’re still missing quite a few people,” Souja glanced around him, taking in who was there and who was not. Kanshi nodded.

“Aoi won’t be coming. Sekime-taichou got herself locked in her laboratory this morning and he’s trying to find a way to let her out,” he said lightly, humour dancing in his gaze as he related his story. “I had a Hell Butterfly to that effect. Apparently she was working on some particularly potent binding Kidou and managed to accidentally seal the door to the lab. She can’t seem to remember what spell she used, and so they were having a lot of trouble breaking it when I got Aoi’s message.”

“Poor Michihashi,” Enishi looked sympathetic. “Sekime-taichou may be a genius, but I wouldn’t want to be running around after her getting into all these scrapes.”

“Well, at least she didn’t blow herself or her lab up this time. That’s progress,” Kanshi eased into his seat, eying them quizzically. “Did I interrupt something, by the way?”

“When the meeting begins, we’ll raise it properly,” Souja reflected.

"I had hoped to have everyone here, but I suppose in a situation like that, it can't be helped."

"No. Fortunately, Aoi is a patient, tolerant soul," Kanshi agreed. "I'd be climbing the walls, but that's just me. Providing, of course, my division still had walls to climb — you can never be too sure of things like that in the Twelfth."

"So that leaves us with..." Sora glanced around, counting the members present on her fingers, "five more to come. Yamamoto, from the First. Shihouin probably won't come from the Second, since I'm pretty sure the Onmitsukidou are on secret manoeuvre again."

"If it's secret, Sora, how do you know about it?" Enishi blinked at her, and Sora grinned unrepentantly.

"I hear stuff," she said casually, "you know how it is. Anyhow, other than them, we're still waiting for Shirogane-dono and the Vice Captains from Fourth and Ninth."

"Shirogane-dono and Hyakken-dono are on their way," Souja spread his senses, picking up the distinctive Kuchiki auras approaching the meeting room. "I don't know about the rest."

"...So as I was saying, Ikata, it would be fairest of all if..."

"I intend on Chairing the meeting today, if nobody else minds," The door slid open, cutting Shiketsu's reasoning dead as the two Kuchiki shinigami stepped into the room, bowing their heads in acknowledgement of their colleagues. It had been Shirogane who had spoken, the Vice Captain of the Sixth Squad and an elevated personage among Seireitei society, by dint of his being the heir to what was generally considered the oldest and most powerful Clan in all of Soul Society.

At his words, silence fell, and Ikata's eyes darkened into a sullen glower, thick lips twisting into a grimace of disapproval.

"I already said I was chairing this meeting," he said flatly, and Shirogane raised a hand, dismissing his words with a flick of his fingers.

"A Chair can't be Chair again two times in a month," he said matter-of-factly. "The Kuchiki haven't chaired a meeting in a while, so I intend on chairing this one."

"You're pulling your weight around, Nagoya!" Ikata's quick temper was already flaring, his cheeks red as beetroots and he got to his feet, pounding his fists on the table in his annoyance. "We have to take a

vote for something like that — you can't just waltz in and claim Chair without asking anyone's opinions on the matter!"

"Oh, the irony," Kanshi murmured, rolling his eyes, and Souja hid a smile despite himself.

"I see," the smile remained on Shirogane's lips, but his silvery eyes became suddenly cold. "I'll give you a word of advice, Ikata. Do not refer to me by that name again, if you please. Nobody has called me Nagoya in over two decades and to do so is to suggest a direct slight against the Kuchiki Clan. I'll trust you won't be foolish enough to repeat the incidence — if you were, you'd find yourself answering to my uncle, who, Vice Captain or not, would soon put you in your proper place."

He turned to glance around the room.

"Does anyone object to my Chairing this meeting?" he asked lightly, and dead silence met his question. He gave a little nod of approval, then turned back to Ikata, arching his eyebrow at his comrade.

"You see, nobody minds," he spoke softly, but Souja could pick up on the danger signals the Kuchiki was putting out. "I suggest you move, so we can begin this meeting at once."

Ikata glowered some more, muttering unrepeatable profanities beneath his breath, but he saw when he was beaten, and so, with a great show of bad temper, he got to his feet, stomping across the room like a spoiled child to take up the seat designated for the Vice Captain of the Eleventh. Inwardly Souja winced — it took someone of Shirogane's standing and singularity to look Ikata directly in the eye and humiliate him without fear of any reprisals.

"That's better," Shirogane did indeed seem unruffled, settling himself down in Ikata's vacated seat and gesturing for those still standing to take possession of theirs. "Who is still missing?"

"Shihouin, Yamamoto and Unohana from the Fourth," Ryuusei glanced around the room. "Oh, Michihashi from the Twelfth is also absent."

Shirogane sighed.

"We will begin without them," he decided, with a glance at the position of the sun beyond the chamber window. "It's time."

"Michihashi is tied up with his Captain. He sends his apologies," Kanshi interjected.

“Is that literally tied up, or figuratively?” Shirogane asked ironically, and Kanshi grinned.

“Bit of both, I think,” he admitted. “Anyhow, he said he wouldn’t be able to make it. I don’t know about the others, sorry.”

“Shirogane-dono, I’d like to raise something for this meeting, if I may, now we’re mostly assembled,” Souja raised his hand, and Shirogane cast him a startled glance, as if surprised to see the Seventh Division Vice Captain speaking up so early in a meeting. “It’s something that’s of direct concern to my squad at present — but also, I believe, something that’s affected others in the past few weeks.”

“Go ahead,” Shirogane nodded in his direction, and Souja stood, casting his gaze around the assembled adjutants. His gaze paused for a moment on Ikata’s angry features, then shifted to the serene ones of Mikihara Hyakken, the Vice Captain of the Ninth, and his lips thinned.

“The night before last, one of my division members was abducted on his way back from visiting the Thirteenth Division barracks,” he said softly. “We have searched, and Thirteenth Division have been helping, but there has been no sign of him anywhere in the surrounding area. In light of the reports Ikata-dono so kindly gave us a short time back about the events in Eleventh, we can’t help but think that our Eighth Seated officer is the latest shinigami to fall foul of these unknown Seireitei vigilantes.”

“An abduction?” Ryuusei’s eyes snapped open in alarm. “Here within the confines of Inner Seireitei?”

“That’s how it looks to us,” Enishi scratched his head pensively. “The shinigami’s one of our former members — Kotetsu Tenichi — and so it wasn’t strange for him to come visiting our barracks. His brother’s still with us, and so are friends of his. We’ve spoken to them, and our Sixth Seat confirms he came to see her, but left to go back to Seventh that evening. Since then, nobody’s seen anything of him.”

“You’ve mounted a thorough search?” Shirogane’s brow creased in consternation, and Souja nodded.

“My sister has scoured the whole area and I’ve had other patrols looking since,” he agreed. “There’s no sign of him, and all the testimony I’ve had from others suggests he’s not the kind of shinigami who would abscond, not even for one night. That it’s now been two...”

“Did you get a note?” Ikata broke into the conversation, gazing at Souja quizzically. “We got a note pretty sharpish, you know, outlining

all the grievances and yada yada, stuff those cowards were too pathetic to say to our faces. No clues on it, of course, just written in nondescript kanji.”

“We haven’t had any note,” Souja said grimly. “With no disrespect to the Eleventh Division, either, Seventh are not a division who have omitted to support District people who have been affected by our actions.”

“More concerning is the location of this abduction,” Shiketsu said gravely. “Souja-dono, you’re quite sure that it happened between Thirteenth’s barracks and your own?”

“That is the conjecture, yes,” Souja agreed. “We can’t prove it, but it seems most likely.”

“That’s not a great distance,” Shiketsu bit his lip. “Even in the dark, it’s almost unheard of for such a thing to happen without anyone noticing. A flare of reiatsu, the sounds of a struggle — but you say nothing of this nature was reported?”

“Nobody saw anything,” Souja responded bleakly. “I would like the permission of the relevant Vice Captains to speak to any members of their squad who might’ve been abroad the night after last on any errand, just in case, but it seems hopeless to me. We’ve even tried tracing his reiatsu — but we’ve had no luck doing that, either. It’s faintly around the Thirteenth and just beyond, but then, nothing at all.”

“Is there an active *Senkaimon* located between Thirteenth and Seventh?” Kanshi cast Shiketsu a questioning look, and the Third Division Vice Captain shook his head.

“There is not,” he said firmly, “There was one, some years ago, but with all the shifts in Seireitei’s structure and the building of new barrack buildings, it was sealed over more than ten years past. Even if that were not the case, however, Kotetsu Tenichi isn’t an officer with authorisation to open a *Senkaimon* on his own whim. We would notice if he had opened it. Kotetsu Tenichi is not a shinigami with Bankai — therefore doing so untraced is impossible with our current technology.”

“Perhaps the Third could look into that for us in more detail?” Souja asked hopefully. “I’m sure you’re correct, Shiketsu-dono, but on the off-chance these rogues have managed to find a way of re-opening a dead gateway...”

“How would District people manage that?” Hyakken wrinkled his

brow in disbelief, as the even-tempered Shiketsu nodded his assent. “You’re applying Clan philosophies to people of a far lower level of education, Souja-dono. While you’re worried for your member, surely you don’t think...”

“I think it would have been very helpful, Hyakken-dono, if you’d been more forthcoming about the events in your own division when Ikata-dono was kind enough to relate Eleventh’s,” Souja said levelly, watching as consternation flooded Hyakken’s proud features.

“Hyakken?” Shirogane shot his kinsman a quizzical look. “What does he mean? What events?”

“I...”

“He means the abduction of a Ninth recruit by unknown hands, ransomed and paid for before the girl was safely returned,” Sora said candidly, causing hot colour to flush Hyakken’s cheeks. “I’ve heard about it from our own recruits — though Anabomi-taichou seems reluctant to allow discussion about it in outside areas.”

“Is that true?” Shirogane’s eyes narrowed. “Have members of your division suffered from abduction too, Hyakken?”

“One girl was taken and held for a short time, yes,” Hyakken rubbed his temples. “Anabomi-taichou made me promise not to report it, though — it was a divisional matter and we resolved it. The lass is quite safe now and unharmed — the matter is closed.”

“You didn’t think that the main house of the Kuchiki might like to hear about this?” Shirogane’s words carried a dangerous edge, his grey eyes glittering angrily. “Ikata’s Eleventh were targeted because they apparently failed to compensate families uprooted by shinigami activity. I was under the impression that such a thing didn’t happen among Kuchiki-led divisions, but perhaps I have been misled.”

“Shirogane-dono, it... I... Anabomi-taichou...”

“I see,” Shirogane’s lips pursed in displeasure. “I shall talk to Anabomi-taichou myself about this, and then decide whether to take the matter to Guren-sama. You know that the Kuchiki have an active policy of repair and support towards those we protect in the Districts. Neither Guren-sama nor myself will tolerate any deviation from that motif, not even within a squad that intends to operate as a separate entity.”

“Y... yes, sir,” Hyakken looked crushed, and Souja felt suddenly sorry for him, trapped between the orders of his Captain and the orders of his Clan. Shirogane was only an adjutant by rank in the

Gotei, but in Clan terms, he was a far, far more powerful figure than even the Captain of the Ninth aspired to be — and as such, if he chose to exert influence, Souja was certain he could see the unfortunate Anabomi stripped of his rank and title before the day was out.

I doubt he will, though. He's made his displeasure known, but I think it unlikely he'll take it further.

Souja sighed, folding his hands across the table in front of him.

“If I may ask where Hyakken-dono and Ikata-dono’s shinigami were taken unawares?” he asked quietly. “Were they not stolen from Inner Seireitei?”

“On patrol near the Second/Third border,” Ikata said gruffly. “Idiots, not paying attention to the dangers around them, making themselves prey for who knows what. Mikihara, what about you?”

“I really am not sure,” Hyakken admitted uneasily. “I wasn’t involved in the actual matter itself, I only heard of it later. I believe they were somewhere outside Inner Seireitei, though. Perhaps in one of the District territories, but I don’t know which one.”

“But Tenichi-dono was stolen in brazen sight of the barracks, and nobody noticed,” Shirogane looked grim. “You were right to bring this to the meeting, Souja-dono. I understand your lord Father is currently away from the squad?”

“He returns today and I will make a full report to him, then wait on his advice,” Souja responded evenly. “Till then, any information I can gather is of value to me, and I would welcome it. We want to recover Tenichi safely — but even more, we want to put an end to these abductions once and for all.”

“I’m sure we’ll all cooperate as much as we can with your investigations, Souja-dono,” Kanshi said gravely. “I’ll mention it to Hakubei-taichou when I get back to barracks, and I’m certain everyone else will do the same. You’re right — if a shinigami can be taken so close to safety with absolutely no motivation, anyone could be next and we can’t risk it escalating.”

“Ukitake... Ukitake-taichou has some concerns about the District anyway,” Enishi reflected, rubbing his chin ruefully and Souja realised he had almost slipped up and dropped the formality expected of him in public circles. “I don’t know all of them, of course, some are beyond my remit, but he’s been worried about the Hollows and the way they’ve been behaving in some of our raids lately. I think he’s had Shikibu investigating in more detail, and possibly, Tenichi’s brother, which may be why Tenichi was taken. I’ve been thinking about this a

bit since speaking to my Captain last — I wondered if Tenichi being taken was meant as a message to stop investigating.”

“A foolishly naive one, if so,” Ryuusei grimaced. “The lad’s brother is aware of this Tenichi’s disappearance?”

“No, not yet,” Enishi shook his head. “Only Shikibu, Taichou and myself as well as the officer Kikyue-dono questioned are in the know. For Ketsui’s sake, we’re keeping him out of it. Maybe it is far-fetched, but I dunno. Taichou is concerned, and that’s usually a red light in the right direction.”

“I can’t say I’ve noticed the Hollows doing much different from usual,” Sora admitted. “They attack stuff, they kill, they get purified.”

“I know,” Enishi nodded. “I guess I’m raising half-theories I don’t really understand myself, but I’ve just heard him talking about it, and it made me wonder. That’s all.”

He spread his broad fists with a rueful shrug of his shoulders.

“I’d have asked him for more clear notes to bring with me this morning — s’what I’d planned to do — but Ugendou was a no-go zone and I didn’t get a chance,” he added sheepishly.

“A no-go zone?” Kanshi shot him a sidelong glance. “Meaning..?”

“Fever,” Enishi said succinctly, and Sora groaned, pulling a graphic face.

“What a time for that,” she reflected heavily. “Oh well. You’ll just have to probe him about it for the next time. I think Shu... *Kyouraku*-taichou said something about him addressing the Captains about Hollow attacks, so maybe he’ll go over our heads with it and we’ll get the memo later, anyway. In the meantime, is there a lot we can do? Without knowing what J... Ukitake-taichou was getting at...”

“I think it would be a good plan if we’re all a lot more vigilant about our squads and the Hollows they come into contact with,” Shirogane reflected at length. ‘If both Ukitake and *Kyouraku* think there’s something to pursue, probably it’ll go further, so for the time being we’ll have to wait for the Captains on any clear-cut instructions relating to what Houjou just said. We’ll agree to monitor our own raids and expeditions in the meantime and,’ he nodded his head towards the Seventh Division Vice Captain, “do what we can to assist Souja-dono with his enquiries at the same time.”

“Thank you,” Gratitude glittered in Souja’s eyes. “Hopefully from this point on, we’ll make more progress.”

“In which case, let’s move on,” Shirogane cast another glance at the position of the sun, gauging the time. “Is there any other business?”

“And that’s as much as you can tell me?”

Keitarou pursed his lips, processing the report his companion had brought him carefully. “It’s not much to work with... not enough detail, and we’re hard pressed for time. If Kurotsuchi’s report is correct, and the Gotei are beginning to investigate...”

“There’s no doubt of that. Ukitake’s raised the subject with the Captains and there’ll probably be a meeting in the next few days,”

The voice came back across the spiritual Kidou link, broken and wavery, but unmistakeable in its weary frustration. “It’s no good for me either, Keitarou-dono. If they were to know that I was working with you like this... if they guessed...”

“But they won’t, will they?” A smile touched Keitarou’s features, bringing his hands together pensively and watching the faint flicker of spiritual energy dart between the tips of his index fingers. It was not an easy spell to hold long-term, let alone utilise as a two-way communicator, but practice and determination had at last drawn its rewards. “That’s why I chose you. You’re almost above suspicion — nobody would ever guess that you’d be working with a wanted exile and rebel lurking in the wastelands.”

“You should be careful,” the other speaker cautioned, their voice lowering to a dull murmur. “This isn’t a secure place for us to be talking, and I can’t guarantee to keep the line open very much longer. You shouldn’t tell even me more than you have to about where you are and what’s going on. That way, if the worst happened...”

“If the worst happened, I have no doubt about what you’d do,” Keitarou said composedly. “In the meantime, I appreciate your report, even if it’s not as thorough as I’d have liked. I realise what risks you’re taking, and I won’t ask for any more — not this time.”

“Mm. I know. I need to do better,” the voice was frustrated. “I’ll try, I promise. When I know what measures the Council are putting in place to investigate, then it’ll be easier to pass on the information, but I’m dependent on a lot of things for that.”

A pause, then,

“The Hollows’ behaviour recently... can I put that down to you?”

“Ah, you’ve noticed that?”

“I’ve heard reports. So have other squads. It’s only a matter of time before they start to realise something is controlling those creatures to attack when and where they are. You had better be ready with your back up plan when that happens, Kei-dono, because I’m in no place to salvage your cause from my current position. It’s already suspicious enough if I venture out into the District wilds by myself... if I was to start doing so in connection with Hollow activity...”

“You needn’t worry about that,” Keitarou’s words were reassuring. “I promised you, didn’t I? When we first opened terms of this agreement, my first assurance was that I would do nothing to threaten your current position. You’re far more useful to me where you are, and I don’t want to see you fall into disgrace. I have other people and other plans in preparation for when action needs to be taken. Just providing me with the right information is enough. I won’t ever ask any more of you than that.”

“I must be mad, but I believed you then and I believe you now,” the voice sounded tired. “It’s hard work, sometimes, but I’ll keep it up. I’m not done with Seireitei, not yet. On my own, there’s not much I can do — but with your help...”

“Yes. That’s what it’s all about. Help,” Keitarou agreed evenly. “I still remember every word of our conversation all those years ago, and I don’t intend on reneging on it for one moment.”

“Mm.” There was a long, protracted silence, and Keitarou felt the spell waver, as though his contact was having trouble regulating their spiritual energy. The memory was a conflicting one, he reflected pensively, that even now could draw forth waves of frustration, and he waited patiently for the moment to pass and the fibres of the spell to return to their former alignment.

“You have my word,” he said, as the interference began to calm down. “It means a lot to me, knowing someone within the Gotei views me as something other than a murdering anarchist. I told you when we met back then that I’d reward your faith in me, and I shall. Everything is moving to plan — I’m not backing out on our deal now, nor will I.”

“Yes,” the other person agreed softly. “I know. What you’ve already given me has proven that — you’re not the one who should be grateful, that’s me. Seireitei has never understood, but I keep my mouth shut, hoping that one day they’ll really understand how much more progressive your Soul Society vision is. It’s just the frightened clucking of a few rich overlords not wanting to let go of their stranglehold — but without it, the possibilities for this world...”

“They’re endless,” Keitarou agreed smoothly. “That’s what I like about talking to you. I know that you’ve seen things as they should be seen... and it brings me reassurance that the drive for change is just as much alive on your side of the divide as on mine. When the time is right...”

“Yes,” the word was barely more than a sigh, “and I’ll carry on with my surveillance. Just... Kei-dono, be careful. I don’t know by what means you’re manipulating the Hollows, and I don’t want to know. It’s better that way. If the Gotei lock onto it, though, people like Ukitake aren’t going to rest until they’ve dug right down to your roots and exposed you and everyone you’re trying to protect. I don’t want you killed — right now, there’s nobody else who’s capable of bringing about this new future of yours.”

“Don’t you worry about Ukitake,” amusement danced in Keitarou’s muddy eyes. “I know all about him, and I’ll be ready. Trust me, all will be well.”

“Then I need to go,” in the background, Keitarou could faintly hear the sound of other voices, and his contact’s words dropped to the faintest of murmurs. “Till next time, when I hope to have more to report.”

There was a crackle of energy, and the spell that had connected them flickered and died, leaving Keitarou alone in his study.

He sighed, leaning back on his hands as he contemplated what he had been given.

I suppose I can't blame anyone for being nervous. Katsura's skills are well-honed, but he's naive and he gets distracted easily when on Seireitei's land. No, he's better off in Rukongai for the time being. I'll keep him away from the other side of the divide for a bit, allow things to settle and let them turn their attention to other matters. I can't suppose they haven't noticed that Tenichi is missing, yet? With any luck, that will take precedence over a few odd Hollow behaviours in the Districts. And, once Katsura and Sakaki complete their task, nobody in the Gotei will be thinking about events in the District for quite some time. As a distraction manoeuvre, it lacks panache, but its effective. It sends a message, and clogs up shinigami resources so that we can move more freely in other areas.

“I wish you hadn’t brought that boy here.”

The heavy divide that blocked off his study quarters from the rest of the small dwelling was pushed back, and a woman ducked her head beneath the cloth, a look of reproach on her face as she stepped into the room proper. She had waited for the spell to finish, he realised,

not wanting to eavesdrop directly on his business, yet impatient to speak to him all the same. No matter how cross or perturbed she was, she had always respected his right to speak to his undercover contacts in private, but, glancing at her, Keitarou realised that even the feeble aura she put out was prickling with agitation, enough, perhaps, to make the spell's connection unstable.

"It was a reckless gamble, Kei-sama — I thought we'd agreed that there'd be no more of them, not this time around."

"Eiraki-chan..."

Keitarou sighed, leaning back against the house's support beam to run his gaze over his wife's deceptively fragile looking form. She was older now, of course, though in the way of most Seireitei people, two decades of aging had only rendered her as more of a woman and less of a girl still in her teens. Her thick dark hair was braided and wound around in a knot at the nape of her neck to keep it from getting in her way, and the vivid blue eyes that had sparked with such defiant life when they had first paired up were quieter now, yet still as deep and as richly blue as he ever remembered. She was robed simply, in pastel blues and browns stitched together into a basic peasant kimono and held together at the waist with a length of dusty, fraying black fabric that passed as an *obi*. Her feet were bare, though Keitarou was sure he had had *tabi* and *getastolen* from Seireitei for her use only a month or two earlier, and he surmised ruefully that these, like so many of the extras he acquired, had been spirited away to help the people in the local village.

Though Keitarou's connection to the Rukongai villagers he lived among was a real one, it faded in comparison to his wife's. When they had first arrived in Rukongai, he remembered, he had been critically wounded, compounding the damage done to his body by ingesting a vial of his own *reidokupotion* to effect their escape from the clutches of the Gotei. Eiraki had nursed him, all the time preparing for the birth of their first child, and it had been the kind hands and guidance of the local women which had helped her to cope with both burdens. Eiraki had been born a Clanswoman of considerable wealth and status, but the Rukongai poor folk had accepted her as one of their own, and their kindness and comfort she had neither forgotten nor betrayed. Whilst Keitarou talked about Rukongai from the point of view of his political ambitions, for Eiraki it had become a passion and a crusade — righting the wrong that had rendered these kind unfortunates on the very fringes of Soul Society.

It had not taken long for Keitarou to establish that the people here

had been mistreated and abandoned by the Gotei shinigami enough times in the past, and, as he had regained his physical strength, he had begun to see how he could utilise his new circumstances to his advantage. The people here did not fear him, as many in Seireitei did. He had become their protector, and, little by little, he had gained their loyalty and their trust, for now they gravitated to him and his kin in a time of need. Rukongai souls had helped bring his children into the world, had taught Eiraki how to nurse them and had played a part in their education and their upbringing. In the past twenty or more years, Keitarou had set down roots in this barren wasteland and, when the Shinigami had come to evacuate Plus souls to the Spiritless Zone, his neighbours had rallied round to protect him, allowing him to hide from those who would have dragged him back to the Council's gallows.

He had fallen on his feet, yet try as he might, he could not see the people here as anything more to him than a useful tactic — a pawn in a time of war. Now, whilst her concern was primarily for him and for the safety of their young, it was also for the souls who could not protect themselves from hunger or from harm, and at the reproach in her expression, Keitarou let out a heavy sigh.

"I've been looking for Tenichi for a long time. Ketsui, too," he said softly. "They are kin to me, Eiraki-chan. Do you expect me to forsake them?"

"Yes," Eiraki spoke bluntly, her expression not wavering for a moment, and Keitarou was reminded ruefully that even now she was the only one who could meet his gaze and scold him as an equal, no matter what the circumstances. His one real weakness had been falling in love with her, but he was finding that such emotions were not easily reversible, and so he had learned to cope with it as best he could, no matter how inconvenient.

"You've known where they were for a long time, and you could've left it that way," she said now, moving across the floor towards him and resting her hands on his arms. "I forsook my family when I left District Seven, and I never did look back. You should have done the same, Kei-sama. Having ties to that world only makes us vulnerable. It puts us in harm's way, and then..."

She shuddered, shaking her head, and Keitarou knew she was remembering the last time she had encountered any of her Seireitei family. It had been a bad memory for the both of them, for Keitarou had been near death, and only Eiraki's intervention had prevented him from losing his life. Deep down, Keitarou knew that Eiraki still

loved the brother that had confronted them — but equally, he knew she would never turn back to him. She had made her choice, and never once in the past twenty or so years had she complained about the hardship that choice had brought her.

“That won’t happen again,” he said now, reassurance in his voice. “I’m not taking on Kuchiki. I’m not doing anything, in fact, except staying here and coordinating things from afar. You worry far too much about me, Eiraki-chan. I’ve learned from our past encounters. I know my weaknesses, now, far better than I did then.”

“Kotetsu Tenichi is a weakness,” Eiraki’s eyes were emotionless now, cold and predatorial as she raised her head to his. “You know it. I know it. He shouldn’t be here. Send him back.”

“I will. I will, and soon,” Keitarou patted her gently on the head as though she was still a young girl rather than a grown woman, wife and mother. “Don’t look at me like that, Eiraki-chan. It hurts when you doubt my ability to manage things. I haven’t grown old or senile, not yet.”

“Hrm,” Eiraki’s eyes narrowed, and she ducked away from his touch, moving back towards the slat-framed window of the low-ceilinged chamber. “Maybe not, but telling a member of the Gotei where we are isn’t a good plan of action. The others, they had their heads covered and they had no idea where they’d been or who had held them. They never came here, and you handled it all at distance, without taking silly risks. On the contrary, that boy is unrestrained, and walks among us as though he belongs here. I don’t understand why, that’s all. I don’t know how you can tell he won’t betray us, and bring it all crashing down.”

“In that respect, you could call it a gamble,” Keitarou admitted, running his hand through his muddy brown-blond hair. “Though less of one than you might think, given the reasons behind my taking him now. He wants to know about Daisuke, and I can answer those questions. So long as that’s true, he won’t — can’t betray where we are. He’s like his father, honest and principled. He’s given his word that he’ll help provide for the people here, too. That should make you happy. Doesn’t it?”

“Not if it might hurt them or us in the long run,” Eiraki sighed, looking suddenly tired. “Kei, where is Katsura? Kurotsuchi said you sent him somewhere, again, though I thought he had come back from Seireitei. This constant coming and going tries my patience... you might not dart into danger yourself, but sending them...”

“Katsura is a grown man, and intelligent,” Keitarou reflected. “Talented, too. I’m not worried about him, Eiraki, not on this particular mission. Sometimes, true, he lets the bright lights of Seireitei distract him, and he’s at the age where he’s far too fond of girls and the favours they can offer him. In the Spiritless Zone, though, there’s unlikely to be anything to tempt him to linger. He’ll be home soon enough, don’t worry... I haven’t sent him into any particular danger, and this time, he isn’t alone.”

He paused, then,

“Sakaki went with him. They’ll do this one together.”

“Sakaki...” Eiraki looked pained, then turned away from him, and for a moment, Keitarou could not see the emotions that reflected in her eyes. “All right. I suppose if she’s there too, all will go to plan. I just don’t like it, when they’re constantly away and at the whim of others. What if someone was to connect them to here? To us?”

“Now, why should they do that?” Keitarou moved behind her, sliding his arm around her shoulders and pulling her gently towards him. She sighed, the tension seeping out of her, and she did not resist his touch, instead sinking back against his body and closing her eyes.

“It was easier when it was just you I had to worry about,” she murmured, more than half to herself. “That was enough to drive my hair white, but now... it’s so much more complicated. I don’t know, half the time, what you’re planning or when you intend on taking action. I trust you — I always have and I still do. I believe in what you do, that hasn’t changed. Just now, there are so many more lives involved. So many more people at stake.”

“True,” Keitarou nodded, pursing his lips as he considered her words. “You’re not wrong. We couldn’t win the war with just the two of us. We needed this time to regroup, and now we have. Tenichi is only my latest objective. There is a lot still to be done before we can launch our coup d’etat, and I’m taking every care to make sure things go as they should.”

“I still don’t think that boy should be here,” Eiraki said flatly, and Keitarou nodded.

“I know,” he agreed levelly. “It won’t be for a lot longer. I’m stalling him — waiting for the right moment.”

His eyes narrowed, a calculating look entering his mud-slurried eyes.

“Do you remember District Seven?” he asked softly, and Eiraki

snorted derisively, nodding her head.

“I will never ever have reason to forget,” she said bitterly. “What about it?”

“Your grandfather tried his best to exterminate the Urahara,” Keitarou’s grasp around her tightened slightly as he remembered. “He killed Daisuke, and wanted to track me down. He also had a lot of lesser Urahara slaughtered, just to ensure we didn’t speak against him to the Council. He did a good, thorough job — he eradicated most everyone he could. Ketsui and Tenichi are survivors, of course, but Daisuke sent them away and so they grew up in foreign land. The others...”

He shrugged his shoulders, his eyes darkening.

“When you and I left the Endou manor, there was a concerted search for us,” he whispered, pressing his lips towards her ear so that the vibration of his words tickled against her skin. “You remember it, just as I do. We had to live by our wits to escape properly. Do you know why that was?”

“Kyouraku Tokutarou broke his promise to me not to hunt you down,” Eiraki said grimly. “They were stalking you even before I chose to come with you — I was so afraid that you’d never come back, or that they’d kill you before I had a chance to speak to you and tell you what I felt.”

“Well, they failed,” Keitarou soothed her gently. “However, their search was a threat to me — to both of us — and more recently, I discovered exactly why. I had thought that the Urahara exiles were all killed by Shouichi and Seimaru — but I was wrong. It seems a sect of them survived — literally going underground to escape from the threat of persecution. These people bought their lives from the Endou — they sold themselves to Misashi and his son in order to protect their own existences.”

Eiraki stiffened at the sound of her father’s name, turning to stare at her husband in consternation.

“Urahara? Working with Father?”

“Yes,” Keitarou fought to keep his tones even, nodding his head. “Mostly insignificant in terms of spirit power, though some of them had a modicum of intelligence, and a few were powerful enough to merit notice even in the Urahara court of my father. They were descendants of two or three northern families who worked with Otousama on the *reidoku* and who fled the District before he was

arrested. People who'd heard that he was a Council target and got out before they were tarnished by the same brush as he was... probably people who gave evidence against him to that same Council, since none of them were ever tried or executed when Father and those more loyal companions he had died. Cowards and traitors, the lot of them, skulking in the shadows out of my line of sight. I have no idea how they succeeded in doing that, but somehow, for a century, they did."

"And now?" Eiraki turned to face him properly. "What of these people?"

"They're probably still working for the Endou, still digging underground, still looking for us," Keitarou said grimly. "That's why I'm waiting before I return Tenichi. His Captain is away from the squad at the moment. What I have to convey in this abductee's ransom message is not the same as what I've asked for in the past. I don't want money or supplies from your brother, Eiraki. I want answers."

"You want to know the location of these underground Urahara, so you can kill them?" Eiraki asked, and Keitarou nodded.

"If I know that, I can take steps," he agreed simply.

"Why bother?" Eiraki asked quizzically. "They looked for us a long time ago, but they didn't find us. We're not in their neck of the woods now. There's no reason to..."

"These Urahara — they were used by your father but officially pardoned by your brother and, as far as I know, they work for him in espionage of varying levels." Keitarou relinquished his hold on her, moving to the window to gaze out over the barren landscape. "They're known as 'Kitsune' — foxes, maybe even fox spirits, given how easily they can disappear. It would be naive to suppose those spies were all within Seventh District. The Gotei is now a much wider ranging organisation than it was back when we first met. Whilst it's possible the bulk of them are there, I would be surprised if they hadn't been deployed through the Gotei Divisions by now."

"Even more reason to keep away from them, surely?" Eiraki asked, and Keitarou shook his head.

"Their existence could prove a problem to what we're trying to achieve," he said grimly. "If they're loose across the Gotei, they're also loose across the Districts, picking up tidbits of data that might otherwise have been overlooked. Districts no longer keep so proudly to themselves. Foreign shinigami cross borders all the time. We already have the Shihouin's Onmitsukidou to contend with, but for the Clan of Seventh, this is all a whole lot more personal and, if you'll

forgive me, ruthless. I don't need people tying together fragments of information into a whole picture, not whilst we're still building towards our goal."

"True, but going out to find them is surely going to bring them more of that kind of information?" Eiraki pointed out, folding her arms across her chest. "If Oniisama is doing as you say — and I don't know whether he is — these are people who are good at hiding. Hunting them down will be difficult and we don't have the resources."

She looked suspicious.

"Are you sure this isn't just about you avenging yourself on people who betrayed Keitsune-sama?"

Keitarou's eyes flickered for a moment, then he sighed.

"I can't completely detach that thought from this one," he owned wearily. "I wouldn't be human if I didn't connect the two things in my mind. I've left it this long, though, Eiraki-chan. I've waited. Much as I'd like to see them all skinned and strung up to hang, you're right. It would be a futile endeavour if revenge was the only goal."

"But it isn't?" Eiraki arched an eyebrow, and Keitarou shook his head.

"These Urahara are a danger to us," he said frankly. "No. Not just to us, Eiraki, but to *others*. Maybe Sakaki, maybe Katsura, but more importantly, to someone else we're both working hard to protect and shield."

"Someone else?"

"An exiled fox, feral from its kind will cross the woodland path, leaving new scent and causing the river willow to turn towards a new sun," Keitarou intoned gravely, his words and expression impassive. *"Once met, this bond cannot be broken, for the willow will protect the fox even with its life."*

Eiraki's features paled, despite the cryptic nature of his words, and she grasped at his fingers, staring at him in alarm.

"You mean... they're a threat to... *Kohaku*?"

"Maybe," Keitarou agreed grimly. "Maybe not, but I can't take the chance. We can't take the chance. Yes, he's a lot stronger than he was. The last couple of years especially, he's improved in leaps and bounds. That said, though, he's still young and there are still dangers. Perhaps I'm overreacting, but if the Gotei were to know about him... about what he can do... what if the Gotei decided... *Hirata* decided to send

these spies of his to Rukongai next? Their origins are as Clan as yours or mine — do you think they wouldn't sense Kohaku's presence the moment they arrived? Maybe even ours, too? Do you think that we... and therefore he... would not be top of any hunting bird's hit list?"

"No..." Eiraki's face was drawn, and she shook her head. "But would they? So far, Rukongai has been so..."

"So far, but the mission I sent Katsura and Sakaki on will change that," Keitarou said grimly. "I had to get rid of the shinigami from the Spiritless Zone, and killing them was the safest option for us — but there will be shinigami in that part of Rukongai to investigate and retrieve the corpses, and that's generally bad news in the short term. By no means do we want them extending their search here."

"Do you think Hirata-nii will give up these people?"

"Not really," Keitarou rubbed his chin, "but asking about them does two important things. One, it tells him that we know they exist, and so he can't slip them in and out under the radar if that thought crosses his mind — more likely he'll try and protect them and therefore hold back from any forays we don't want him to make. It will preoccupy him enough to create a smokescreen, at least, so I hope. Two, it will tell me how much he values them as opposed to one of his squad. It's a test. I need to read how things are."

"Will you kill him?" Eiraki's voice was barely more than a whisper, and Keitarou shook his head.

"I'd like to, but I won't. I promised you that I wouldn't, as he wouldn't kill you that day he faced us in District One," he said gently, brushing his finger against her cheek and twisting it absently into a stray lock of her dark hair. "He remains our enemy, but I won't kill him. That means I have to neuter him through other means. Your brother is no longer a weak and retiring young man, Eiraki. I saw his true nature in that moment he came at me, and felt the power in his sword, too. I won't take it for granted that his affection for you will benefit us a second time. I need other weaknesses — since I know he's still yours, whatever you might say."

Eiraki pursed her lips, but made no reply, and Keitarou patted her absently on the head.

"What about Tenichi, if Oniisama doesn't take your bait?"

"I will send him back, probably. I'll find a way to do so that leaves him ambiguous about our aims and motives. It might work in our favour, if he is released knowing his Captain wouldn't pay his ransom

— but I'm still thinking on that one. I don't want to make him too openly resentful of the Gotei, because he's forthright enough to give it away."

"And if he betrays us?"

"He won't," Keitarou smiled. "He's already one of us — he just doesn't know it yet."

"You mean..?" Eiraki's gaze drifted to the sheathed knife at her husband's waist, and Keitarou laughed, shaking his head.

"No. No, not that," he chided softly. "Kohaku. Kohaku is the reason why I know. Do you doubt his word more than you doubt mine?"

"I suppose not," Eiraki relaxed somewhat at this, letting out a heavy sigh. "Does *he* know about the Kitsune, by the way?"

"I haven't spoken of it at all," Keitarou responded evenly, "so if he does, it's not from me. It's better we don't unsettle him with things we can't confirm. With his help, it would be a lot easier to find and kill these folk. A lot less risky, in many ways. I'm prepared to sacrifice things — limbs, locations, even lives if need be, to bring about our final victory. However, if we lose Kohaku..."

"You don't need to say any more," Eiraki said quietly. "If it's that way, then..."

She trailed off, and Keitarou put a reassuring hand on her shoulder.

"I will protect him," he said softly. "We need him — more than anything or anyone else, we need him, and so for that reason, I won't take any chances. He may be what divides success and failure, Eiraki, so it's for his own good — and ours — to eliminate these people and move forward with our plans."

The Shinigami camp were not expecting her.

Sakaki crept around the perimeter of the small, make-shift settlement, getting her bearings carefully and judging with an expert eye the swiftest way to get in and out again should she need to beat a hasty retreat. She ran her fingers pensively across the hilt of her katana. There had never been an occasion when she'd had to do the latter, but she had had it drilled into her from a very early age that it was always best to consider all the possibilities, however unlikely, before launching into a scene.

The encampment was not tightly secured, and she eyed it with

derision, taking in the blind spots between the two shinigami guards on duty. They would not be able to see each other from where they were positioned, relying on one to set up a vocal alarm if they saw any sign of trouble. From her position in the nearby bushes, Sakaki allowed herself a soft chuckle. They wouldn't have time to raise any kind of alarm — both of them would be dead before they realised she was there.

Half of the perimeter was thick with shrub and bush, the other side opening onto a trackway that doubtless led down to one of the local settlements over which the Shinigami were meant to be standing guard. Sakaki sniffed the air, taking in the faint scent of ash and sulphur on the wind. So a Hollow had been here, then? Her nose wrinkled in distaste. Katsura had been this close to the shinigami, and yet hadn't laid a finger on any of them?

Typical.

She grimaced, rolling her eyes. Her brother still persisted in this new-fangled idea of preserving lives if they could be spared, a school of thought Sakaki had never had any time for at all. Although she was still only sixteen, she considered herself far the more traditional type of assassin, and prided herself on her slash first, ask later mentality.

If the wrong person gets killed by mistake, so what? All it means is they can't come back and be a problem later.

She rolled up the sleeves of her rough kimono, gazing up at the overhanging branches of a string of nearby Japanese maple trees.

If they weren't trouble, they wouldn't be in the area you're planning a hit. Obviously getting rid of them is a good plan, and anyone else who might decide to cause a problem later on. If Katsu-nii thought like that, everything would be a lot simpler — I only hope he's found the nerve to nail the shinigami in the south, because I don't want to have to mop up his spoils afterwards. It's no fun if they're already maimed and bloody — I like a fresh kill, and I'm not my brother's keeper.

Keeping herself out of view of the two sentries, she raised her arms, leaping up to grab the lower branch of the nearest tree and pulling herself nimbly into the thick foliage of its branches. For a moment she curled up close to the wood, allowing the faint rustle her jump had made to be passed off as a gust of wind or a bird by the men below, then, very cautiously, she inched her way deeper into the tree's bough, testing each branch for strength before shifting her weight onto it. A little further ahead, she knew, this tree meshed with the next one, and so she pushed on, plotting a pathway through the

greenery whilst down below the shinigami kept their eyes on the paths for any sign of trouble.

They had no idea she was there, but then, Sakaki was used to that. Shinigami rarely knew she was anywhere, she reflected with a bitter sigh, looping slim fingers around the branch of her final destination tree and hauling her body across a gap of about half a metre into the safety of the overhanging maple. The bough swayed and creaked a little, causing one of the sentries to look up, and Sakaki held her breath, feeling a thrill of adrenaline charging through her veins as, for a moment, she debated whether or not she had been seen. The moment quickly passed, however, and, as the sentry returned his attention to the ground below, she let out a disappointed sigh, curling her fingers around the hilt of her dagger and pulling it silently from its cloth sheath at her side.

She glanced at it, taking in the half-glint of her reflection rendered by the fragmented sunlight that dappled through the criss-crossing branches above her head. Then she swung it around, squinting slightly as she judged her trajectory. She had one shot, and if she misjudged, her job would become a lot more difficult, so, as she stretched out like a snake across the wide branch she had chosen as her support, she felt her pulse speed up a second time, heart racing in her ears as she picked her moment.

One second passed. Two, three, then ten, stretching into thirty, and still she did not move, her eyes fixed on the sentry she had chosen as her primary target. He was a half-inch out of her line of fire, only a short distance, but enough to make the difference between living and dying. A wounded man could still gasp a warning to his comrades, maybe even yell and raise the alarm before his blood saturated his lungs and choked off his air. Sakaki's lips thinned, impatience glittering in her eyes, but still she did not move, knowing that if she rushed it, she could bring the whole plan to nothing.

Finally, after what seemed like forever, the sentry moved, stepping back very slightly to enjoy the shade of the maple tree, and Sakaki saw her chance. Lifting her hand very slightly, she steadied her position, then, with the deftest flick of her wrist, she launched the dagger through the air, firing it with speed and accuracy down towards her target's heart.

The sentry turned his head slightly, as though seeing the missile coming out of the corner of his eye, but it was too late for him to do more. With a dull thud, it embedded itself in his chest, the force of the shot cracking through the rib and causing the sharpened blade to

penetrate deep into the vital organs beneath. His eyes widened, his lips twitching for a moment, but he could not form coherent words, and, as those sightless orbs rolled back into his head, he crumpled and fell, sliding to the ground with the softest of impacts. Sakaki allowed herself a smile of triumph, resisting the urge to punch the air. One down, but there were still six more, and she had to take them all out before she could feasibly call the game over.

She shuffled her position around, eying the second sentry carefully to see whether he had noticed anything amiss, but, as she had surmised, he was far enough out of the line of sight of his comrade not to have seen or heard a thing. The tree she had chosen as her vantage point towered over him, and with a slight modification to her position, she was soon right above him, glittering eyes gazing down at the unsuspecting shinigami as she readied herself for the second kill.

This one would be more fun, she reflected to herself, pulling the katana from its sheath and positioning it in a vertical hold between her hands. Then, with the faintest of rustles, she leapt from the branch, descending on the shinigami, weapon unfurled. This time, he did not even have time to so much as look up and, as she landed atop his shoulders, her weight causing his legs to buckle at the unexpected assault, she grabbed her gloved fingers roughly around his mouth, watching his eyes bulge for a moment with fear and alarm before bringing her weapon neatly across his throat, slitting it deeply and causing a fountain of crimson blood to spray out across the ground.

Discarding her victim, Sakaki took a moment to shake her blade free from the majority of the blood before turning her attention on the camp as a whole. Unlike Katsura, she could not pinpoint where her targets were exactly by spiritual means, but her hearing was sharp, her vision the acute skill of a predator well versed in stalking, and so she canvassed the campsite carefully, alert for the slightest movement or shadow that would give away the presence of living beings within. She turned to retrieve her dagger from the chest of the first shinigami, wiping it absently on the sleeve of her clothing, then returning it to the sheath at her belt. She might need it again later, and in any case, weapons were not easy to come by in Rukongai. She had no mind to be scolded for discarding a perfectly good knife in the heat of battle and, whilst her prey were armed with spirit swords, they were weapons of no value to someone like Sakaki.

The first tent she reached was empty, but from the next one she heard the faint murmur of voices, and she tensed, dropping to the ground and moving slowly and silently on all fours around towards the back of the shelter. Going in through the entrance was too

obvious, and Sakaki knew that all those who had been trained in carrying arms would always have one eye on the doorway, ready to move at the first sign of trouble. Attacking from behind gave her better odds, especially since she was outnumbered five to one, and though she was confident in her abilities to dispatch the other shinigami, she wasn't taking anything for granted. These people had spiritual powers which could disable or even kill her, and she wasn't about to let them have time to release their *zanpakutou*.

Once behind the tent, Sakaki ducked behind a discarded wooden crate that had once held some form of medical supplies, shaking her blade once more then eying it critically. It was still quite spotted with the blood of the previous victim, but it would have to do. She didn't have time to be fussy about the cleanliness of her katana when there were shinigami to kill and a limited amount of time in which to do it.

Allowing the adrenaline to take her once more, she sprang forward, ripping the razor-sharp katana through the canvas of the back of the tent and tearing it open, darting through the opening without a moment of hesitation. There was an exclamation from within, but Sakaki knew better than to stop and ruminate on her situation when danger was almost certainly a sword swing away. Acting purely on instinct, she swung her blade forward, clashing it against the half-drawn weapon of one of her opponents before using her free arm to grab at the shinigami's throat. Startled, the individual ducked back to avoid her touch, and Sakaki drove home her advantage, launching into the unfortunate healer feet first and winding the woman in the gut. She crumpled, gasping in shock and pain, but Sakaki could not worry about her for the time being for the shift of air against her ear told her that the tent's second occupant had got their weapon from its sheath. Ducking the blade, she swung around, plunging her own sword deep into the other shinigami's gut before the man could react, and he staggered back, clutching at his midriff in surprise and dismay. He opened his mouth, but before he could speak, Sakaki had pounced on him, using her body weight to pin him to the ground before wrapping her fingers around his throat and squeezing determinedly until she heard the familiar 'crack' of a snapped neck. The man's eyes became dull, and Sakaki retrieved her sword from his belly, his corpse already forgotten as she wheeled back on her original target, sweeping the katana across the woman's throat before she had managed to recover her breath.

Four down, three to go.

Sakaki's eyes glittered with the thrill of the kill, surveying her victims critically. They had been ready to fight, but not against

someone like her, and it had cost them dear. She had not found their leader yet, though — the one she would have to pay particular care and attention when facing.

Unohana Madeki, that's the name that he gave me. A third seated officer within the Unohana division, and therefore someone who's probably pretty good with a sword. I could take proper damage from him, so I need to plot accordingly.

She scoured the tent for anything that might be of use to her in the next stage of her assault, the cooling bodies already forgotten as she began to plan her next kill. Boxes and crates like the empty ones outside were piled up in one corner and, stepping nimbly over the leg of the fallen man, she moved to investigate them, one ear open for any sign of disturbance. They were pressed firmly shut, the lids screwed down, but Sakaki had never been patient enough to work out delicate ways of breaking in, and she turned her sword around, bashing a hole in the side of the crate instead and then inserting a curious hand, feeling around for whatever was within. For the most part it was bandages, she realised with disgust, but then her fingers closed around what was unmistakably a glass vial and she pulled it out, gazing at it thoughtfully for a moment.

I wonder...

Sliding her blade back into its scabbard, she unfastened the lid of the vial, giving it a tentative sniff. A smile spread across her lips.

Houten-yaku. Just as I thought.

Pulling the sword free from its holder once more, she tipped the liquid liberally across the blade, watching as the smooth, glittering substance mingled with the smeared blood, tainting it with an eerie reddish tinge.

That should even up the odds a little, I reckon.

Tossing the vial aside, she turned her attention back to the crate, pulling out lengths of bandages and tossing them aside as she hunted for anything more useful. More vials of the anaesthetic potion came to light, and she pocketed a second, standing on tip-toes to reach as far into the wood-slatted box as she could. At first, she could feel nothing, but at length her fingers brushed against something that felt like sand, but much finer, and she closed her hand around it slowly, drawing it to the surface and holding it a safe distance away to examine it.

Tiny granules of something scattered across her palm, small enough to be mistaken for dust, but pure white in colour.

Some kind of medicine, waiting to be made up?

Sakaki glanced at it quizzically for a moment.

I don't know what it is, though, and I daren't mess around with it. It might be something like Gaten-yaku, something I can handle, but it could easily be something more deadly, so I won't risk tasting it.

“Who are you?”

The sound of a voice made her spin around, momentarily caught off guard by the intrusion of one of the remaining healers, and, at the sight of the bloody bodies, the shinigami let out an exclamation, a fat hand closing around the hilt of his weapon and drawing it swiftly from his sheath.

“Buchou!” he yelled, and Sakaki cursed, knowing that her cover was now well and truly blown. “Buchou, we’ve got an intruder! She’s armed, and she’s taken down two shinigami!”

“You’re going to regret doing that,” she hissed, closing her hand around the dusty powder as she readied her own blade, and the shinigami’s eyes became cold, clear hatred burning in their green depths.

“You’re the one who’s going to regret it, Plus soul,” he said disparagingly. “I don’t know what you thought you were doing, coming here, but killing shinigami is a crime punishable by death.”

“Then you’d better die, and let me get on with my job,” Sakaki spat back, lunging forward and bringing the handful of dust up, throwing it in the shinigami’s face. He coughed, his free hand going to his eyes, and Sakaki did not hesitate, bringing her drug-laced weapon down towards her enemy’s own. Instead of disarming the man, however, Sakaki knew better than to waste time on civil niceties, and she slashed her katana through the shinigami’s arm, his howl of agony merely ripping adrenaline once more through her young body. Her opponent staggered and stumbled, blood pouring from the wound, and eyes streaming from whatever she had thrown in his face, and Sakaki watched for a moment, fascinated by the jerky, puppet-like contortions his body made before succumbing to the anaesthetic and crashing forward on top of the still form of his comrade.

There was no time to gloat, though, for Sakaki could already hear voices from outside the tent. She had already wasted the drug on a lesser shinigami, and there were still two healers left — two targets she could not leave behind.

I have another vial of anaesthetic, though. I'll keep it as a last resort.

She coughed, waving her hand to clear the dusty air around her. It would not do to drug herself by accident, but the atmosphere was getting heavier, and those voices beyond were getting louder. Bracing herself for a violent confrontation, she raised her weapon cautiously, then, with an inward pep talk, she burst forward, slashing and spitting at the startled shinigami beyond.

“Hey!”

A woman’s voice penetrated the air, but Sakaki had slipped into savage mode, now, kicking, punching and swinging her sword as though a demon had possessed her.

“Fall back, Keiko! Let me handle it!”

A male voice — the voice of the squad Buchou, some little voice inside Sakaki’s wild brain told her, and she snarled, turning and launching herself in his direction, blade up as if in challenge. Her lips curled back, revealing sharp white teeth that, given the right incentive, she would gladly plunge into a foe’s body to inflict harm, but the squad captain was not a lower ranking shinigami, and he met her blade with his own, dark eyes rich with consternation as he surveyed her crazed, blood-splattered form.

“Keiko, check the tent. Check for injuries,” he ordered, in a voice that told Sakaki he knew his comrades were dead but was trying his best to shield the living companion from harm’s way. “Leave this to me, I’ll take care of her.”

“Sir?” the woman sounded doubtful, and Madeki waved his free hand impatiently at the tent, gesturing for her to go. She faltered for a moment, then obeyed the command, leaving Sakaki alone with the strongest and most challenging member of the Seireitei contingent.

“Who are you and what do you want here?” he demanded of her, parrying her sword a second time and pushing his weight forward as though intending to use his superior male strength to disarm her. “Answer me, and explain yourself.”

“Your death,” Sakaki hissed, shifting her weight from left to right then flying at him again, slashing her sword towards his throat. He dodged back with a curse, and Sakaki saw his fingers glitter with faint light, as though he was preparing a kidou spell with which to repel her. Fear and the thrill mingled for dominance in Sakaki’s heart, her pulse racing fit to burst as she sprang at him again, trying in vain to bring her weapon close enough to land a hit.

“You can’t take me down with that weapon,” Madeki’s voice

sounded calm, but the look in his eyes told Sakaki he was far from it, his mind racing from the savagery he must know had taken place across his camping ground. “It’s an asauchi, nothing more than a basic sword. Surrender and let me take you into custody. If not, I’ll have to kill you, and I don’t want to do that.”

“I want to kill you, though,” Sakaki told him through gritted teeth, her eyes hardening with resolve. “I’m not going to be killed by any damn shinigami, in this life or the next one! I already killed your precious companions, and I’m not stupid. You want to take me captive so you can sell me to Seireitei — and that’s not going to happen!”

“*Bakudou no Ichi — Sai!*” Madeki’s spell flew out towards her, and Sakaki let out a curse, dropping to the ground to avoid it and rolling towards her opponent, sword still gripped in her right hand. Her left fumbled at her *obifor* the sheathed dagger, but Madeki was bearing down on her, weapon drawn and hand already glimmering with the threat of a second Bakudou. Sakaki’s desperate fingers brushed past the knife, touching the cold vial of unopened anaesthetic and without thinking what she was doing she had pulled it from her belt, tossing it at him like a grenade.

This was clearly the last thing Madeki had expected, for he brought his sword up to deflect the object, the light prickling at his fingers desisting with his need to defend himself. The vial shattered against the flat of his sword, sending clear liquid raining down on it and on him, and in the moment of hesitation, Sakaki lurched a kick at his leg, causing him to stumble and lose his balance. Scrambling to her feet, Sakaki was ready with her katana, praying that she had at least bought herself a few minutes with which to launch a counter-attack.

It was not to be, for Madeki was quick to right himself, his dark eyes boring into hers as he backed her up against the tent she had so defiled.

“Who are you?” he asked again, his words lacking in any emotion now. “Why are you here, and what do you mean by attacking my subordinates?”

“As I said, I mean to kill them,” Sakaki shot back, hackles rising like a cornered wildcat preparing to launch a clawed attack on her attacker. “I mean to kill you, too. That’s why I came here. To kill all of you. To kill you stupid shinigami and tell your Gotei to stay away from here and from us!”

Madeki’s eyes narrowed, his blade moving up towards Sakaki’s throat, but then he faltered, his grip on the sword trembling slightly as

though unable to keep the same firm hold he had had moments before. Startled, Sakaki gazed at him in apprehension, expecting a trick, but as she met his eyes, she understood the reason for his sudden hesitation.

The Houten-yaku. Some of it entered his system. Some of it... worked.

Relief crashed over her as the Third seated officer stumbled, struggling to keep his balance, and she saw her opening, launching forward with her body and knocking him to the ground. He fell like a stone, the sword clattering onto the ground, and, as she stepped over him cautiously, Sakaki marvelled at how quickly the drug had taken effect.

A potent dose. Probably meant to be diluted with something before ingesting, but never mind. It worked just in time.

She bent to touch the edge of his sword, noting the faint discolouration against the blade, and a thought struck her.

I wonder... if a shinigami can be poisoned by a drug touching their sword, not just their body? He was going to release it at me... and then... this. Oh well.

She got to her feet, circling around to Madeki's head, and hovering her sword pensively over the man's throat.

There's still one more left. One in that tent, and the sun is getting higher in the sky. I need to get back soon — I've wasted far too much time here. He'll sleep for a while, so I can come back to him after. The other one first. She saw me, and she's still conscious. Even if I did release some kind of drug in that tent, I need to take care of loose ends.

Her gaze flitted to Madeki's dulled, half-open eyes, and a predatory smile twitched at her lips.

"Wait for me, Buchou," she whispered, "I'll be back for you in a minute."

Skipping over his motionless form, she pushed back the flap of the tent, katana at the ready as she prepared for a surprise attack. As she stepped into the tent, though, she realised that there was no movement coming from within, and with a jolt she made out the form of the final shinigami sprawled out across the stomach of one of those she had already killed.

Well, whaddya know? I guess it was an anaesthetic after all.

Grim humour teased at Sakaki's blue eyes, and she moved forward, grasping the woman's head by the hair and pulling it back to reveal the throat. A quick slash of the blade later and the shinigami's deep sleep became an eternal one, and Sakaki stifled a yawn, stepping back

out into the sunlight and taking a deep breath of fresh air.
I took in some of it, then. Maybe I did before, too.

She glanced at her sword, registering how much heavier it felt now than it had moments before. With a sigh she returned it to its sheath, moving back to where Madeki lay in a stupor, his breathing heavy but even.

He's still alive. I wonder how much anaesthetic it takes to kill a man.

She bent at his side, touching her finger to his throat clumsily.
I'm going to have to hope for the best, and trust that he took enough into his blade to speak for him. I need to get back, before I fall asleep here and get caught. I'm covered in blood, and that's going to look pretty suspicious to anyone walking past.

She swallowed another yawn, grimacing ruefully at her hands.
Best I find some hiding place and sleep this off. Somewhere nobody can find me, so then I can go back and report in safety. It's a pain, but I can't risk being found here, so this time, I'll have to retreat. Sleep for a long time, Buchou — else I'll have to come meet with you again, and that'll be a drag for the both of us.

With that she reluctantly turned on her heel, picking her way through the campsite towards the deep forestland that lay beyond.
*I don't think I took in enough of the drug to cause me harm, but there's no sense in taking unnecessary risks. I'll find a nice tree to sleep it off in — then I'll go home and tell **him** that the job's done.*

Behind her, Madeki's eyelids twitched slightly, as though registering her departure. Had she turned, maybe she would have seen heavy eyes shift slowly and purposefully in the direction she had gone. Had she looked, she might have seen her foe absorbing as much detail about her as possible. She did not see the shinigami's eyes close, her image the last thing imprinted on his thoughts before sleep claimed him. Lost in her own concerns, she slipped into the forest, heedless of the trail she had unwittingly left behind.

Author's Note: Happy New Year!

Although this story is written to something like Chapter 24 on my flashdisk, I go back to university at the end of this week so updates may become spasmodic again. Bear with me! ;)

Ficcish factioid stuff...

Houten (崩点) is one of the potions that Ukitake assumes Yoruichi has used to drug Ichigo on the bridge when faced with Byakuya in the Soul

Society arc (vol 14 of the manga). You might assume that the powder Sakaki finds is the other one, Gaten (穿点). Yaku is simply the suffix for “medicine” (from the kanji kusuri 薬).

Members, ViceCaptains and Captains of Divisions

I realise that some names are familiar to readers of Meifu and some are new characters, but to try and save on the confusion, here’s a minor run down on the divisions and their members in these stories so you can keep up with who is where. Some names may not be familiar to you yet, even if they are from earlier stories — but will doubtless be of relevance as the story potters on.

FIRST DIVISION

Captain: Yamamoto Yuuichi (Current head of the Yamamoto Clan — Hashihiko has died)

Vice Captain: Yamamoto Akira

Third Seat: Gujihara Tetsu

SECOND DIVISION

Captain: Shihouin Midori (Current head of the Shihouin Clan)

Vice Captain & Head of Onmitsukidou: Shihouin Kai

Third Seat (and Onmitsukidou Fukukan): Etsuo Saku

Other members:

Oomaeda Kaneyo

THIRD DIVISION

Captain: Urahara Nagesu (Current head of the Urahara Clan)

Vice Captain: Urahara Shiketsu

Third Seat: Urahara Yunosuke

Sixth Seat: Kamitani Jun

FOURTH DIVISION

Captain: Unohana Retsu (duh xD)

Vice Captain: Unohana Eriko

Third Seat & Rukongai Mission Buchou: Unohana Madeki

Twelfth Seat: Ukitake Shikiki

Rukongai Patrol Members (Unseated)

Aomori Seri

Edogawa Mitsuki

Kikuchi Haseyo

Shakano Kazuki

FIFTH DIVISION

Captain: Shiba Kyouki (Current head of the Shiba Clan)

Vice Captain: Shiba Ryuusei

SIXTH DIVISION

Captain: Kuchiki Guren (Current head of the Kuchiki Clan)

Vice Captain: Kuchiki (formerly Nagoya) Shirogane

Third Seat: Kuchiki Ryuu

SEVENTH DIVISION

Captain: Endou Hirata (Current head of the Endou Clan)

Vice Captain: Endou Souja (Patrol Leader, Squad 1)

Third Seat: Endou Kikyue (Patrol Leader, Squad 2)

Fourth Seat: Kitabata Hajime (Patrol Second, Squad 1)

Fifth Seat: Ohara Masayuki (Patrol Second, Squad 2)

Seventh Seat: Nakata Yusuke (Squad 2)

Eighth Seat: Kotetsu Tenichi (Squad 2)

EIGHTH DIVISION

Captain: Kyouraku Shunsui

Vice Captain: Shiba Sora

Third Seat: Shindou Tetsuya

Fourth Seat: Nagasata Kaoru

Ninth Seat: Nakamura Hanako

Tenth Seat: Magaki Shizuka

NINTH DIVISION (Run by Kuchiki Clan)

Captain: Anabomi Seizuku

Vice Captain: Mikiyara Hyakken

Other members:

Takaoka Sakura

TENTH DIVISION (Run by Shiba Clan)

Captain: Shiba Hakubei

Vice Captain: Souryou Kanshi

ELEVENTH DIVISION (Run by Yamamoto Clan)

Captain: Minaichi Atsushi

Vice Captain: Ikata Jintarou

TWELFTH DIVISION (Run by Urahara Clan)

Captain: Sekime Mareiko

Vice Captain: Michihashi Aoi

Other members:

Urahara Akaya

THIRTEENTH DIVISION (District Division)

Captain: Ukitake Juushirou

Vice Captain: Houjou Enishi

Third Seat: Shikibu Naoko

Fifth Seat: Atsudane Makoto

Sixth Seat: Hikifune Kirio

Seventh Seat: Kira Hideharu

Ninth Seat: Tsukabishi Tsunemori

Tenth Seat: Kotetsu Ketsui

Recruit: Kayashima Eiji

9. A Cry For Help

Chapter Eight: A Cry For Help

It had been a long ride.

Endou Hirata removed his cloak from his shoulders, tossing it down onto his desk and running his fingers through his long dark hair, moving to the mirror with a sigh to examine his appearance. A young man stared back at him, tired eyes meeting his from behind the lenses of round-rimmed glasses. Despite having been a Captain for almost twenty years now, he still resembled a new graduate from Genryuusai's Academy in many ways, but there was something in the pale blue eyes that told anyone who thought he was a fresh recruit that they needed to take a second look. He had never been tall of stature, and indeed, many of his fellow Captains still towered over him, yet the fright-or-flight reactions that had marked him out during his schooldays had all but been overcome now, and, at least in public, he walked proudly, his head held high.

If he wasn't proud of the Endou Clan, there was nobody else to be proud for him, so even if he had doubts, Hirata had long since learned not to show them in his demeanour.

That day he was robed not in his customary *shihakushou*, but the rich brown and red of his family's crest colours, the dark earthy silk pulled together at his waist by a crimson *obi* that had been pressed and stored with loving care among his other, more military possessions. This *obi* he wore more than any other when visiting the main house, for it had been a gift from his youngest daughter, Sayuri, a child with whom he spent little enough time as it was. He put a finger to the silk now, running it gently over the neatly woven fabric. At the edge, only just visible above the folds of the cloth was the distinctive shadow of a hunting bird, embroidered neatly in tiny, perfectly formed stitches. Although she was only seven, Sayuri was already excelling in all her lessons, and as he touched her handiwork, a faint smile touched Hirata's face, softening the predator that lurked within and making him seem several levels more lighthearted.

I spend more time with Souja and Kikyue because my job requires it, but whenever I go home, Sayuri still runs to greet me, hugs me and chatters excitedly about all the things she's done since last we saw each other. I wouldn't have her anywhere near the barracks or the dangers that lurk here, but when I go back to the Endou manor, at least there is one innocent

smiling face waiting to greet me.

“Otousama?”

There was a knock at the door of the office, and Hirata’s gaze darted towards the wood with a sigh, knowing that the moment he responded to the call and admitted his son to his chambers, his duty as Captain of the Seventh Division would begin once again in earnest. Though he loved his work as a shinigami, sometimes leading a division as high-maintenance as Seventh was a trying, tiring job, and he would have liked to have had a moment to rest and recuperate before rejoining his squad. From the anxious tone in Souja’s voice, however, he realised it was not to be, and so, with marked reluctance, he turned back towards his desk, moving his cloak aside and calling for his son to come in.

Souja did so, sliding the door back quietly on its runners and stepping into the Captain’s chamber with a respectful bow of the head. This was his son and heir, Hirata reflected ruefully — a young man who always did things the way they should be done, regardless of the close bonds of kinship that bound them together.

“Otousama, I trust you had a good ride back from the main estate?”

The question was a polite formality, and Hirata could tell from his son’s aura that the young man had something more pressing than small talk to discuss.

“I did,” he confirmed now, gesturing for his companion to take a seat. “And before you ask, your mother and your sister are quite well. I didn’t expect to be set upon the moment I returned back, however. Is there something you need to report to me, Souja? I was going to change and take a bath, but if it’s important...”

“It is, sir, and I apologise for it,” Souja did as he was bidden, raising earnest eyes to his father’s clouded ones. “As Vice Captain, I ought to have been able to handle the matter entirely myself, but as it is...”

He reached into his *obi*, pulling out a folded sheet of parchment, which he toyed with between his fingers as he debated how best to begin his explanation.

“It’s been about forty-eight hours, now,” he said at length, “and neither Kikyue nor I can find head nor tail of Kotetsu Tenichi.”

“Tenichi-kun?” Hirata’s eyebrows shot up behind the rims of his glasses. “That’s the boy who transferred from Thirteenth, isn’t it? I gave him over to Kikyue’s command — and you’re saying she’s somehow managed to lose him?”

“We fear worse than that, Otousama,” Souja admitted, folding the sheet of paper and then unfolding it again without seeming to realise what he was doing. “There have been a number of minor incidents involving shinigami from other squads that recently came to my attention. Shinigami of low rank have been abducted from Seireitei, held to ransom and then released unharmed when that ransom is paid. Usually, it comes in the form of supplies or food, water, things like that, and the kidnapped shinigami have been from squads who are reluctant to pay compensation to destroyed villages. However, even though Seventh are up to date with such things, it’s our general belief that Tenichi has become the next victim of these vigilante District rogues.”

“Abducted?”

Hirata stared at his son, aghast, then he groaned, removing his spectacles and burying his head in his hands. “And Juushirou trusted him to me — what will he say when he knows... does he know?”

His head shot up sharply at this thought, and Souja nodded apologetically.

“Kikyue went to seek his counsel,” he admitted. “I’m sorry, Otousama. I hadn’t realised... I don’t suppose either of us thought you’d want to keep it to ourselves. It’s a serious matter, and I think we need help in getting to the bottom of it.”

“No... no, it’s fine,” Hirata sighed heavily. “Just my pride, taking a hit. Well? What clues do you have? You are quite sure that he was abducted? There’s no question of anything else having occurred?”

“We’ve explored every angle and this is the last remaining one,” Souja said sadly. “It’s outrageous to think of, a shinigami being taken so close to his home barracks, but it’s the only explanation. Added to that, a message came a little while ago. It’s addressed to you, by name, and so I didn’t like to open it, not with you coming back today.”

“In my absence, Souja, you are in charge here. Things like this are for you to handle,” Hirata reminded him, nevertheless taking the crumpled piece of paper his son held out to him. Picking up his glasses and returning them to their perch atop his nose, he turned the offending article over in his hands to examine the name across the front. It was written in cheap town ink, much like that which could be bought at market stalls across the length and breadth of Soul Society, and though the characters that made up his name were written in a neat and well-schooled hand, they were not distinctive in any

particular way. Running his gaze over them, Hirata could not tell if they had been penned by a man or a woman, and as he turned it back to unfasten it, he realised that the seal was unmarked, giving no clue as to its place of origin.

“Very suspicious,” he murmured, more than half to himself, sliding his nail beneath the crude wax fastening and unfolding the sheet, smoothing it out across the desk. “The other divisions also received notes in this manner?”

“So I’ve been led to believe,” Souja agreed. “To be honest, it was a relief when it arrived. The other Divisions had notes far more quickly, and I was starting to fear for Tenichi’s life.”

“Hrm,” Hirata’s brows knitted together. “Well, if the others were returned safely on payment of a ransom, I suppose whoever’s involved hasn’t graduated to slaughter for gain yet. That’s something to be grateful for. I...”

He paused, his words trailing away into nothing as his attention was caught by the body of the letter, and his lips thinned, his jaw tightening as he re-read the paragraph over a second time.

“Otousama?” Souja’s words held a note of anxiety, and Hirata lowered the sheet, glancing at his son.

“The other squads, which did you say they were?”

“I don’t know that I did, but it was Eleventh and Ninth, sir,” Souja looked startled at the suddenness of this question.

“And the nature of the ransom?”

“Menial supplies. Food. Water. Materials for rebuilding shattered houses — things of that nature,” Souja’s brow creased in confusion. “Why?”

“Eleventh and Ninth,” Hirata pressed his lips together. “Eleventh are notorious for shirking their community duties, because Minachi doesn’t approve of the Districts in any way, shape or form. He’s never forgiven Juushirou for... well, in any case, he’s never paid them much heed. Ninth... I imagine that Anabomi-dono decided to cut some corners because his workload was over capacity, and this was the result. In both cases, someone was paying attention and exacted their punishments according to the crime... correct?”

“Yes, sir,” Souja nodded, looking non-plussed. “I don’t understand, though, what you...”

“The Endou haven’t committed the same crime as the other

divisions,” Hirata sighed, holding out the sheet to his son and gesturing for him to read it. “It seems whoever is behind this is both knowledgeable and dangerously clever. They don’t want supplies from us, Souja. Read it. Read it aloud. They want something else.”

“Something... else?”

Souja frowned, but took the sheet obediently, turning his attention to the neat kanji inked in columns from left to right across the parchment.

“Endou Hirata-dono, Respected Captain of the Seventh Division, greetings,” he began slowly. “In respect to your seated officer, Kotetsu Tenichi, he is in our custody. He has not been harmed, nor is his life in imminent danger, however, if you wish to have him swiftly and safely returned to you, we would ask you to enter into a trade.”

He glanced up.

“A trade?”

“Keep reading,” Hirata pressed his fingers to his brow, feeling the start of a dull headache beginning to spread beneath the skull.

“The terms of the exchange are as follows. It is our belief that you have in your employ members of an underground group known as the ‘Kitsune’. In return for the safe return of your squad member, we wish to know the current location of these Kitsune, and their active operations. This is not negotiable. We will give you forty-eight hours in which to respond. Failure to comply will result in further consequences.”

He took a deep breath into his lungs, and Hirata nodded, absorbing the ashen shade of his son’s cheeks.

“The *Kitsune*?” Souja whispered, as the silence threatened to envelop them both. “But... who would want...”

“Who indeed,” Hirata said grimly, grabbing the parchment and scrunching it between his fingers as he fought to quell the hunter’s instinct that swelled with indignation inside him. “Before we can take any kind of action, Souja, we need to answer that very question. Who would want to find the Kitsune, and more significantly, why?”

He got to his feet, reaching for his cloak once more.

“Take charge here, and say nothing to your sister, not yet,” he instructed brusquely, ignoring the look of alarm that passed over his son’s features. “There are few even among the Gotei who know the Kitsune exist, and I need to get to the bottom of this at once. We have

little time indeed to secure Tenichi's return, but the whereabouts of loyal agents is not on the bartering table. I need to think this out... and I can't do that here."

"But... where are you going?" Souja asked apprehensively. "The squad will be expecting you, and..."

"Time is of the essence, so they'll have to wait," Hirata said grimly. "I don't mean to sacrifice one of my men if it can be avoided. I'm going to Thirteenth Division — any urgent messages can be forwarded there. Oh, and Souja? I suppose you've been in communication with Joumei since Tenichi disappeared?"

"I have," Souja chewed on his lip. "I sent a Hell Butterfly as soon as I'd done de-briefing Kikyue, and I got a response just before dawn the next morning. He couldn't tell me very much, though. Whoever's behind these abductions, it doesn't seem to have crossed their territory."

"Then the best thing you can do is send another message and tell him to keep his — and everyone else's — heads down for a while," Hirata responded flatly. "They're used to that, so they'll manage it — but under no circumstances are you to go into Kitsune territory, not without my say-so. Understood?"

"I promise," Souja nodded earnestly, his fingers already moving together to sculpt the blue-black insect. "I'll do as you say."

"Good. Then tell Kikyue and the others I'll see them later," Hirata flung the cloak back around his shoulders, fastening the badge a second time at his throat. "I don't know how long I'll be or how late I'll be back, so continue without me. I'll see you when I do."

Souja hesitated for a moment, then, at length, he bowed his head.

"Yes, Father," he said softly. "I trust that when that happens, we'll have better news to discuss."

The sun was beginning to drop in the sky over Hokutan by the time Mitsuki and her enigmatic companion reached the network of small settlements on the path to the shinigami encampment. As she walked between the rows of charred, abandoned ruins, Mitsuki felt her heart clench in her chest, remembering the terror and panic that had flooded the valley the night the Hollow had struck. There were no souls here now, for even the injured they had tended to would have been relocated, and the ashes of the village were a forlorn reminder of how difficult it still was to police a peaceful Rukongai.

Only three districts, and we still can't match up to what the enemy throws at us.

Mitsuki stole a glance at Seri, eying her pale complexion with concern. Her friend was still alive, for she could feel the dull thrumming of her comrade's pulse weakly resonating against her senses, but she knew that there was no guarantee that Seri's life had been saved. Yuuyugo's hilt still hung at her waist, bereft of its blade, and Mitsuki knew it had taken a lot more of her strength than she was used to using to repair the savagery of Seri's internal wounds. Although she could feel faint tendrils of the blade's energy beginning to seek each other out once more, she knew it might take twenty four hours or even longer to fully regenerate the missing spirit power in Rukongai's sterile atmosphere, and she still had to find a way to report to Madeki that two of their squad had died.

She was exhausted, for the walk was not a short one, yet somehow she kept putting one foot in front of the other. Her companion had kept to her pace, seeming to understand without asking that she was approaching the end of her tether, and secretly Mitsuki was grateful to him for his unspoken consideration. They had talked a little, exchanging random snippets of meaningless small-talk, but soon enough both had sunk into silence, Mitsuki focusing all her strength on putting one foot in front of the other.

What he was thinking, she didn't know, but as she stumbled against a protruding stone in the pathway, a black-covered hand shot out from beneath the heavy cloak, grabbing her around the arm and righting her before she could tumble over. She shot him a startled glance, disconcerted by his swift reaction, but he just grinned at her, a disarming, open grin that put her off her guard.

Who was he? Why was he here? Mitsuki had a thousand questions, but all of them stuck in her throat. Whoever he was, he had come to her aid, and more frightening than walking the wilderness with a nameless stranger was the idea of trying to make it back to base camp alone. The aftershock of Haseyo and Kazuki's deaths still ricocheted at intervals around her shattered consciousness, and she found herself glad of the distraction, using the silence to puzzle out what little she knew about the man who had come to her rescue.

He was not a shinigami. He'd said as much, with an edge to his words, and Mitsuki could tell from his aura that it was true — he didn't have a spirit sword, for there was no second consciousness vibrating in harmony with his own. He had claimed to come from Rukongai, but Mitsuki was sceptical. Though she had met souls with

tainted spirit power, she had never encountered a Plus soul who had been able to confront and face down a Hollow, much less destroy it without any visible weaponry. No, more likely he had come from Seireitei. Why he was in the Spiritless Zone, well, that she couldn't explain. How old did she think he was?

She shot him another surreptitious glance. Young, she thought. Perhaps in his twenties, but it was difficult to be sure. Had he escaped from some provincial prison in the Districts using his uncommon spirit power and then, somehow, managed to slip into Rukongai in search of sanctuary against his pursuers? She narrowed her gaze, trying to work out if he looked like an escaped criminal. He was clean-shaven, she realised, with pleasant, easy-going features that somehow struck her as vaguely familiar. Had they met before? Mitsuki discarded this thought almost as soon as it had come, for she had been in Rukongai for more than two decades, longer, probably, than this man had been alive. Still, though, there was something reassuringly commonplace about his appearance. His eyes were dark, and at first glance Mitsuki had thought them brown, but under closer scrutiny, she thought they might be a very dark blue. His complexion was fair, as fair as her own, and unruly black hair fell in uneven waves around his face, ostensibly tied back by a rough ribbon but in reality more of the dark mane was outside of the tie than still within it. From throat to foot he was clothed in black, the fabric cheap and unremarkable in either the weave or the cut, and completely devoid of any emblem that might disclose his District of origin. Her gaze strayed to his *obi*, but there was no sign of any weapon, not even a basic knife with which to cut food. He carried no belongings, and if she hadn't known better, Mitsuki would have been tempted to believe he just wandered into the Spiritless Zone on a random whim to see the sights.

"About the Hollow," at length she broke the silence, fixing him with a probing glance.

"Mm?" her companion seemed startled by her sudden return to conversation, but he smiled, tilting his head so that he could see her more clearly around Seri's limp body. "What about it?"

"What... how... exactly did you kill it?"

"Oh," he pursed his lips, a fleeting moment of what might have been consternation crossing his gaze. "I don't know, really. I mean, if it has a name, I don't know what it might be. I just acted on impulse... it's never gone quite like that before."

He cast her another disarming grin, lifting Seri more firmly in his arms and shrugging his shoulders.

“I have spirit power. No point in pretending otherwise,” he said flippantly. “If I really focus, I can bring that power together and do stuff with it. It’s nothing as impressive as you shinigami people are meant to do — no bright colours or fancy explosions — but if I concentrate very hard, I can repel the Hollows and defend myself. This time I had double the incentive, though, so it worked twice as well.”

He winked at her, and despite herself, Mitsuki offered him a wry smile.

“Do you think that flirting with someone when you’re carrying her wounded friend, covered in blood and returning from a scene of carnage is a good plan of action?”

“It lightens the mood,” her companion seemed unperturbed. “You’re tired, and you’re worried about what to tell your squad captain, aren’t you? I’m trying to take your mind off it — that, and mine off what kind of reception I might get, if any of your companions should see me.”

He bit his lip, and Mitsuki frowned.

“You’ll be fine. I’ll tell them you saved my life — Seri’s too, as it happens,” she promised. “Buchou is strict but he’s fair. He’ll listen.”

“Mm,” the young man murmured noncommittally, and Mitsuki could tell he wasn’t convinced.

“You’re... not wanted for anything in Seireitei, are you?” she asked hesitantly, and he stared at her, then burst out laughing.

“Oh, good grief, is that what you think?” he demanded, clearly amused.

“I don’t know,” Mitsuki flushed, feeling suddenly awkward in the face of his obvious mirth. “You won’t tell me your name, and you’re worried about meeting up with shinigami, as though you’ve got something to hide. You’re in a place you shouldn’t be, and yes, I owe that fact my life, but...”

“Believe me, Mitsuki, you have nothing to worry about,” her companion told her dryly. “You should be focusing on finding your camp, not interrogating me about things that don’t matter.”

“That’s another thing,” Mitsuki remarked, nonetheless turning her gaze back on the landscape, looking for particular landmarks with which to guide them to their target. “I don’t remember giving you permission to call me Mitsuki. I’m pretty sure I’m older than you — and we’ve just met. If you won’t give me your name, you could at

least remember your honorifics.”

“Are you fussy about things like that?” He looked taken aback, and Mitsuki shrugged.

“It depends,” she said matter-of-factly. “I don’t know anything about you, so in those circumstances, intimate name sharing isn’t exactly appropriate.”

“Putting space between us,” her companion let out a mock sigh, then, “I see. All right. I’m sorry, Mitsuki-san. I didn’t mean to offend your sensibilities.”

He grinned at her wickedly.

“As for my name, why don’t you try to guess?” he challenged her. “I’ll give you a clue. It’s somewhere in this forest — at least, most probably.”

“In the forest?” Despite herself, Mitsuki paused, glancing around her, and her companion nodded.

“If you guess right, I promise I’ll tell you,” he said solemnly. “There, does that sound like a fair deal to you?”

“Not really,” Mitsuki pulled a face. “There are hundreds of things in this forest. Grass. Trees. Animals. Flowers. If I went through every one of them, we’d be here all day and all night, too.”

“But it’s stopped you moping over your friends a little, so play along with me,” came the unrepentant response. “Otherwise I’ll start asking you questions — such as, why would someone who cares so much about the ordinary folk here in Rukongai choose to take up arms and fight as a shinigami?”

“As you already saw, I’m not really much of a fighter,” Mitsuki pulled a graphic face. “My skills are healing ones, mostly. My Kidou isn’t bad. I’m not confident holding a sword, though — that’s never been my forte.”

“You sure you should tell me that?” the young man arched an eyebrow. “I’m a stranger whose name you can’t guess, remember? I might be anyone or anything.”

“If you were waiting to ambush me, you’d have to be pretty slow on the tactical update,” Mitsuki said matter-of-factly. “I was unconscious for a good while after tackling that Hollow, and you could’ve finished me then. You keep trying to make me afraid of you, but I’m not. Even without a name, I guess you’re just not that intimidating. Sorry if that disappoints.”

“You know, I think you have a mischievous streak underneath all that wanting to help people,” her companion eyed her thoughtfully, and Mitsuki’s lips twitched into a smile.

“Maybe I do,” she reflected. ‘Perhaps it’s the Kuchiki blood. I’m not always like other healers, and... what?’ as she noted the look of dismay that suddenly crossed the stranger’s face. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

“You...’re a Kuchiki?” the words were soft-spoken, even and level yet Mitsuki could tell that he was working hard to keep them that way. She nodded her head, confused.

“By birth, yes, though I’ve been in Rukongai so long I’m sure most of the Clan don’t even remember me,” she agreed. “Why? Does that scare you?”

“Scare me?” her companion let out a low, humourless laugh. “The most powerful, terrifying group of rich folk with swords happen to be your family. No, why on earth should I be scared? A big, brave soul like me? Surely not.”

“Now I know you’re from Seireitei,” Mitsuki reflected. “Rukongai people don’t know much about Clans, let alone the individual names of them and their standing.”

“I’m not...”

“You can pretend if you like, I don’t mind,” Mitsuki cut across him. “For now, though, we’ve...”

She faltered, her brows twitching together in sudden alarm as something murky and distorted filtered through her healer’s senses. To begin with, she couldn’t place it, then her eyes widened with dismay as she realised it was a distress call, a flaring of reiatsu by something or someone too broken and damaged to properly form their words.

The signal was damaged, yet Mitsuki’s wits had honed onto it now, and, her companion and Seri momentarily forgotten, she hurried forward towards the camp perimeter.

“Buchou!”

Caution thrown to the wind, she almost tripped over the legs of the first dead sentry before she saw him, leaping back as though stung as she rested her eyes on his greyish, blood-spattered features. His expression was one of surprise and fear, and Mitsuki swallowed the bile in her throat, bending to touch her fingers to his neck automatically without any hope of finding life. His body was still warm, though cooling, and Mitsuki estimated he had died about half

an hour earlier — no more, for his corpse had not yet begun to stiffen and the blood that soaked his uniform was still damp to the touch.

He had been killed, and she had not known about it. Although her spiritual senses spanned far and wide, too much open, spiritless space had been between her and her squad-mates, and so when he had been cut down, she had been teasing her companion on their walk here. She had not known... not felt it...

Before she could remonstrate with herself too greatly, she saw a dark stain across the other side of the grass. Heart in her throat, she made her way towards it, disbelief and horror flaring within her as she laid eyes on the second of her dead companions. This one had met a gorier end, throat slashed and body crumpled on the ground like discarded litter, and she took a step back, shaking her head.

“No...”

“Mitsuki.”

His voice made her jump, and she turned, seeing her unknown companion standing a short distance behind her, his gaze clouded as he surveyed the dead shinigami.

“You knew this was going to happen,” Mitsuki’s words were numb. “You warned me... you said they were in danger. If I’d hurried... if I’d dallied less...”

“This isn’t your fault.” His words were soft, as though trying to soothe her, but Mitsuki was beyond soothing right then. Her eyes had caught sight of something on the ground, something covered in black cloth, a torn white trail of what might have been an *obi* stretched out like a signal against the grass. As she hastened towards it, she saw an arm move, twitching clumsily before falling back against the earth in defeat.

Even without that, though, Mitsuki knew this one was alive.

“Buchou!” She hurried down at his side, fingers already glittering with healing energy as she checked her superior officer over for cuts or bruises. He was barely breathing, she realised, his pulse sluggish and heavy, but there was no sign of savagery on his body and, though his sword was drawn, his *shihakushou* remained clean and intact. Pulling back his eyelids, Mitsuki soon saw the cause of the man’s unresponsiveness. *Houten-yaku*.

And a considerable dose, too.

Mitsuki spread her hands over his chest, closing her eyes to focus

what little spiritual energy she had left on neutralising the anaesthetic. Madeki's spirit power was strong and his will to live obstinate, yet still she could not be sure she would not lose him, pouring more and more of her *reiryoku* into her spell until she had no more magic left to give. Trembling with exertion and the after-effects of the shock, she sat back on her heels, pressing her hand to his chest and feeling with giddy relief that his pulse had steadied, his breathing both even and deep as he slipped into a proper slumber. He would probably not wake for a while, but he was alive, and, as far as Mitsuki could tell, he would recover.

She turned to speak to her mysterious companion, but there was no sign of him, and she frowned, pulling herself unsteadily to her feet as she glanced around the dishevelled campsite. A scene of carnage and devastation greeted her, the scent of blood pungent and overpowering, and as she cautiously unfurled her senses, she realised what was wrong with the whole picture.

There was *nobody* there.

Not her rescuer, not her squadmates, nobody. At her feet, her squad captain's heart still beat, and from somewhere not too far away, she could feel the reassuring rhythm of Seri's life force, resolutely clinging onto life despite the depth of her injuries. Aside from them, though, she was alone.

Her gaze flitted towards the tent, eying the brownish stains that had begun to spread across the white cloth, and she bit her lip. *Something killed them. Something horrible... just like Haseyo and Kazuki. Whatever it was was powerful enough to take out my team.*

She struggled forwards, gripping hold of the torn tent cloth and pulling it back to reveal the scene of slaughter inside. Her knees buckled at the sight, but the faint scent of scattered anaesthetic powder made her back away, taking deep breaths of fresh air as she fought to calm herself down.

Madeki was unconscious, Seri was wounded and everyone else was dead.

Her heart spasmed, skipping at least three beats before starting up on its normal rhythm once more.

I have to contact Seireitei.

Mitsuki's hands trembled as she fumbled at Madeki's belt, inwardly saying an apology to her squad captain for taking such liberties with his clothing. At last she found what she was looking for, the Seireitei transmitter that he never moved anywhere without.

I have to speak to Retsu-sama. I have to... I have to...

She cast one last glance around her for any sign of her enigmatic rescuer, but he was nowhere to be seen. Seri's huddled form lay beneath the tree where she had found the first victim of the massacre, and as she moved to her friend's side, Mitsuki realised that the young man had laid his burden down gently and securely before fleeing the scene.

I suppose I see his logic. If he was found here, a stranger and maybe a wanted Seireitei escapee, it would look bad.

Mitsuki ran her fingers over the transmitter, using her free hand to brush Seri's thick hair from out of her face.

It's up to me to get help, now. If there's only me, then that's what I need to do. Buchou left me in charge, so with him incapacitated, I have to call Seireitei and get help for him and for Seri. Whatever it was might come back... and it will soon be night.

She shivered at the thought, half-wishing the young stranger was still there to keep her company.

They'll come. When they know, they'll come at once, and then it'll be all right. They'll come and get us... they must.

Author's Note

Chapter Eight is short, so while I'm home I'm going to upload nine with it as well...

10. The Hidden Hut

Chapter Nine: The Hidden Hut

Rukongai was cold when the sun began to set.

Tenichi stifled a shiver, pulling the thin fabric of his *shihakushou* more tightly to his body in a vain attempt to shield his body from the sharp wind that had begun to pick up around the dusty tracks and pathways that surrounded him on all sides. For once, he was on his own, for the ever-attentive yet disinterested Koku had been summoned away on some other errand, and he had taken advantage of that fact to explore his surroundings, really taking in for himself the barren wasteland to which he had been forcibly brought.

The longer he was here, the less he felt like he had been abducted by force. Though he was still highly wary of Keitarou and his motives, he could not deny the truth of the poverty every way he looked. Houses with missing beams, roofs broken and decaying, dry pools and dying trees hanging like skeletal reminders of a once prosperous landscape. Though he had never been to Rukongai before, he had never thought that conditions on the other side of the Sekkiseki divide could be so wretched. Seireitei had spent so much time working on ways and means to improve the situation of the hundreds of thousands of Plus souls that apparently made their homes here — yet despite that, it was clear this area had long since been forgotten or ignored.

Had it been an oversight, or was it on purpose? Tenichi frowned, bringing his lips together tightly as he debated both trains of thought carefully to himself. He was not ignorant or naive enough to believe that all of the Seireitei Clans cared overly about the fates of those not directly in front of their noses, and he had been old enough when his family had been sent into exile to recall the long trudges knee deep in mud through frozen rainstorms and whirling winds, holding tightly to one another in fear of being separated. He remembered only too vividly walking with his eyes closed to prevent the dust and debris from the pathway blowing up and scratching at his eyeballs, and as he stood there, watching the sandy earth swirl a little on the path before him, he knew that it was a memory people in this forsaken hole might also share.

But, for them, it wouldn't end with refuge. Tenichi's family had been able to settle in District Eight and had forged a life for

themselves, despite the hardships they faced. They had stuck together through everything, because they had all believed wholeheartedly that better times were to come. When Tenichi had applied and been accepted to the Shinigami Academy that was the crowning achievement of District One's most illustrious noble shinigami, those days seemed to have arrived. Ketsui had quickly followed him as soon as age and ability had allowed, and now both of them lived lives that, during their time as refugees they could only have imagined. Food was available, water too, as was the warm camaraderie of other like minded individuals with whom they shared their day.

I told Koku I hadn't forgotten what it was like to be a refugee, but maybe I have, just a little. I remember the images, but standing here, I begin to really feel it, too.

A sense of loneliness wrapped itself around his heart and he shivered, forcing it away. Keitarou had promised to release him, he reminded himself. Koku had agreed to raise the subject, too, and he wasn't fool enough to suppose they wanted him in their territory long-term. Although, he reflected, gazing up at the grey, colourless sky for any sign of either sun or moon, the more he saw of Rukongai, the more risky their gamble of bringing him here.

I could promise not to talk, and then go back and tell my Captain everything. They haven't hidden anything from me — Koku I know by face and name, and there's also Kurotsuchi, who I haven't met but whose name I could also pass on. I know where Keitarou's base of operations is, and even though I don't know precisely where I am in Rukongai, I'm sure there can't be too many valleys so utterly overlooked. It would only take one word to the right person, and then...

But what would happen to these people, then?

A soft, nagging voice poked at his thoughts, making him jump and spin around as if to see a real speaker. Even as he did, though, he knew that the voice was in his head, the gentle, reproachful tones of his long dead mother reminding him once again of the struggle she had faced to keep both her sons alive and well. As he thought of her, another memory drifted across his thoughts — one of Daisuke, dusty from a long day's research work, yet greeting them with smiles and hugs and asking them what they had done that day. Keitarou had been with him that day, he recalled with a jolt. He had brought fruit from the Endou manor, and had shared it with the children, though Irie had scolded him for taking a risk and stealing from the men who fed and clothed them all. Keitarou had dismissed her concern with amusement, his muddy-brown eyes light and amused at the suggestion of being caught, and as he relived those fleeting fragments of a past life, Tenichi remembered a feeling of security and reassurance. He

hadn't known, then, what his family were involved in or how dangerous their lives would become. Back then, he had been a child who had trusted in the adults around him — and one of those adults had been Keitarou.

The man who tested me on my kanji, and who always answered my questions about the things I'd seen in the village, if he was able to do so. The man who knew why trees bloomed in spring and shed leaves in autumn — and who bothered to explain to me how the birds built their nests and why the egg-shells scattered around our home were different colours depending on where I found them. He didn't come often, not often at all, but when he did...

He frowned, rubbing his temples.

That man became this man... because of Father? Because Father was murdered, Keitarou-san took revenge on the Endou and it spiralled into how things are now? But Keitarou-san hasn't come to this point unscathed, either. He moves stiffly. Perhaps whatever injury caused that lameness is part of the reason he now chooses to remain here, limiting his vigilante actions to protecting those who helped support him when he needed it most. Maybe the vengeance and spite is behind him. If I were to report this in, they'd come here in force. Raid the place. Probably people would be hurt. Maybe people who are already living in terrible conditions... and who would protect them, then? There'd be bloodshed — maybe on both sides. No. No, it's better this way. If I can do something to get supplies here in secret, then nobody need get killed on either side and everything can continue peacefully.

A rustle from the pathway ahead drew him from his thoughts and he paused, raising his head to see a dark-clad shape shift behind a nearby building. Immediately on his guard, Tenichi hastened forward, only just remembering at the last minute that his spirit power was sealed and he would not be able to use shunpo to give chase. He darted behind the building, not sure what he expected to see. A young woman was standing there, fear etched on her thin features as she stared at him uncertainly. At first, Tenichi could not work out why she had not fled, but then he caught sight of her foot, misshapen and deformed at the ankle, and he realised the odd rustling sound had been her shuffling gait, moving the only way she could between solid structures and using them as her support.

He offered her a smile, but she continued to stare at him, taking a limping step back to put distance between them. Tenichi glanced down, noticing that his fingers had curled instinctively around the hilt of his weapon, and he inwardly berated himself, pulling his hand away and raising it in the air to indicate he had no intention of

attacking.

"I didn't mean to scare you," he said quietly. "You surprised me too, but I'm not going to hurt you."

The girl continued to stare at him, and Tenichi noticed the heavy bucket clasped defensively in her arms.

"You're going to find water." It was a statement, not a question, and slowly and jerkily the woman nodded her head.

"There's no water around here, though," Tenichi glanced around him, seeing nothing but dry tracks, and the woman's lips trembled, but she made no attempt to speak.

"You'll have to walk a long way to find any, won't you?" Tenichi's voice softened, as inwardly he made up his mind. "Will you let me help you? I really didn't mean to hurt you, and... wait!"

As the woman tossed the bucket in his direction as a distraction, limping desperately towards the break between the next two shelters. The vessel clanged against exposed stone, and Tenichi scooped it up, hurrying forward to grasp the woman loosely around the wrist. She struggled against his hold, her fear clearly reflected in her eyes, but Tenichi merely steadied her on her feet, releasing his grip and holding the vessel out towards her.

"Keitarou-san brought me to Rukongai. He wants me to help you, and I want to help, too," he said evenly. "My name is Tenichi. Kotetsu Tenichi."

More silence.

"You don't have to tell me your name," Tenichi assured her quickly. "I told you mine so that you know who I am, and why I'm here. My father Daisuke was Keitarou-san's cousin, and so he and I are kin. You trust Keitarou-san, don't you? In that case, you can ask him about me yourself. Ask him why I've come here — he'll tell you the same as I just have."

The woman eyed him uncertainly, but at the mention of the name Keitarou, some of the tension had slipped from her skinny body, and she nodded her head.

"Natsuko," she said softly, her voice barely above a murmur. "I've seen you... with Koku-dono. By the... by the river."

"Yes, that's right," Tenichi nodded eagerly. 'I was with Koku, and also with Keitarou-san. You believe me, don't you? I know I'm dressed like this,' he gestured to his grimy *shihakushou*, "but even though I

have a sword, I'm not here to hurt you. I learned to hold this to protect people — people like you and people like my kin back in Seireitei. I would never draw my sword on an innocent soul."

He bowed his head towards her sombrely.

"I'm pleased to meet you, Natsuko-san," he added. "Will you let me help you find water? It's a long walk, and your foot... it looks quite sore."

"It's always been this way," Natsuko glanced dispassionately at her leg, then shrugged. "I don't know why. I don't remember. It was from before... when I came here, it was like that."

From the Real World?

Despite himself, Tenichi's curiosity piqued. He had never spoken to a proper Plus soul before — an entity from the Real World who had been reaped to Seireitei space yet who did not fully belong in this world. A place-marker soul, bringing *reishi* back to Seireitei before dissipating into dust and reforming to provide new life and stability. In his studies at the Academy, Tenichi had learned that some Plus souls endured for a century or more without any reiatsu to speak of, but he recalled Keitarou telling him that the souls here were contaminated — tainted with spirit power and therefore gifted or cursed with a lifespan that could potentially equal his own.

"There's water underground," Natsuko was speaking again, clearly having no interest in the past she could not remember, and Tenichi turned his attention back to the conversation, not wanting to unsettle the woman by asking her awkward questions. "Sometimes, people manage to dig through to it. There's not much, and it's deep, but it's here. Yesterday, someone from the village broke a rock and water came from it. It's near here. I want to find it."

"I'll help," Tenichi decided. "I might be able to split the rock better with my sword — we can try, at least."

"I suppose so," Natsuko looked doubtful. "Don't *you* want the water, though?"

"I'm fine," Tenichi dismissed her concern with a flick of his hand. "I won't steal it from you, Natsuko-san. Keitarou-san wouldn't like it if I did that — and he might not be so keen to let me linger around here, if I was bullying you all."

"Keitarou-sama would not," Natsuko said with certainty, "and Eiraki-sama would curse you and hunt you down herself."

She laughed, a strange, brittle laugh, and Tenichi felt a chill at the implied threat in her words. Almost certainly it was not a threat from the woman herself but something she was repeating, something she had heard, something she had been told...

Eiraki-hime, the sister of my Captain who took off with Keitarou-san and abandoned the Endou. The stories say she was the one who killed Guren-sama's son and heir in cold blood before she was even an adult. Perhaps she's more frightening a prospect than Keitarou-san. If she spoke those words...

Out loud he said,

"Eiraki-sama is protective of you all, isn't she?"

"She is kind to us, yes," Natsuko's smile became a touch more genuine and she nodded, her hard eyes softening slightly. "She always has been. Well, and so it should be. We're kind to her, too. She's like one of us, except strong in ways most of us are not. She wouldn't allow anyone to hurt us — she'd slit their throats first."

"Well, it's a good thing I don't want to do harm, then," Tenichi said ruefully. "I've no intention of crossing Eiraki-sama, believe me."

"I do," Natsuko agreed slowly. "All right. I'll show you where the water reserve is. If you help me, I'll tell Eiraki-sama, and then she'll look well on you. Is that fair?"

"Yes, that's fair," Tenichi confirmed. "Can you manage to walk there, or..."

"It's the only way to get around, so I'll manage," Natsuko said simply, turning awkwardly on her good leg and beginning to shuffle off towards a narrow pathway that led towards the centre of a crop of long-dead trees. "If you can't move, you can't survive."

"Even with Keitarou-sama and Eiraki-sama's help, it's hard, isn't it? Living here." Tenichi fell into step with her, walking at a pace so slow it chafed him, but forcing him to keep alongside his companion so as not to demean her determination. Natsuko sighed, looking weary, and Tenichi wondered briefly if she was older than she had first appeared.

"There are so many of us, and more all the time," she reflected. "There are so few of them. Of course it's hard."

"I guess that was a stupid question," Tenichi acknowledged. "I'm sorry. I'm learning about it all the time — I haven't spent a lot of time in Rukongai, not yet, but I do want to help. When I go back to where I come from, I need to know what I can do to help make life better here."

“You probably can’t,” Natsuko said frankly, “but... at least you want to try.”

She offered him a faint smile.

“Shinigami aren’t usually so helpful when we’re like this,” she added, “but if Keitarou-sama brought you here, and you’re kin to him, I guess you’re different.”

She limped to a stop, gesturing towards a cluster of rocks just beyond a dip in the road, and Tenichi’s gaze strayed to where she pointed, his eyes narrowing as he tried to make out what was the tiniest trickle of muddy brown water between the two jagged fragments of grey stone.

“There?” he asked, and Natsuko nodded.

“Can you split it further?” she asked doubtfully, and Tenichi nodded, pulling his weapon from its hilt and stepping forward to examine the problem more closely. As he did so, he caught a glimpse of a pathway just beyond where they had halted, half-hidden by a thicket of what must once have been thriving bush and shrub but what was now a skeleton of white-bleached sticks intertwined together like a natural fence, sharp and splintered and warning people against approaching. A tiny gap between the thicket and the wall of a nearby ruined shack indicated that access was there, but as Tenichi tried to work out what lay beyond, he felt a hand on his arm.

“You can’t go there,” Natsuko’s voice was barely above a murmur, and, glancing at her, Tenichi saw apprehension in her tired eyes. “Even if you are here because Keitarou-sama brought you... we don’t go through there. None of us do. It’s not allowed.”

“Not allowed?” Tenichi’s brow creased in confusion. “Why not? What lies beyond there?”

Natsuko hesitated, glancing around her, then shaking her head.

“We don’t go there,” she repeated. “You mustn’t either. Keitarou-sama would be cross. We’re not supposed to disturb him... we’re not allowed.”

“Him?” Tenichi latched onto this, and horror flooded Natsuko’s gaze. Her hands flew to her mouth, and she visibly paled, realising she had let something slip. Tenichi sighed, gently patting her shoulder.

“I won’t tell Keitarou-san you said anything. I promise,” he said softly. “I just want to know what’s dangerous. I want to keep safe while I’m here, so it’s important I know... isn’t it?”

Natsuko eyed him uncertainly, then,

“You promise not to tell?” she asked anxiously. “We’re not supposed to... especially not to people from outside.”

“People from outside have been here before?”

“Mm. When this place was evacuated, they came,” Natsuko agreed bitterly. “We didn’t tell them, though. We never tell them. I shouldn’t tell you, either. You’re from outside, even if you are Keitarou-sama’s kin.”

“Natsuko, if you don’t tell me, I’ll have to ask Keitarou-san,” Tenichi said sensibly, and Natsuko shook her head frantically.

“No! No, please don’t! He’ll be cross — we’re not allowed to...”

“Then you tell me?” Tenichi beseeched. “What’s beyond those briars? What’s so dangerous it needs to be avoided at all costs?”

Natsuko looked uncomfortable, but slowly she inclined her head.

“Not what. Who,” she whispered, her eyes darting around her all the time as if looking for unseen eavesdroppers. “That’s where he is. Kohaku-sama. He’s there.”

“Ko... haku-sama?”

“Mm,” Natsuko nodded agitatedly. “We’re not to disturb him. It’s bad, if we do. Sometimes there are screams... Keitarou-san told us... stay away, because if we don’t... bad things could happen.”

She swallowed hard.

“Once, when there were really loud screams from that place, a man went to see what was happening,” she whispered, eyes huge now as she recounted the story. “When we found him, he was wandering around the place, gibbering to himself about things that made no sense. If anyone went near him, he started yelling and fighting against them. It was like he’d gone crazy — jerking and foaming at the mouth and yelling curses. Then... then he died... and... and Keitarou-san told us that we should stay away from that place, just in case.”

“Really,” Tenichi’s eyes narrowed, glancing back towards the gap in the hedge. “You’ve never seen this Kohaku-sama?”

“No... no, we haven’t,” Natsuko agreed nervously. “We’ve heard him, but not seen him. Keitarou-san said he didn’t want anyone else hurt, and so we stay away. The man who died, Keitarou-san was worried by it. He made us all promise one by one, and we did. We swore. Nobody’s crossed the boundary since.”

“Does Keitarou-sama?”

“Sometimes,” Natsuko agreed. “But not often, not these days. The screams come less, too. We try to forget it. It’s nothing to do with us.”

She inched towards the water source, eying him with pleading eyes.

“The water, Tenichi-dono. Please.”

“Yes. Yes, of course,” Tenichi cast the dim pathway a final glance, then nodded, tightening his grip on the sword and turning his attention back to the task at hand. “I’m sorry to have put you so on edge, Natsuko-san. I won’t go there, and I won’t ask again. I appreciate the warning... now I’ll repay it by getting you some water.”

He crouched to his knees, putting his weight behind the hilt of his *zanpakutou* as he used the blade like a chisel to split the rock apart, allowing the thin trickle of water to gush into a small pool around his feet. Natsuko let out an exclamation, hurrying to catch the water in her tarnished vessel, but all the time Tenichi was working, his mind was on the woman’s story and the genuine fear he had seen in her eyes.

Kohaku-sama... huh?

He pressed his lips together.

That wasn’t part of what Keitarou-san mentioned to me. I wonder what... or who... is through those briars. I thought I could just make out the walls of a hut — but if there’s something in it, with my spirit power cuffed, I can’t sense anything at all. Whoever it is, obviously they pose some danger to Plus souls, and so Keitarou’s kept them away. To protect them? In which case, why keep something like that so close to them? Unless it’s one of them — a Plus soul so tainted that it can taint others and drive them to madness.

A shiver ran down his spine at the thought.

When I get a chance, I’ll try and ask Keitarou-san about this. I want to see his reaction — I’m sure I can find out without implicating Natsuko or getting anyone into trouble. The way she talked makes me think something really dangerous is lurking in this valley, and if I’m here, I need to know what it is. It’s risky... especially since I want to go back to Seireitei and get on with my life. The more I know, the more dangerous it becomes — Koku was right about that and I ought to listen, but some questions need answering no matter what the risks might be. I’m a hostage in a place nobody’s going to rescue me, and I have to look out for my own safety. That means knowing the risks of this environment, since I don’t know when I might be leaving.

My priority is getting back to Seireitei alive. Anything else can happen from that point on.

“It’s such a damned nuisance.”

Juushirou pulled his blankets more tightly around his shoulders, gritting his teeth in frustration as a shiver ran through his thin body. “I’ve been fine for such a span of time together, and now, when everything is starting to kick off, this happens.”

He glared mutinously at the blue fabric pouch that lay on the floor beside him, faint dribbles of clear liquid soaking through to the tatami mat floor as the ice gathered by one of his lower ranking officers began to melt in the warmth within Ugendou’s four walls. On the floor, scattered around him were a number of books, some from his own shelves and others from the division’s substantial, if compact library chamber, but all had been discarded barely read. A fresh ink brush lay beside the ink tray on his desk, but the parchment that lay there was clean and white, testament to the fact very little of purpose had been done in that room that day.

The tension, however, was moving ever closer to boiling point.

“I really thought that I was starting to get over this frequent propensity to random fevers, but I guess not.”

It was the same day, afternoon shifting towards evening deep within Thirteenth Division, and all around the bustling barracks shinigami were getting on with their late tasks, each hoping to scrape together a few spare minutes in which to enjoy themselves after work hours were done. All, that is, except for the Captain. Holed up in Ugendou since waking at dawn with one of his persistent, chronic fevers, Juushirou was about reaching the end of his patience tether, and even the fresh icepack that Kirio had brought him a half hour earlier had gone little way to soothe the heat of his frustrated temper. Though he had lived with the lung condition *haibyou* all his life, he had never quite resigned himself to the times when the disease had the upper hand over his frail body, and, as most who knew him could testify, whilst he might be a great Captain, he was a horrendously poor patient.

“You poor soul,” from the doorway, Shunsui cast him an amused smile, lounging up against the wooden runners as he surveyed his friend. ‘I had come here with the hope of discussing some of that annoying “everything’ with you, but from the looks, I’d do better putting it on hold and letting you rant off your fever, wouldn’t I? We

both know that if you rest and let it do its thing, it'll pass, and it's not as though you're needed out in the field this morning, is it?"

"No, but I was going to go myself into Seireitei proper and see what I could pick up about the Hollow attacks in the local vicinity," Juushirou grabbed up the blue pouch with very bad grace, putting it to his brow with a sigh and leaning back against the wood panels that made up Ugendou's walls. "I know, I know, I'm like this every time, but really, I had been feeling so much better of late. I've been taking the new remedies Unohana-taichou sends over by way of Shiki-chan each week and I thought they were beginning to have an impact."

"Mm, probably they are, but you're worrying about Tenichi-kun," Shunsui pressed his lips together, sauntering across the chamber and dropping down with a light thud opposite his friend. 'Yes, I know about it,' as Juushirou sent him a startled look, "at least, bits and pieces. I knew that there had been some incidents, and I'm sorry for not discussing it with you sooner, but you were already on one crusade and it seemed unlikely to be something that would affect you or your squad. Just some District idiots getting political, nothing more serious. However... according to Sora-chan's summary of this morning's Vice Captain's meeting..." he shrugged. "Maybe not. Tenichi might not be yours any more, but I know you haven't fully let go of him. And, from what Souja-kun told Sora, the circumstances of this one are messed up."

"It makes no sense, and you're right, I am bothered by it," Juushirou groaned, closing his eyes briefly as he allowed the cool liquid from the ice bag to trickle over his hot brow and down his cheeks. 'I didn't sleep so very well last night trying to puzzle out how he was taken, and I didn't get very far. Probably that explains this,' he gestured to his body, "but it's a nuisance all the same."

"Did Enishi talk to you about their meeting?" Shunsui asked, and Juushirou shrugged.

"The bare bones," he replied. "He took over my share of the drill duties as well as his own, so there wasn't time for more. He's priceless, because he never complains, but it leaves me sitting here feeling highly useless."

"That's what a Vice Captain is for. Doing your work when you can't or don't want to," Shunsui grinned. "Call it training. One day he'll benefit from all this experience."

"Yeah," Juushirou shot his friend a rueful look. "So? What was this 'everything' you planned on discussing with me?"

“Like this?” Shunsui arched an eyebrow, looking sceptical, and Juushirou nodded.

“I’m bored,” he said plaintively. “I’m not having an attack, Shunsui. I did cough a little, last night, but not very much since this morning, and no blood. I have a headache and I’m hot and bothered, but quite in my wits and perfectly able to talk, even if I’m not in such a good shape to wield a sword. At least make me feel as though I’m doing something worthwhile. Tell me what you know about the abductions — or the Hollows — or anything, so I can pretend I’m doing useful work this afternoon instead of wasting time holed up in bed.”

“All right,” Shunsui grinned, but relented, reaching an arm across to shut the sliding door, then shuffling around to face his friend once more. “What I know comes from Kaoru-chan, whose friend Sakura is in Ninth. The girl that was taken from there remembers nothing at all about the incident, and from what Sora said, Anabomi’s been covering it up so even Shirogane-dono and Guren-sama didn’t know it happened. Anyway, the M.O is pretty classic. Shinigami is of low rank. Shinigami is patrolling in some area away from Inner Seireitei. Shinigami is seized by unknown individuals who cuff them and take them to a secure location. Ransom note is sent. Ransom is paid, shinigami is returned. Most likely they’re knocked unconscious on abduction, and so remember nothing when they’re returned. I also heard that Anabomi did a spiritual scan of the girl when she was brought back, for traces of foreign *reiryoku*, but found nothing of any use to their inquiries.”

“The same happened in Eleventh?”

“Ikata is very outspoken. Sora said he’s not tried to keep it a secret, and has complained about Minachi’s high-handed dealing with it for good measure to anyone who’d listen,” Shunsui nodded. “From what she said, yes. The two in Eleventh were taken, held, and returned in the same way.”

“Away from Inner Seireitei,” Juushirou murmured. “Yet Tenichi was taken here — in a place where there are no easy access points for District, but plenty for shinigami.”

“You think it’s an inside job?” Shunsui’s eyes became slits, and Juushirou shrugged.

“Its possible, though I’m trying to think otherwise,” he said wearily. “Nobody saw anything. Souja has been investigating, so has Kikyue, but nothing has come of it. How can a shinigami of Tenichi’s rank and level just disappear into nothing in the midst of what’s meant to be a

safe location unless someone was paid to look the other way? The trouble is pinpointing who, where and why. I don't have any of the above, just a vague sense of unease about the whole thing — certainly not enough to build a case on. And, if I'm wrong, I don't want to make unfounded accusations."

"Have you told Ketsui that his brother is missing yet?" Shunsui asked, and Juushirou shook his head.

"No, but I must," he responded darkly. "Another thing preying on my mind. I was hoping we'd have more news sooner than this, even a note or a ransom demand so we could confirm where he is. From what Enishi said, though, Souja hadn't had any note by the time they had their meeting this morning."

He pulled the blanket more firmly around him, dumping the ice pack back onto the tatami mat floor and stifling a dry cough. "It makes me wonder what the delay is. Maybe it isn't like the others, but someone is trying to make it look as though it's connected to throw us off the scent."

"You think he was taken for other reasons?" Shunsui asked quietly, and Juushirou shrugged.

"It worries me," he said gravely. "That's all."

"It worries you, and you make yourself sick in the process, so we all end up worrying about you," Shunsui sighed, rubbing his temples. "Look, delegate this one to me, all right? I don't pretend I know the lad as well as you, nor have I been his Captain, so I can't say I've that kind of bond with him. Maybe that's better, though, considering. Let me look into it. I'll deploy some of Eighth and see what I can find out. I'm sure Souja would be glad of some help, and you have enough on your plate investigating the Hollow activity."

"I appreciate what you're saying, but I can't," Juushirou shook his head. "Tenichi and Ketsui are my recruits, Shunsui. Even if Tenichi belongs to Hirata now, he's still one of mine. I can't shake that — I have a responsibility to him and his safety."

"You have no such thing," Shunsui shook his head firmly. "You take the world onto those skinny shoulders of yours and they're just not big enough to carry it all. Tenichi is a grown man. He's not your recruit any more, he's Hirata's Eighth Seat and it's up to Seventh to do the legwork and track him down. Ketsui is your concern, true enough, but if it comes to it, you can get Kirio-chan to talk to him, set him straight and explain. They're not children and you can't protect them, even if you want to. This is the problem with making your squad your family

— sometimes you blur the line and see your siblings instead of your subordinates.”

“Maybe,” Juushirou let out a heavy sigh. “It’s the only way I know how to do it, though. It’s how I am, and it won’t change. Whatever squad he’s in now, I still feel I have a duty to help if Tenichi is in trouble.”

“Right now you have a duty to your Division to get well,” Shunsui said firmly. “You know it and so do I. I’m glad you were sensible enough to stay in bed today, at the very least.”

“Naoko told me that she’d send a message to Fourth Division if I thought about getting up and taking my training drills, and have someone come and sedate me,” a faint, sheepish smile touched Juushirou’s pale lips. “She’s very forceful, sometimes, and she takes my health even more seriously than Enishi does. I didn’t feel up to arguing with her, so I let her have her way and sent her off to take charge of the recruits Enishi was meant to oversee doing their various chores.”

“You weren’t brave enough to defy her, though,” Shunsui pursed his lips, letting out a low whistle. “I underestimated Naoko-chan’s ability to emulate Unohana-taichou, but I guess it’s there deep down, even if the healing side isn’t.”

“That probably makes Naoko a touch more frightening,” Juushirou murmured, and Shunsui laughed appreciatively.

“Perhaps, but she was right, and I’m glad she spoke up and told you what she thought,” he responded evenly. “If you’re less fevered tomorrow, we’ll both go and look into this — how’s that? I’ll offer my personal services as your side-kick, and that’s a rare thing I don’t give many people, so be honoured. If you think there’s someone on the inside playing devils, the more people we have investigating it the better.”

“All right,” Juushirou looked relieved. “Thank you, Shunsui. If we both tackle it, maybe we’ll make up for lost time. Hirata will be back too, soon, and...”

“Unless I miss my guess, he’s already back,” Shunsui turned, his eyes narrowing slightly as he glanced towards the door. “In fact, I have this strong feeling he’s heading this way. Call it a hunch if you like, but I think I just heard a bird of prey flap its spiritual wings.”

“Souja’s told Hirata about Tenichi,” Juushirou deduced, and Shunsui nodded.

“That would be my first guess, too,” he agreed with a sigh. “And when you’re all bundled up like this as well, but never mind. I think he’s coming here, and doubtless Souja’s told him you’ve been helping in their search. Some old habits die hard — I guess we’ll have to hear him out.”

“Taichou?”

At that moment there was a light knock at the door, followed by the voice of Kira Hideharu, one of Juushirou’s seated officers. “Taichou, Endou-taichou is here. He wants to see you. I told him you weren’t feeling well, but he says it’s important and... well... can I let him in?”

There was an edge of nervousness to the man’s tones, and Juushirou pressed his lips together, glancing at his friend.

“I can feel it too, now,” he murmured. “I’m trying not to use my spiritual senses much while my temperature’s unsteady, but it’s hard to ignore it.”

“Hirata’s not happy, and he’s put the wind up Kira when Kira tried to dissuade him,” Shunsui agreed grimly. “I wonder just what exactly Souja said.”

“Taichou?” Kira’s voice sounded anxious, even pleading. “Please, if you’re awake, will you answer me? I’m really sorry to be disturbing you, but Endou-taichou...”

“It’s all right, Kira. Let him come in,” Juushirou raised his voice, his hoarse tones carrying across the small chamber. “I’m awake, and S... Kyouraku-taichou is with me, so he won’t be disturbing me at all.”

There was a faintly audible sigh of relief, followed by the murmur of words on the other side of the divide, and Shunsui grinned despite himself.

“Kira’s sword work might be better than it was and he’s probably a solid member of your squad these days,” he reflected, “but his courage and deference when faced with senior officers, even ones he went to school with, still leaves something to be desired.”

“He does his best,” Juushirou responded simply, and Shunsui let out a chuckle.

“I see. You won’t let me criticise one of your own? I suppose that makes sense. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to imply a slight against Thirteenth.”

Before Juushirou could respond, there was the sound of the door

sliding back, and both men turned to see their comrade and old school friend step over the threshold, entering the chamber and pulling the sliding door shut with a snap behind him. He was still dressed in Clan robes, his red Endou cloak flapping around his shoulders, and one look at his expression told Juushirou that his former classmate was not here to ask after anyone's health.

As a boy, Hirata had been unimposing, but as a shinigami, that impression had changed. The weight of the Endou had demanded him to play the part of the confident Clansman, even when he had his own inward doubts, and his sword, Tsumi no Fuuhi, was renowned among the members of Inner Seireitei as one of the most ruthlessly powerful among the current Gotei. Juushirou had never seen his younger classmate as threatening or frightening in any way, but in that moment, as he absorbed the grim line of Hirata's mouth and the hard, unreadable expression in the pale blue eyes, he realised that the impression was not simply the junior officers' over-imagination. His aura prickled around his body, held in check only by what was a steely sense of will and purpose, but Juushirou could tell that Tsumi no Fuuhi was angry, and that Hirata himself was only just keeping his hunter's instinct in check.

"I'm sorry to come when you're sick," he said now, bowing his head slightly towards the Thirteenth Captain. "I didn't know, but it can't wait."

He cast Shunsui a glance, long and hard, then turned back to Juushirou.

"I need to talk to you. Alone."

"Ouch," Shunsui pretended to wince, holding up his hands in mock-surrender. "How to make an old friend feel unwelcome, Hirata-kun — the temperature in here dropped by about a hundred degrees the moment you looked my way."

"Shut up," Hirata's eyes snapped with impatience. "This isn't a time to be joking around. I need to speak to Juushirou. It's nothing to do with you, so if you don't mind..."

"Maybe I do mind, though," Shunsui said evenly, folding his arms across his chest and making no attempt to get up from the floor of the chamber. "Juushirou isn't well. He's not in any fit state to deal with you in this kind of temper, and I'm certainly not going to let him be subjected to your flaring spirit power when he's already running a fever. Get your bird back in harness and shut off the hunter, else there'll be no conversation at all."

“Shunsui...” Hirata’s eyes became near slits, and Shunsui raised an eyebrow, meeting the younger Captain’s gaze with an even, unhurried one of his own.

“I can beat you, if I have to, though I don’t want to, because it will make Juu sad,” he said evenly, his tones measured and calm despite the implication in his words. “I’ll say it again. Calm down or you won’t be speaking to Juu at all.”

Hirata opened his lips as if to retort, but at that moment Juushirou coughed, holding up his hands as if to demand a ceasefire.

“Not... not in my chamber,” he managed, between spasms. “Hirata... please... it’s not making it any easier with your *reiryoku* flaring up l..like that.”

Hirata’s eyes widened, the anger dissipating from his expression as though something in the white-haired man’s words had risen him from a spell, and Shunsui sighed, slowly shaking his head.

“See? Now you made him cough,” he told the visitor reproachfully. “It’s no good, Hirata-kun. You’re old enough to do better, especially when Kira told you Juu wasn’t feeling one hundred percent.”

“I’m sorry,” Hirata’s expression glittered with guilt, and he dropped his head apologetically in his friends’ direction, the flaring, predatorial reiatsu that up till a few moments before had surrounded him dissipating to a dull hum in light of his contrition. “I didn’t mean... it was just...”

He trailed off, as if unsure how to continue, and Shunsui gestured for him to sit down.

“Sometimes, you know, you let it rail too easily out of hand,” he said quietly, as Hirata hesitated, sending a concerned glance in Juushirou’s direction. “When it’s us, under normal conditions, we know how to handle it and you, if need be. With other people, though, you might easily give the wrong impression. You’re the one who likes to say you’re not that kind of Endou. Keep tabs on it, else you’ll cross the line once too many and someone you like will get hurt.”

“Something’s happened, though, hasn’t it?” Juushirou kept his voice to a cautious murmur, waving his bespectacled friend down to join them with a weary smile. “Sit, it’s all right. You’ve dropped your reiatsu and I can breathe again now — my chest is a little raw and I’m running a temperature, so I’m not really up to clipping hawk wings today, that’s all.”

“Kira did tell me, and I’m sorry,” Hirata removed his glasses,

rubbing the bridge of his nose as if trying to relieve some of the tension physically. “I should have stopped and checked myself before I stepped inside, but I’m tired and frustrated and then I saw Shunsui was here...”

“You really want rid of me, don’t you?” Shunsui feigned a hurt expression. “That’s charming. I thought we were friends, Hirata-kun.”

“It’s not that,” Hirata shook his head impatiently. “It’s not me wanting rid of you, just what I have to talk to Juushirou about is something that’s top secret. Even more so, right now, given everything that’s happened. I don’t want to discuss it with more people than I have to — particularly not with people who don’t know anything to begin with.”

“Hirata?” Juushirou looked concerned. “What do you mean, top secret? If this is to do with Tenichi, Shunsui knows all about that. If not...”

“It is about Tenichi,” Hirata agreed, “but it’s not just about that. I know Kikyue came to you, and I know Souja’s been open with everyone about the boy’s abduction, so it’s not exactly a private matter. What I want to talk to you about, though, is.”

He eyed Shunsui doubtfully for a moment.

“You don’t trust me?” Shunsui asked softly, and Hirata grimaced.

“I do,” he said frankly. “More than myself, a lot of the time. What you said is right — probably you or Juushirou are the only people who can face me down when my spirit power flares up and threatens to overwhelm me like it did just now. I rely on the both of you to make sure I stay the proper side of the line — but this is a special circumstance.”

“Something I already know about, but that Shunsui doesn’t?” Juushirou rubbed his chin pensively. “There aren’t many things like that. I discuss most things with Shunsui — and I’m pretty sure you do too, as a rule.”

“Yes, but this is...”

Hirata stopped mid-sentence, digging into his hand-embroidered *obi* and pulling the parchment from beneath its folds. “Here. Read this. Don’t say anything, just read it. When you’ve read it, you’ll understand why I want to talk to you in private. It’s complicated and time is ticking away.”

“All right,” Juushirou was nonplussed, but he took the sheet,

unfolding it and running his hazel gaze down the columns of kanji. As he was doing so, Shunsui sat back on his hands, a gesture that to anyone else would look as though he was just lounging all over the place as usual, but to the white-haired shinigami, meant he was giving his friend extra space to read in peace without fear of having the document read over his shoulder. Curious as Shunsui could be, Juushirou knew he would not try to read the letter without Hirata's express permission. It was one of the characteristics he most liked about his lazy, enigmatic friend — Shunsui was often infuriating, but it was always honourably done, underpinned by the thick vein of integrity that characterised him as a shinigami. Sword-wise, he might be one of the most powerful in the Gotei — indeed, only Juushirou and a couple of others could confidently raise a blade to his without fear of quick defeat, but as an ally, his strength was his loyalty to those who had won his trust.

As soon as he had read the contents of the letter, Juushirou understood Hirata's request for secrecy. He re-folded the sheet, passing it back with a grim expression on his thin features.

“Tenichi's ransom note came, huh?”

“It did,” Hirata agreed bleakly. “It seems it was waiting particularly for me, which means that whoever sent it knew I was away and when I would be back.”

“Juu thinks whoever abducted your Eighth Seat is somehow affiliated with Inner Seireitei,” Shunsui put in thoughtfully. “I don't know what's in the letter or why Juu's also now looking like someone stole his favourite pet, but if you don't mind me leaving huge plotholes in the conversation, I'll try to adlib along with you both and see if I can offer my thoughts.”

“An inside job?” Hirata's eyes slitted, and for a brief instant the predator glinted once more beneath hooded lids. Juushirou shrugged.

“Or someone on the inside passing information to someone else,” he replied. “I don't know. It seems like they know too much about the Gotei movements, that's all. Providing this is the same people who took the other... you do know that others have been abducted and ransomed, too?”

Hirata nodded.

“Souja filled me in,” he agreed briskly, “as far as he was able. To me, it sounds like Tenichi's abduction was in the style of those, but not the same *modus operandi*. This note almost proves it. They're similar, but not the same. What they asked of the other divisions isn't

what they've asked of us... and yet..."

"They're still asking for something of benefit to them, something your squad can, theoretically, provide," Juushirou looked apprehensive. "I'm going to strengthen security around Thirteenth, just in case. The information in question belongs to you, but it's not unknown to me, either. If they know what you know, then they might... know I know too."

"Oh, good grief, that was cryptic enough to make a top rank spy have a nervous breakdown," Shunsui remarked. "If you're not going to tell me what you're talking about, at least try and vary the verb a few times so I don't get my brain tangled trying to keep up."

"Sorry," Juushirou sent his companion an apologetic look. "I suppose we were speaking in tongues."

"Whatever you were speaking in, it wasn't vernacular Japanese," Shunsui agreed ruefully, moving to get to his feet. "Maybe I ought to go and leave you boys to it. Hirata's calmed down, so I don't need to protect you from the Wind Hawk any longer — I could saunter back to Eighth and see whether Sora's done all my paperwork for me in my absence."

"Has she ever done, yet?" Juushirou asked curiously, and Shunsui laughed, shaking his head.

"You don't know Sora-chan if you think she's that easily manipulated into filing documents and signing releases," he said with a grin. "I can hope, though. That's also a part of Vice Captain training, or so I tell her whenever she complains."

He winked at Hirata.

"Keep the bird in chains and play nicely, all right? I don't want to come in here and find Juu choking up blood the next time I visit — which will be soon," this last to his white-haired friend.

"No, wait," Hirata held up his hands, and Shunsui turned, shooting the other Captain a quizzical look.

"Yes?"

"Sit," Hirata sighed, resignation in his pale blue eyes. "Sit down, and listen. I'll tell you. You're smart and you might see something I haven't — we haven't."

"It's top secret, isn't it?" Shunsui reminded him. "You don't want anyone who doesn't need to know knowing about it — right?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

“If it’s not my business, I don’t have to be here to hear it. You don’t have to pander to me — I’m not offended, not if it’s like that.”

“Hirata’s right,” Juushirou interjected. “If he’s happy discussing it, I’d rather talk it out with you. I’m not fully on the ball tonight, and you’re sober, which means you might stand a better chance of being rational. Besides, you can keep a secret. It’s a delicate matter, but I think your input would help.”

“Because I’m sober?” Amusement danced in Shunsui’s brown eyes, but at a nod from Hirata, he retook his seat, folding his arms and slipping his hands into the sleeves of his *haori* as he gazed at them expectantly. “Well? If you feel that way, I suppose I can spare a little bit more time. Sneaking back when Sora’s gone to bed usually means I escape the lecture till the morning, and first thing I’m never awake enough to absorb all her complaints, so I don’t mind. If you’re sure, though, Hirata — I don’t want you to feel I’m forcing it out of you.”

“It’s not that,” Hirata admitted. “I just don’t want any bloodshed. You mustn’t raise it with anyone, Shunsui. Anyone at all. It’s not something you ought to talk to us about, either, unless it’s entirely safe to do so.”

“Sounds like trouble waiting to happen, but I’m all ears,” Shunsui responded lazily. “Well? What is this big secret the pair of you have huddled together over?”

“It goes back to when Thirteenth Division was stationed in Seventh District,” Juushirou glanced at his younger companion, who nodded his head. “That’s how I know about it, and you don’t. It’s more Hirata’s story than mine — it involves him more — but I was aware of it... of them... because I was his Captain and, well, he sought my advice a couple of times regarding them.”

“Them?” Shunsui’s eyebrows shot up, and Hirata inclined his head once more.

“The Kitsune,” he said softly, his tones barely above a whisper. “A group of underground Urahara who fled from District Three in the weeks before Keitsune-dono was arrested and arraigned for the *reidoku*.”

“Kitsune?” Shunsui pursed his lips. “Like, foxes?”

“Not exactly,” Juushirou’s expression became troubled. “At the time Urahara Keitsune was arrested, there were, apparently, rumours that some of those Keitsune had relied on for support in his work had

managed to secure their safe escape by bartering information about their scientific experiments and, essentially, compounding the Council's case against their leader. In reality, it doesn't seem to have helped them any, for those who turned on Keitsune were considered despicable within their Clan, and were banished, although most of them fled before any sentence could actually be carried out. Due to Urahara pressure, the Council ultimately offered them no protection. In fact, I believe any who were alive at the time of Keitsune-dono's execution are also still technically under warrant of death by *both* Council and Urahara law, only none of them have ever been caught."

"Most of the Urahara didn't want Keitsune killed, but understood it had to happen once all of the evidence was open for public view, and these people were the ones who opened it up and made it impossible to ignore. Rikaya-dono had no choice but to denounce his brother and cut ties," Hirata agreed sadly. "It brought shame to the Urahara and left a lot of bad feeling in District Three — to the extent that even Nagesu-dono, with his reputation for pacifism and reconciliation, has either not wanted to or not been able to repeal the orders against these people. The exiled group were labelled 'Keitsune no Uragirimono' = the ones who betrayed Keitsune. In exile, they changed the name. *Keitsune* became *Kitsune*, and that's how they call themselves — wild foxes running feral from their mother Clan rather than traitors to a long dead man."

"That's ugly, but not entirely surprising," Shunsui mused, and Juushirou could tell he was digesting every detail, mulling it over carefully. "If I bothered to read Oniisama's dusty records, I'd probably find some reference to them from the Council proceedings of the time. From how you're talking, though, these Kitsune are still very much around. More, you know far too much not to have some direct involvement with them — so you obviously don't hold such negative opinions of them as the Urahara do."

"Mm," Hirata sighed heavily. "The Kitsune are almost entirely made up of Clansfolk from the North of District Three. It's also through this strain that ancient and traditional ties with the Endou are at their strongest. Keitsune's father — the head of the Urahara before Rikaya-dono — also married a part-Endou princess, quite probably on the advice of these families. In fact, it's a very strong possibility that his wife came from the Northern regions herself. I don't know for sure. Without the Urahara records, it's hard to be certain, and the Urahara have preferred to forget they ever had any blood ties to us at all. All I can be sure of is that a large proportion of the people Keitsune relied on to help with his research and testing belonged to one or other of these northern lines... at least one of which was significantly high

ranking to create a subsequent scandal when the arrests began.”

“You’ve spoken about the Urahara in your blood before,” Shunsui remarked. “I didn’t realise it went both ways — you traded your hime to them and they to you.”

“There were, once, positive trade and other links between our two Clans,” Hirata laughed bitterly. “Hard to imagine now, but once, it was that way. Being so geographically distant, our land had resources Third lacked and vice versa, so it was mutually beneficial and marriages between the families helped keep the rapport amicable. By the time of the Keitsune incident, though, Grandfather was in charge and his policy was generally war rather than peace. The diplomatic arrangements with Third lapsed, but some individuals on both sides maintained ties. That’s why so many Urahara fled to District Seven, even though it was a long trek. The Kitsune fled there too, and hid. They literally went underground — took over the old Sekkiseki mines that had been abandoned or exhausted and made their home in those tunnels.”

“More like moles than foxes, then, though I suppose having a den of tunnels isn’t entirely unlike a fox,” Shunsui reflected. Juushirou nodded.

“When we were in Seventh, we encountered the Kitsune,” he said slowly. “One or two of them had been working for Misashi-sama, in such a secret capacity not even Sumire-dono knew it was going on. He’d used them as a network of informants, promising them protection against Seimaru and Shouichi-sama, and therefore when the culls were taking place, the Kitsune escaped. They always knew when a hit was going to happen... and avoided it by going back underground. With the Sekkiseki residue still deep in those tunnels, they were never found.”

“Misashi-dono is a sly one, isn’t he,” Shunsui looked grudgingly impressed. “So many tricks up his sleeve, no wonder he managed to survive living in such a dangerous environment.”

“Mm,” Hirata pressed his hands together absently, and Juushirou knew he was still fighting to keep Tsumi no Fuuhi’s spirit from breaking its shackles and flying free. “All of those who were involved with Keitsune’s case are dead now. Spiritually gifted folk have their life force stunted by being in constant contact with Sekkiseki, and so most of them succumbed before I even knew about them. Those who survive are descendents — those who were born in Seventh and they are loyal to the Endou. Where Seimaru and Grandfather abused their historic ties to the Urahara, Father protected and provided for them,

and so a bond was established. The Kitsune are now Endou spies — and as such, when Keitarou first appeared on the horizon and when Eiraki disappeared, they were dispatched to gather information in an attempt to track him down.”

“Keitarou,” an ice chill ran down Juushirou’s spine and he gazed at Hirata sharply. “Are you saying... do you think...?”

“No proof,” Shunsui said firmly, before Hirata could speculate. “Go on, Hirata. Finish what you were saying. We’ll come to idle speculation later.”

“When I became Head of the Clan, Father handed control of the Kitsune over to me, and I’ve divulged it to Souja but kept it, so far, from Kikyue,” Hirata continued pensively. “Nobody else in my Division or my family knows. Ai certainly knows nothing — I wouldn’t involve her any more than Father involved Mother. Souja is my heir, so he needs to be abreast of things, but it’s too risky to let anyone else in on the secret. The wrong careless word or command and they could be put in jeopardy. They work loyally and tirelessly and put their skills to our benefit without question — its not my intention to get any of them killed.”

“Let me guess,” Shunsui’s eyes became thoughtful. “Your note from our friendly neighbourhood kidnapper wants information on the Kitsune in return for Tenichi’s life.”

“Got it in one,” Hirata groaned, “and whatever I do, I’m stuck.”

“What do you want to do?” Juushirou asked quizzically, and Hirata shrugged.

“The hawk in me wants to go tear shreds into people till I find the truth and get Tenichi back,” he admitted, a note of shame in his voice. “The rational shinigami wants me to play it carefully and not do anything to make the situation worse. There’s absolutely no question of me handing over the location of the Kitsune to anyone, whether I know their names or not. Even Juushirou doesn’t know where their main base is, and I’d rather it remained that way. Still, though, there’s the boy’s life to consider. I can’t just discard him. He’s one of Seventh squad and it would be bad — no, terrible for morale if I were to do that.”

“If you can’t betray the Kitsune and you want to save Tenichi, what do you do?” Shunsui bit down absently on his lip. “It’s a tough one. Souja knows all of this, you said?”

“He does,” Hirata agreed. “He has a close friendship with one of the

Kitsune boys — they played together as children, and the boy's father was one of my most trusted agents up until two or three years ago.”

“When... something happened to him?”

“He died,” Hirata said succinctly, “of Sekkiseki exposure. I told you. It shortens their lifespan. We’ve tried to find a way to overcome it, but removing the Sekkiseki removes their protection against outside interference, so they won’t have it. Better to live shorter lives and die free, they say, than aim for immortality and spend it in prison. So long as the Urahara indictment against them remains, they can’t risk coming out into the open. Even though these are all guiltless descendants far removed from the original incident, they still have to carry the burden all the same.”

He shrugged his shoulders.

“In any case, the man’s son, Joumei, is now about the same age as Souja, and effectively, the leader of the group with his father’s death,” he added. “He’s a descendant of that most high ranking family I mentioned earlier on, and the other Kitsune hold them in high renown. I encouraged the friendship because it’s important for them to have absolute trust in one another, and it helps keep the trust between us and them for another generation. For that reason, too, I’ve had Souja send the warning. They’ll get it and Joumei will take them all underground, far from prying eyes... in the meantime... I need to find my missing squad member and I’m not confident that calling the kidnappers’ bluff will do the trick.”

“If they know about these Kitsune, they obviously have a deep, dark reason for wanting to find them,” Shunsui said slowly. “I know now why Juu was so upset at the mention of Keitarou’s name. It’s been a very long time since he made any kind of move, but he’d have a motive to do this, wouldn’t he? They betrayed his father and we know how dotty he is about that subject. It would be an easy leap for him to take a shinigami from your squad and turn the screw.”

“But Juushirou thinks that it’s an inside job,” Hirata pointed out, “and with the information that they have, he might be right.”

“Which leaves the Urahara?” Shunsui asked, and Juushirou grimaced.

“Nagesu-dono is too reasoned, Shiketsu-dono too level-headed,” he objected.

“It doesn’t have to be someone at the top of the Clan, though,” Shunsui pointed out. “It might be a lower ranking officer. The Urahara

have two squads — Third and Twelfth. There are a lot of Third Clansfolk dotted between the two squads. It could be any of them.”

“Or we could be grasping at straws because even something as awful as an internal revolt is better than the alternative,” Juushirou said grimly. “None of us want to think that Keitarou might be stirring again, but we can’t entirely rule it out. Hirata, I’ve had Naoko investigating Hollow activity in the Districts, and we think there’s something odd about it. I’m going to bring it to a Captain’s meeting when I’m well enough to do so. Tenichi’s abduction just makes it all the more important we do so.”

“We need evidence. Hard evidence,” Shunsui drummed his fingers against the tatami mat floor, unable to fully hide his agitation as the subject moved into less pleasant territory. “We have none. Wild suppositions from hysterical Captains aren’t going to cut it. There are a lot of other explanations, including recalcitrant Urahara wanting to mop up a botched security job from almost a century and a half earlier. First, though, we need to find Tenichi... and hope that in the meantime he’s strong enough to hold out against whatever has him.”

“That’s a point, you know,” Juushirou observed softly. “Why Tenichi? He’s a high ranking officer, much more difficult to nab than a recruit or a low seat. He’s strong, potentially a leader of the future. Why take someone like that when there’s easier pickings on the ground?”

“Because he’s someone valuable to my squad?” Hirata suggested. “Taking someone powerful suggests a powerful opponent, and that’s good enough propaganda.”

“Mm, maybe,” Shunsui rubbed his chin absently, “but Juu has a point. It’s still a gamble... that might require more thinking, later down the line, once we’ve located the lad and managed to get him safely back here in one piece.”

“Providing we do,” Juushirou spoke ominously.

“That’s the fever talking,” Shunsui shot him a reproachful glance. “You’re normally the one who believes in things, however small the probability of them happening. Pessimism is generally my department — lets not poach each other’s jobs now, all right?”

“Unless we can think of a way to track down his abductors, though, Juushirou might be right,” Hirata rubbed his temples. “We’ve no clues to go on. Souja says there’s nothing to indicate any sign of abduction in the near vicinity, and I’d trust him and Kikyue to have checked every possibility. Souja even said he raised it with the Vice Captains

this morning, but so far, nothing has come of it.”

“Kirio said that Tenichi was here, but as far as she knew, he’d gone back to Seventh before curfew was called,” Juushirou agreed. “You can talk to her as well, if you’d like, Hirata, but Kikyue already did and she shared whatever she knew.”

He frowned.

“Now we’ve had a note, it’s for sure he’s been abducted,” he added grimly. “There’s no keeping it any longer from Ketsui... I ought to send for him and tell him what’s happened.”

“Not while Hirata’s here. It’d scare him, seeing the Seventh Captain on the verge of losing his spiritual temper,” Shunsui shook his head. “I know you’ve reined it in, Hirata, but it’s still there, and if he saw that then he’d realise how serious the matter was. Talk to him in the morning, Juu — when you’ve had a chance to sleep off your fever. We might have had more news, then, and...”

“Ukitake-taichou! Kyouraku-taichou, Endou-taichou!”

Before Shunsui could finish his sentence, the door of Ugendou was flung back, revealing a breathless, red-faced Makoto, an anxious look on his face. “Houjou... I mean, Fukutaichou just received an urgent message from the Fourth Division, and he sent me to notify you at once!”

“An urgent message... from the *Fourth* Division?” Juushirou’s eyes widened and he glanced at his two friends, who returned his gaze with equally non-plussed looks. “From Unohana-taichou, then? Something urgent, requiring the attention of Captains and Vice Captains right away?”

“Yes, sir, right away,” Makoto’s eyes glittered with a mixture of apprehension and urgency, and he nodded his head emphatically. “There’s been a distress call... all squads are to be on urgent alert in case their services are needed!”

“A distress call?” Shunsui echoed, and Juushirou felt a sudden cold sensation begin to run through his body, sneaking up to and closing gently around his heart. Without thinking about it, his fingers drifted to his throat, where a silver pendant bearing the crest of the Kuchiki Clan hung, normally out of sight beneath his robes.

“Explain,” he said now, his words more abrupt than he had intended, and Makoto bit his lip, clearly unsure how to begin his message.

“Take a breath, Atsudane, then do as your Captain commands you,” Shunsui said softly, and Makoto sighed, slowly nodding his head.

“It’s the Spiritless Zone, sir,” he said at length, an almost apologetic look in his dark eyes, as though he personally was responsible for generating the bad news. “A distress siren was triggered from one of the protected regions, and try as they might, nobody from Fourth has been able to make contact with any of the shinigami deployed to that area. After consulting all the evidence, Unohana-taichou believes that the Zone may have come under some kind of hostile attack, perhaps from Hollows or from some other entity. She’s working as quickly as she can to unlock the safety barriers to open a gateway down to that location, but in the meantime, she wanted all active military squads on alert, just in case...”

he swallowed hard, then,

“just in case when they open the gate, some kind of enemy force manages to slip into Seireitei and launch an attack there, too.”

“A distress flare...” Hirata’s eyes became stricken, his gaze shifting to Juushirou, whose face, despite his fever, had drained entirely of colour. “And no response?”

“Originally they thought it might be a technical glitch, but none of the shinigami on duty were able to patch through a signal, and even Unohana-taichou wasn’t able to make contact,” Makoto agreed anxiously. “Houjou-fukutaichou sent me to alert you. He and Naokosan are getting the squad primed in case of attack — but he said you ought to know right away, and when Kira said Kyouraku-taichou and Endou-taichou were with you...”

“We need to go back to our own squads and issue similar orders,” Hirata murmured, and Shunsui frowned, shaking his head.

“Juu, you don’t know that anything bad has happened,” he said softly, and Juushirou jerked his head up, hearing his name but not a lot else as his mind began to race towards horrific, unthinkable possibilities. “Hirata, I can’t leave him here alone like this, not when there’s a message like that and he’s already sick. Atsudane, run to Eighth and tell Sora that she’s to assume full command of the Division and prepare accordingly. She’ll be frantic enough herself, I imagine, but she’ll do as she’s told because it’s a direct order. Tell her I’m detained at Thirteenth and I’ll be back as soon as I can... in the meantime, she doesn’t need to wait for my further instructions to act.”

“Yes, sir,” Makoto seemed relieved at the excuse to leave, saluting Shunsui sharply before withdrawing from the chamber. Silence fell,

then, slowly, Hirata got to his feet.

"I can't delegate this to Souja. Not with things as they are," he said regretfully. "I'm sorry, Juushirou. I need to go... though you have my word that if Seventh are called on and there's anything we can do, we'll do it without hesitation."

"You should go," Juushirou's words felt alien to him, even as he heard himself speak them, detached and calm as though his vocal chords had become detached from the chaos ruling his mind. "You too, Shunsui. It's an order from a senior member of the Council of Elders and we ought to follow instructions."

"Uh-uh," Shunsui shook his head, but Juushirou got to his feet, putting his hand against the wall to steady his fevered body before reaching for his *shihakushou*.

"Juushirou?" Hirata stared at his friend, aghast, and Shunsui was on his feet in a moment, grabbing the white-haired Captain by the shoulders and pulling him back down.

"You are not going anywhere," he said firmly, a forceful look in his brown eyes. "You're sick and there's no way you'd be able to hold together any kind of objectivity with an alert message like that going the rounds. Enishi and Naoko have Thirteenth in hand, and they'll do what's needed, so you stay here. In this state..."

"Get off me," Juushirou pushed his companion aside, grabbing the *shihakushou* and shooting the Eighth Captain a dark glare. "This is my division and I still make the rules here. You just commanded one of my men without even thinking about deferring to me, and I'm not having it. This is my Division. I'll do as I like, and in an emergency..."

He trailed off, as a bout of coughing racked through his thin frame, and Shunsui sighed, hitting his brow with his palm in frustration.

"Hirata, you go," he said with a grimace. "Leave this to me. I'll deal with it. Seventh need reassurance right now, and your hunting bird is it."

"All right," Hirata seemed reluctant, but he nodded, glancing at Juushirou for a moment before withdrawing from the room.

"Shunsui, you're not stopping me." Juushirou was already unknotting the tie of his nightrobe, preparing to pull on his black and white uniform. "You know you can't stop me... not with something like this. It's an alert, and an urgent one — I'm not ignoring it and nor should you."

“You’re not thinking about Thirteenth Division or their deployment, though,” Shunsui said softly, sitting back against the wall of the chamber, apparently realising that fighting with his friend was only more likely to bring on a fresh round of coughing. “You’re thinking about Mitsuki — we both know that you are.”

Juushirou faltered, gazing at Shunsui helplessly, unable to suppress completely the tears that prickled at the back of his hazel eyes.

“She promised me she’d come back,” he whispered, the anger slipping from his voice as worry and anguish took over. “All those years ago, when we said goodbye, she promised. I’ve taken care of myself, too. I’ve done what I could to make sure I’d be here, and I’ve waited. When the others came back and she didn’t, I was upset, but I set my mind to waiting a little longer, however long that might be. It was the Spiritless Zone. It wasn’t dangerous. It should be all right. Now... now this...”

“We don’t know what happened,” Shunsui said softly, and Juushirou shook his head, swallowing hard against the bile that rose in his throat at the thought.

“That’s what makes it worse,” he muttered, pulling on his *hakama* and sliding the black *hakamashita* over his pale ribs. “A distress flare with no response pickup suggests something bad. Unohana-taichou is involved directly and throwing caution to the winds by releasing the safety barriers to allow access to what’s been a scientifically protected site for a long long time. She would only do that if she thought her personnel were at risk of their lives.”

“And you’re going to do what? Race in there half-delerious and coughing up blood to run to Mitsuki’s rescue?” Shunsui looked sceptical. “For a start, your *reiryoku* would destabilise anything they’ve worked to do in that zone over the past several years. And, secondly, if you think you can get past me, you won’t get past Daisenpai. She’ll take one look at you and lay you out with a soporific Kidou before you can say Healing Squad. She knows your partiality for Mitsuki and she’ll probably expect you to race in like an idiot to save the day. You might as well sit it out, Juu. They’ll get in there and find out what’s happening, but in the meantime...”

“I can’t sit around here and wait,” Juushirou cut across him, tying the white *obi* about his waist and lifting his *haori* from its peg, sliding it over his arms and hugging it tightly to his body as though it could somehow protect him from the chill in the evening air. “If Mitsuki is in danger, Shunsui, I can’t and I won’t. What you’ve said might be true, but it doesn’t change anything. If Mitsuki’s in trouble, I’m

going.”

“Juu...”

“I have to,” Juushirou said firmly, his words shaking slightly as he reached for the chamber door. “You understand more than you want to admit, so don’t try and stop me. I have to know what happened, Shunsui. I have to see for myself.”

11. Rescue Mission

Chapter Ten: Rescue Mission

Stupid, careless, idiotic girl.

Katsura trudged through the grass, his face the picture of thunder and his fists clenching and unclenching at his sides as he tried to keep his *reiryoku* from flaring out of his control. Losing his temper was not something he often did, but, in the circumstances, he knew that only fortune and Mitsuki's own distracted behaviour had prevented him from making a scene.

The Shinigami camp had been a mess. He had steeled himself for corpses, knowing that they were friends of the girl he had impulsively rescued from the Hollow, but certain that in the circumstances he would at least be able to offer her reassurance that she was not alone with night on the approach. As they had happened on the scene, however, while Mitsuki's attention had been taken by Madeki's faltering pulse, Katsura's eyes had fallen on one thing and one thing only.

Footprints, smudged in blood, leading a trail towards the forest.

His eyes narrowed, dark gaze sparking with uncharacteristic fire. *How many times has she been told? Enter a scene, do your job, leave it clean! An untrained child could draw a connection between the massacre and those prints, Sakaki — it's only lucky for you that Mitsuki's a healer and her priorities were elsewhere! As soon as others get here, they'll pick that up and follow it in a heartbeat. Heedless and unnecessary — wait till we get back to base!*

He paused, casting his gaze over the ground. He had been following the prints from their final victim into the dense thicket that lay beyond, but with each step the evidence of Sakaki's path had become a tiny bit fainter, until he had to bend and examine the blades for shinigami blood residue.

She thinks that because she has no spiritual presence, she's untraceable. That's nonsense right there. What the hell was she thinking?

He sighed, dropping back against the trunk of a nearby tree. The scent of blood was more diluted here, but Katsura could feel it nonetheless, severed specks of a shinigami's life force drifting and dividing on the breeze. Sakaki could not feel such things, therefore

never understood, but to Katsura it was like the ghosts of her victims were haunting this forest, dragged here unwillingly by the young girl's carelessness. Until the rain fell, or enough time passed, they would linger, screaming a silent plea to anyone sensitive enough to hear their calls for justice. Katsura had never had any sympathy for shinigami — the 'enemy', as he had always thought them, but he knew the risk of leaving evidence hanging so close to the scene of crime.

The tracks stopped here, though. Although the air was still saturated with dead shinigami *reishi*, Katsura could tell it didn't go any further. Sakaki couldn't shunpo, and there were no gateways or slipholes through the Rukon divide in this area, therefore a break in the trail meant only one thing.

His sister was here.

He raised his gaze, squinting as he tried to see through the criss-crossed branches. Was that a dark shape he could make out, huddled against the trunk? Reluctantly he reached out his senses, cautiously exploring the air around the shadow before brushing his thought patterns against its, reading whether or not it was alive and whether it was who he sought.

A bevy of slashing, bloodsoaked imagery made him reel back with a gasp, hurriedly pulling his thoughts away from hers as he struggled to regain a hold on his composure. Although reading Sakaki's mind was not a challenge, it was something he shied away from doing, for the thoughts and impulses that lurked there were enough to give him nightmares and he had no mind to be driven mad by the psychotic blood lust of a teenage girl. Right at that moment, though, he had confirmed his suspicions, and he grabbed hold of the tree's supple trunk, giving it a violent shake to dislodge the sleeping assassin from its branches.

At first nothing happened, but as he tried again and then a third time, there was the sound of a creak and a groan, followed by the sharp snap of a branch splitting in two. A moment later, something dark tumbled through the green-leafed boughs, landing with a thud on the grass below.

Katsura watched impassively as the huddled ball of dark fabric began to stir, muttering a string of curses and reaching a hand up to touch her head.

"When you've quite finished taking a nap," he said slowly, and she jerked her head up, staring at him for a full minute before recognition

coupled with resentment flooded her features. She scrambled to her knees, hand moving to her blood-soaked blade, but the movement was clumsy, and Katsura frowned, darting forward to cup the girl's chin in his hands. He raised her gaze forcibly to his, adding to her earlier expletives with one of her own as he made out the blurry haziness of his companion's eyes.

"Drugged?" he asked flatly, and Sakaki hissed, recoiling from his touch and pushing him away.

"Why did you come after me? That wasn't your order," she spat out, her words slightly uneven, but clear enough to reassure Katsura that whatever dose his sister had received, it had been relatively minor. He grimaced, grabbing her by the shoulders and dragging her forcibly and mercilessly to her feet, giving her a short, sharp shake and pushing his head close to hers, anger sparking in his eyes.

"Unless you want me to rewrite your brain patterns for you, you shut up and listen to me," he said blackly, tightening his hold on her shoulders so that she winced. "You're hiding less than a *ri* from the crime scene, covered in the blood of your victims, and what's more, you left a trail. I came here because I *followed* you here. If I could, other people will. You're covered in foreign reiatsu, and it's already breaking down into the atmosphere, making it even easier to pick up. Did nobody ever tell you how to clean up before leaving a kill scene? What was the point in giving you a sword if you're only going to use it to bring us all into danger?"

"Get off me!" Sakaki reacted like a feral cat, kicking and clawing at her brother's skin until he released his grip. "It wasn't my fault! It was the... the... anaesthetic..."

"You were infiltrating a healer's camp," Katsura said inexorably. "You should have known there was a risk of soporific medicine nearby."

"It doesn't matter," Sakaki's eyes became sullen. "I did my job. I killed them. They won't link it back to me."

"What if they had found your trail before I did? What if I hadn't come this way to make sure you were all right?" Katsura demanded. "What do you suppose the penalty is for those convicted of killing Shinigami? Do you want to be hauled to Seireitei to stand trial?"

"They wouldn't be able to do that," Sakaki said coldly.

"No, but it would hardly matter, seeing as you'd be dead before they got you in the dock," Katsura snapped back. "We have to get out

of here. Thanks to you, there are clues a mile wide leading from the scene. Broken branches, blood matter, you name it, it's here. I can sense it, so they will. They'll find every bit of it, which means we can't leave the Spiritless Zone from here. We'll have to travel — and fast."

"You are not taking me anywhere!" Sakaki protested, but Katsura's hand clamped itself around her wrist.

"We're going, and I'm taking you home," he said frankly. "I'm pulling rank. As your older brother, it's my duty to make sure you're all right, whether you like it or not. If you get killed here, Okaasama will cry. You know it. I know it. Whatever sadistic pleasure you take from slitting the throats of these shinigami, put it aside and think for a moment about the people who worry about you, all right? Okaasama wouldn't forgive me either, if I left you here — though I should. If I cover for you all the time, you'll never learn to do it for yourself."

"You think you're so clever," Sakaki muttered, her expression every bit the sulky teenager, but Katsura was not in the mood for listening.

"They'll open one of their gates. Soon, probably. We don't have time for this."

"Don't be such a worry-wart," Sakaki snorted. "It'll be ages before they realise the shinigami here are killed. Days. Months, maybe. They aren't that well connected."

"You left their leader alive."

"He'll die. He was doped up. The anaesthetic will see to him, even if I didn't," Sakaki stifled a yawn. "Will you let go of me? I've no mind to have my molecules mangled by your attempts at shunpo, and I don't need your help to get back home."

"I'm not letting you out of my sight. Not till we're safely back where we should be," Katsura retorted. "You shouldn't be so complacent. It won't take two seconds to alert the Gotei that there are officers down here, and..."

He faltered, clamping his jaw shut as he realised what he had almost given away, but Sakaki wheeled on him, an accusatory expression on her young features.

"Why would that happen?" she demanded, her voice dangerously low. "If you killed the four in the south, and I killed the ones here, why would anyone be sending a distress flare back to Seireitei?"

Katsura pressed his lips together, and Sakaki snorted derisively, shaking her head in disbelief.

“You come and lecture me about leaving loose ends, but this is really about you, isn’t it?” she deduced. “You screwed up. You didn’t kill them. Even now they’re roaming back here...”

“The Hollow killed two of them, wounded a third, probably fatally,” Katsura snapped across her. “The other... the other took it down. I don’t have a sword like you do, and Hollows aren’t that easy to find or control in this area. I did my best.”

He swallowed hard, glad she could not read his thoughts, for the lie hung heavily over his head as though to expose his deception.

“Did they see you?” Sakaki’s inevitable question came, and he quickly shook his head.

“Of course not. What do you take me for?” he lied flatly. “Do you think I’d have let anyone see me then allow them to wander off into the wilderness to tell all and sundry what they saw?”

“I don’t know,” Sakaki eyed him speculatively. “You never do take on anyone on your own. You use the Hollows. It’s hard to know what you would or wouldn’t do if it was up to you and your bare hands.”

“I use the Hollows so I’m not seen,” Katsura returned evenly. “The shinigami killed the Hollow, and that’s what shinigami do. I don’t take as many risks as you do, Saki-chan.”

Except that I walked half-way across the Spiritless Zone with Mitsuki to make sure she was safe from Hollows and... and safe from you, too, if you were still at her shinigami camp. I took the slowest route, detoured where possible and delayed so that we wouldn’t get there when you were still there. Mitsuki saw my face, and even if she doesn’t know my name, there’s far more chance of her remembering it than there is of your drugged Captain doing the same for you, even if he lives. I took all the risks this time, Sakaki — but if I tell you, you’ll tell the people back home. Maybe you’ll turn on me... that’s not an option.

His brows pressed together in consternation.

Whatever impulse made me help Mitsuki, it’s probably better I leave it like this. She thought I was from Seireitei, so she’ll never come look for me in the abandoned Rukon Valley — and without my name, I’m nothing more than another random District stranger passing across her radar. I gave her her life this time, so it’s up to her whether she’s fool enough to lose it by coming back and trying again. I won’t be able to protect her any more, and I shouldn’t even think about it again.

He glanced at Sakaki, letting out a heavy sigh.

I have other things to protect. Even if she's insane, Sakaki is my sister and that's a bond by blood. I can't betray that. I'll get her out of here. Protecting her and my family is much more important than a random shinigami who happened to do good things. Better it ends here.

"I knew I should've killed those others on my way up here," Sakaki groaned, "but **he** insisted on giving you your share. As it is..."

"As it is, you left a blood trail and maybe a living captain. I'm pretty sure the injured one of mine will die, she was slashed up pretty bad, but I admit, one got away. It wasn't a perfect eleven," Katsura turned his own unease back on the offensive, grasping Sakaki's other wrist tightly between his fingers. "That being so, I'll make a deal with you. I won't tell anyone about your blood trail, and you don't tell anyone about my less-than-perfect Hollow, all right? We can't waste time hanging around here, though. Whatever the reasons..."

"I *could* go back and kill the ones left," Sakaki suggested, glancing at her sword, but Katsura shook his head.

"There's every chance the survivor already sounded a distress flare or siren or something like that," he said, stifling a sudden flare of fear at the thought of Mitsuki impaled on the end of Sakaki's bloody blade. "We can't risk going back. I can leave reiatsu, even if you can't — it's too dangerous."

"Mm. Pity," Sakaki sighed, but to Katsura's relief she nodded, shrugging her shoulders. "All right. I suppose you're right."

She smiled, a cold, calculating smile as she gazed up at him.

"And it's a deal," she added. "I won't tell if you don't. Just, don't think you need to nanny me around, Katsu-nii. I did my job better than you, and there were more of them for me. I'm younger than you. If you're not careful, I might replace you in Okaasama's affections. You're her shining light, we both know that — but if you start screwing up..."

"We're going, and we're going now," Katsura was not willing to hear the end of his sister's smug speech, slipping his body into shunpo and pulling her protesting and screaming with him into the streams of light. Shunpo was a haphazard art for one with no Academy or Clan education, but one he had managed to master to a reasonable level of functionality, and so, by the time he dropped them out of it, breathing heavily and sweating hard, they found themselves in the heart of the middle district, Nakaken.

"Why did you bring us here?" Sakaki took a shuddering breath into

her lungs, staggering a few steps and grasping hold of his arm to steady herself. "I feel sick, now, Katsu-nii. You're mean. You do it on purpose."

"Nakaken didn't see any attacks. We'll leave from here, since nobody will be looking for spiritual anomalies so far from the scene of either crime," Katsura said evenly, sliding his fingers into his obi and pulling out a smooth black device, rather like a stone, over which he rubbed his palm. "I'll open the gate, so don't go anywhere, all right? We're going back together, so I can make sure you get there safely."

"I don't need your help getting through that thing. Sekkiseki doesn't hurt me," Sakaki pouted, and Katsura sighed.

"Yes, but with a shinigami drug in your system and shinigami blood all over your clothing and sword, I'm taking no chances," he said matter-of-factly. "I have no idea what kind of detection devices there are on that barrier, but we're not going to risk triggering it if you try and pass through wearing contaminated clothing. We'll go through my way, and we'll do it together. All right?"

"You're my brother, not my father," Sakaki sulked, but Katsura paid her no attention, instead focusing his *reiryoku* on activating the small stone. It glowed, humming briefly with energy, then the air before them began to ripple and split, revealing a gaping hole of blackness in the atmosphere beyond. The edges of the opening frayed and danced, shaking out of their alignment slightly so that the gateway seemed to be an odd shape gashed into the Spiritless Zone's pure air, but despite its fluctuations, it remained firm, and Katsura took Sakaki's hand in his, stepping purposefully into the gloom.

There were no Hell Butterflies in the Spiritless Zone, but with the stone in his hand, the pathway back to the abandoned regions of Rukongai was a quick and simple one, and before long they were standing once more on dry, barren earth, the sky overhead as heavy and overcast as it had been when they had left.

"You took long enough,"

Koku's voice greeted them, and Katsura let out his breath in a rush, turning to see the young man standing a short distance away, watching them with no expression on his features. He had been waiting for them, Katsura realised, perhaps for some time, yet there was no flicker of impatience in the other's dark brown eyes. He nodded

"We had a lot to do," he said vaguely, and Sakaki snorted, sending Koku a look of dislike.

"You didn't need to come fetch us. We don't need you," she said dismissively. "Go back to your hovel and read your books. Leave the real work to us."

"You look as though you did plenty of that, already," Koku's eyes took on a look of distaste as he ran his gaze over her blood-spattered form. "You stink of death, Sakaki — you even have blood in your hair."

"I've been killing people. That's what happens, when you use a weapon in the way it was meant to be used," Sakaki's words were barbed, tension hissing through her young body like a wildcat ready to pounce on a particularly unpleasant rival who had just stepped into her territory, but Koku just laughed, shaking his head in a condescending fashion.

"Go clean up," he said frankly. "Nobody will want to see you while you look and smell like that. You've decaying *reiryoku* particles coming off you from all angles — and folk here are sensitive to that, even if you're not. You'll make someone sick."

"You really have no idea how to talk to girls, do you?" Sakaki's teenage pride was clearly offended by this, and she tossed her head. "I was going, anyway. Talking to you is pointless. Even if *some* people here think a lot of you, *I* think you're a waste of space, and I'm not going to waste my time with someone too cowardly to baptise a blade in blood."

With that she was gone, head held high in indignation, and Katsura watched her leave with a look of resignation in his dark eyes.

"As friendly as ever," Koku seemed unperturbed, turning his gaze on his companion questioningly. "Well?"

Katsura's eyes narrowed, taking in his companion's expression carefully. There was a question in the brown eyes, a deeper, more thorough question than he had put into words, and in a moment, the older man knew that Koku understood exactly what they had been sent to do. He groaned, dropping down onto the ground and leaning back on his arms.

You don't need me to tell you. You can sense it, can't you? Sakaki's covered in blood. You can read it just as clearly as I can.

That wasn't what I was asking.

The words snapped back across the psychic divide, crisp and decisive, and Katsura saw Koku's eyes narrow slightly in contemplation. He grimaced.

Don't. I'm not ready to, not yet. You can't turn my skills back against me, Koku. It's not fair.

It's safer if you tell me that way than in words other people can hear. There's nothing to tell. We went, we did, we came back.

Fine. Have it your way.

Koku's words were dismissive, and he turned as if to leave, but Katsura knew from the faint disappointment echoing across the psychic projection that he was not satisfied. Koku took a few steps, then paused, still not turning back to meet Katsura's gaze. Even so, though, Katsura felt as though those brown eyes were boring deep into him, searching for something that he was determined not to give.

It would only put you at risk. Don't, Koku. I mean it. I'm not ready.

Keitarou-san brought a shinigami here.

The change in subject was so sudden Katsura almost didn't grasp the meaning in the words until a few moments later.

"What?" The exclamation came out loud, and Koku turned, shaking his head.

No, talk this way.

The reproach came psychically, more of a broken whisper than a sharp scolding, as Katsura's agitation rocked through his reiatsu, threatening to break their psychic connection apart.

Why? Why on earth? What for?

Somehow Katsura managed to bring the ripples of his *reiryoku* back under control, stabilising the link to his companion's thought processes, but he could not hide the dismay that glittered in his gaze.

This one is different. He's one of ours.

Koku's eyebrows shifted in what might have been interpreted as a facial shrug.

He's a Kotetsu. Keitarou-san wants to trust him. He brought him here to make him one of us.

Will he?

Katsura looked anxious, and Koku smiled ironically.

Apparently. But if I were you, I'd keep away from him. Keitarou-san doesn't want anyone to speak with him who doesn't have to, and he might be harder to sway if he knew you and Sakaki went to kill Shinigami today.

Don't worry. I'll keep out of his way.

Katsura's eyes darkened, their deep blue shade appearing almost black as he absorbed his companion's warning.
Has he been here long?

A couple of days. He won't stay much longer, though. Keitarou-san intends on sending him back to Seireitei shortly.

Koku held out a hand to pull his companion to his feet.

We should try and keep Sakaki away from him until that happens, though. Otherwise, it could be messy.

Understatement.

Katsura groaned inwardly at this thought.

All right. Let me go clean up, then I'll go and find her. Impress on her the importance of not showing her psychotic side to visitors.

Do that.

Koku seemed relieved.

She'll listen to you much more easily than she will me.

What will you do?

Go back and find our visitor, probably.

Koku sighed.

He's with Keitarou-san now, but I've been on sentry duty on and off and it seems better I stay that way. It's easier, knowing where he's been and what he's doing, and I'm not as interesting to him as you or she might be, if you were to encounter one another. I'm just Koku, don't forget. Just another uninteresting resident of Rukongai, far beneath the notice of the Gotei Thirteen.

Don't be like that. You shouldn't let Sakaki's comments get to you.

I'm not. I'm just stating it as it is. If this Kotetsu Tenichi did go back to Seireitei and talk, uninteresting Koku is much the safer option for him to talk about.

The way you say that... you don't think he's our ally?

No, I know he is, or he will be.

Koku's lips pursed, his expression becoming unreadable.

Just, I'm not sure whether he's become that yet. It doesn't hurt to take precautions... it's always better to be prepared.

His chest was burning.

Juushirou stumbled across the cobbles that led to the inner sanctum

of the Fourth Division, pausing to steady himself against the sturdy bamboo walls that flanked the divide between their entrance and that of their neighbours, the Fifth. Dragging gasps of impatient air into battered lungs, he coughed, his vision swimming and dancing before his gaze. He could not stop here — he could not give up now. Until he knew what had happened in Rukongai...

His heart clenched at the mere thought, as unbidden, Makoto's report echoed cruelly once more against his senses.

Mitsuki.

He closed his eyes, tears glittering in their depths. A Captain could not cry — *did not cry* — whether on duty or not, and he had not come here to make an emotional scene of himself. Still, though, despite the fever that still blazed through his veins and the dizzy ache that rocketed around his skull, he could not turn back.

Every breath scalded against the raw lining of his lungs, triggering fresh spasms, but he struggled to push them back, grimly making his legs take one pace and then another, moving ever closer to the Fourth Division's central triage office.

Juushirou, this is foolish.

The cutting words of You, half of his *zanpakutou*'s In'you spirit broke through his fevered thoughts, but he paid the white fish no mind, putting all his focus into staying upright. Using the bamboo divide to support himself, he kept going. One step. Another. A third...

“Juu-nii!”

The exclamation slashed through his aching head like a siren, causing him to wince, putting his hand to his head and almost losing his balance completely. There was a cry of alarm, and then he felt someone take him by the arm, gently yet firmly steadying him back onto his feet. With difficulty, he turned his head, his blurry gaze meeting the concerned aqua one of a young woman of about Kirio's age. This was Shikiki, Juushirou's adopted sister and a member of the Fourth Division since her Academy graduation some several years earlier.

Unlike Kirio, she was broadly built, even chubby, the wide white *obi* swathed about her middle stuffed with sachets of medicine and other healing implements rather than the familiar bulge of a *zanpakutou* scabbard. Thick waves of unruly rose-petal hair were tied back in a braid that fell almost to her waist, stray ends sticking out every which way as though refusing to be tamed, and a wild fringe cut through the broad curve of her forehead, softening what was a kind, if

not overly attractive face. A pair of vivid aqua eyes peeked out from beneath the ends of the fringe, usually bright and full of intelligence, though today they were clouded with tension, a dull reflection of the sea waves when the tide was full in on an overcast day. Wide cheeks and a square jaw completed the image, yet although the most generous of judges could not call Shikiki pretty, there was a pleasantness and charisma in her expression and demeanour that drew people to her all the same. Although she was not as tall as Juushirou, her substantial frame made it easy for her to steady the thin Captain against her, and she reached up stubby fingers to brush his brow, letting out a murmur of dismay.

“You’re hot. Juu-nii, why did you come here? Why not just send a message? We’d have come to you...”

“Mitsuki,” it was the only word Juushirou could manage, but at the sound of it, the young woman stiffened, then lowered her fingers from his skin.

“I see,” she said softly. “That’s why you’re here. Really, Juu-nii... you can be such a fool sometimes.”

She tut-tutted, shaking her head in clear disapproval.

“Retsu-sama has plenty enough to worry about without you collapsing on her as well,” she chided gently. “She sent me out to meet you — now I know why.”

“I need... go inside... find out... Mitsuki,” Juushirou forced the words through his vocal chords, hoarse and stifled as he tried to prevent himself from a violent fit of coughing. The short journey between barracks had been enough to stir the darker symptoms of his disease, and Shikiki groaned, slipping her fingers firmly around his wrist.

“I’ll take you inside,” she agreed slowly, “but you’re not going to where Retsu-sama is, not like this. You’re fevered and you’re not making any sense. Right now, everyone’s trying everything they can to get a signal through to Rukongai, and Retsu-sama’s putting all her focus into lifting the spirit filters so that rescuers can cross over and see what’s happening. You can’t do anything, so come with me and rest.”

“Shikiki...” Juushirou bit his lip, and the girl’s gaze softened.

“You’re still stupid sometimes, Juu-nii, even with the *haori*,” she reflected pensively. “I promised Retsu-sama that I’d look after you, though, and I will. Come on. Come with me. You’ll feel better if you’re

lying down, and then I can see what I can do to make your chest easier.”

“But Mitsuki!”

“We don’t know, yet. When we do, you’ll know too,” Shikiki did not miss a beat, but even in his dazed state, Juushirou could feel the uncertainty prickling in his foster sister’s aura. He was given no choice to object, however, for the young healer was already pulling him forcibly towards the side-door that, from previous experience, he knew led to a private suite of rooms reserved for patients in need of special restive care. It was a wing detached from the central hub of Fourth Division’s activity, a place as far as possible from where Retsu and her companions were frantically trying to reestablish links with their missing squad members, and Juushirou tried to resist her hold, but Shikiki was determined, and he was weak, rendering his efforts futile.

“Retsu-sama will come and be cross with you if you disobey me,” the healer’s words were firm, and she made no attempt to change course or even to slow her pace. “She’s in an especially harried mood right now, and believe me, you don’t want that.”

In spite of his desperation, a faint flare of self-preservation told Juushirou that he did not, in fact, want to face the Captain of the Fourth Division in a state of disapproval. With a painful sigh, he gave up his resistance, allowing his companion to lead him inside and usher him down on the nearest of the empty beds that filled the crisp, clean wing. There were no other patients in residence, and as he dropped onto the soft mattress, Juushirou felt his body shudder with palpable relief that it had stopped moving.

“I should’ve known you’d come here, when the message went around,” Shikiki sat down on the seat beside his bed, the wicker creaking a little as she shifted her weight, making herself more comfortable. “I didn’t think it would be like this, though. I didn’t realise you were having one of your attacks, Juu-nii. You should’ve sent for someone sooner — I’d have come by and given you something to calm it down.”

“It seemed unnecessary to bother anyone,” Juushirou murmured. “I was just... going to rest... and sleep it off.”

“And then you got the alert,” Shikiki groaned, burying her head in her hands. “I’m sorry. If we’d realised... well, I’m sure that we’d have sent a different one to Thirteenth than the one we did. Retsu-sama just sent out a general alert to all the Vice Captains — but in the panic,

nobody stopped to think...”

“I want to know the truth,” Juushirou cut across her, his voice weak but determined, and he grasped out for her wrist. “I’m all right. Don’t... worry about me. My body is... unimportant right now. What... I need to know... is... Mitsuki.”

“I already told you, we don’t know anything yet ourselves,” Shikiki repeated patiently. “All we know is that a siren was sounded and that we’ve not been able to make contact. It might just be a technical glitch. Something might have set off Madeki-dono’s alert button without them realising — it could be any number of things. Retsu-sama’s assuming a worst case scenario because it’s the best thing to do in the circumstances, but it doesn’t mean anything has gone wrong. The Spiritless Zone is a relatively safe environment, when all’s said and done.”

“Then... why did Madeki-dono... carry an alert button in the... first place?” Juushirou demanded. “I’m not foolish, Shiki-chan. I... know that means... there are risks.”

“Precautions, that’s all,” Shikiki sighed heavily. “Look, Juu-nii, are you even going to listen to me? What would Mitsuki-dono say, if she saw you like this? Fevered and babbling based on one alert call? She’d be cross, wouldn’t she? She would lecture you and tell you to stop being stupid. She’s a shinigami, just as you are. They’re all trained operatives — not people who need you or anyone to run to the rescue.”

“You never met her, so you wouldn’t know,” Juushirou snapped back, knowing he was being unreasonable, but unable to control the swirl of his emotions. “She had already gone to Rukongai by the time you went through the Academy and joined Fourth.”

“But I *am* a member of Fourth, and I’ve heard a lot about her and the others in Rukongai from those who came back and from Retsu-sama,” Shikiki was unmoved. “I know she’s someone you care about, Juu-nii. I heard enough about that, too, from Shun-nii and from you yourself when you talk about your time at the Academy. It doesn’t mean she’s helpless, though. She chose to go there, and she knew what she was doing. They all did. Have some faith in them and in her, all right?”

“I just want to know what’s happened. That’s all,” Juushirou whispered, feeling the warm dampness of tears against his cheeks. He cursed, reaching up to brush them away. “Not knowing what’s going on... it’s not about wanting to see Mitsuki, or drag her back here, or

prevent her from doing what she wants to do. I just want to know she's all right... that they're all right. That's all."

There was a long silence, then Shikiki pressed her lips together.

"I can't tell you that they are," she admitted reluctantly. "I don't know the answer and I'm worried about them myself. I didn't ever meet Mitsuki-dono, but some of the others that went there, I did know. Not all of them have been in Rukongai as long as she has... and besides, they're my squad mates. Of course I'm worried."

Juushirou gazed up at her, feeling suddenly guilty as he saw through his sister's calmness to the anxiety that lurked beneath. He sighed, closing his eyes.

"I'm sorry, Shiki-chan," he murmured. "I didn't mean..."

"For now, all I can do is wait. Wait, and help you," Shikiki cut across him, pushing back the folds of the white *haori* and placing chubby hands across the chest of his *shihakushou*. "Breathe normally, deeply, if you can, and try not to cough. I'll try and fix up your lungs a little, repair the mess you just made of them dragging your body across Inner Seireitei. Even if I can't answer your fears just yet, I think it would be better for both of us and for Retsu-sama if you were able to receive any news with a clearer mind. If anyone over there is hurt, we'll need all our resources to help them, and patching you up will just slow that down."

"I can't argue with that," Juushirou acknowledged, opening his eyes to see a faint, yet distinctive pink glow spread out from the young woman's finger tips, enveloping his ribcage with a sensation of deep, penetrating warmth. Different from all of the other healers in Seireitei on account of her unusual barrier magic, Shikiki's sense for healing had been honed by her years under Retsu's leadership, and, although she did not yet hold high rank in the division, she was renowned even among the Unohana as one of the most powerful and effective practitioners in Inner Seireitei. Born in the Districts, and orphaned by the purges of tyrannical Clanfolk, Shikiki's background had never been clearly defined, but as he watched her go about her task, Juushirou found himself absently grateful that he had managed to meet with her before she too had been killed. Shikiki had saved many lives over the years, including both his own and that of the Sixth's Vice Captain Shirogane, and Juushirou knew beyond all doubt that it was these small yet significant inroads that had turned the views of the proud, austere Kuchiki in favour of supporting District shinigami.

Shikiki's barriers rejected whatever damage was inside them, turning them back to a former state, and, though she could not reverse death itself, she was often called to the front line when a shinigami's injuries appeared to be unsurvivable. Just watching her now, Juushirou felt comforted.

"If Mitsuki is hurt, Shikiki, will you... do that... for her too?"

"If my comrades are injured, Juu-nii, I'll use every shred of my skills to bring them back from the brink," Shikiki's response came without a moment of hesitation. "That's why I have this power. Of course I would help. Don't be silly — just relax and let me put you back together again."

"You can't cure me," Juushirou reached up to push her hands back. "You shouldn't waste..."

"You should shut up and let me do my job," Shikiki sent him a pointed glare, and despite himself, Juushirou hesitated. "If I want to heal you, I will. This is Fourth Division and the only Captain's orders I obey are Retsu-sama's. She told me to take care of you, so I am. I'm not a little girl any more. I know the insides of your lungs thoroughly, and I know how to fix them without using too much of my *reiryoku*. I'll have plenty left for emergencies, if there indeed are any emergencies."

"Sorry," Juushirou said sheepishly, dropping his arm back to the bed, and Shikiki grimaced at him.

"Good. That's better," she said matter-of-factly. "I told you when you got the *haori* that I wasn't going to treat you as anything but Juu-nii and that means telling you off when you need telling."

Her eyes narrowed.

"I should send you to sleep," she reflected, and Juushirou's gaze became one of dismay.

"No! Please, Shiki-chan, don't do that! I want to know... when there's news, whatever it is, I..."

"I won't," Shikiki relented, "so long as you lie quietly and don't cause any trouble. Understood? No trying to sneak past me or anything like that. You stay put, and I won't sedate you, but if you dare so much as put a foot out of this room, I'll zap you myself. My aim is pretty good, and I think a few bruises from falling over are better than risking you triggering another *haibyou* event."

"You know, your bedside manner is sometimes a bit disconcerting,"

Juushirou murmured, though already he could feel the burning pain in his lungs subsiding to a dull, manageable ache. “You ought to talk to Unohana-taichou about that — if the patient wasn’t me, they might take it the wrong way.”

“Oh, don’t worry. It’s just you I talk to like this,” Shikiki said frankly, pushing her fingers beneath the dark folds of fabric and onto the pale skin of Juushirou’s chest, running them gently against the ribs that protruded slightly from his skinny form. “You’re not like the other Captains, so I don’t have to be formal with you. Don’t worry, I’m not shaming your family by threatening anyone else. You can take it, though. It’s fine so long as it’s you.”

“I’m starting to wonder what you think a big brother is,” Juushirou observed, and Shikiki grinned, her eyes lighting up despite her worry.

“For most sisters and brothers, a punch-bag, but in my case, I get to do the fixing up after, not the punching,” she said evenly. “You’re feeling better though, right? It’s helping?”

“It is,” Juushirou acknowledged.

“And you feel stupid now, right, for dashing out so impulsively and causing such a fuss?”

Shikiki lifted one plump paw to touch his cheek, where already the tears that had scattered there had dried. “Fever makes you act stupid, but you know, don’t you, deep down inside? You know how a shinigami Captain should behave and where you should be right now.”

“Mm,” Juushirou sighed heavily, allowing his head to move forward slightly into a feeble nod. “Enishi and Naoko have Thirteenth, though. In the circumstances, I’m better here than... than there. If the news is the worst... Shikiki, I’d rather they didn’t see me. I’d rather none of Thirteenth saw me.”

“Do you think that’s likely?” Shikiki’s question was in earnest this time, and Juushirou knew she was looking to him now as an older brother, seeking reassurance in his words as she had done from time to time as a young child. Unlike some of his other, more naive siblings, Shikiki had never been easily fobbed off with untruths, and try as he might, Juushirou could not pull words of optimism together.

“I don’t know,” he said softly, his voice shaking slightly. “I don’t want to think it, but it’s all I can think of.”

“You really love Mitsuki-dono, don’t you?” Shikiki withdrew her hands from his chest, the pink glow fading and dissipating into

nothing. “Even after so many years apart, you still care for her like you did back then, don’t you?”

Juushirou lifted his hand to his throat, cupping it around the silver Kuchiki pendant.

“I do,” he agreed sadly. “Maybe it’s foolish for a Captain to have those feelings, but I do. If I know she’s all right, then I’ll be all right — but if she isn’t, if not...”

He stopped, unable to continue, and Shikiki sighed heavily.

“I’ll do whatever I can, if it’s needed,” she promised quietly. “You have my word on that, Juu-nii. Retsu-sama might send me in through the divide — she asked me already, if I’d be willing to go. She said that my skills might be of best use if the situation is serious, and they wouldn’t want to waste time getting people back here when I could be on site ready to begin at once. With my powers, time matters. I was going to stay here with you, but I think... maybe... I ought to go through.”

“I want to go, too,” Juushirou pulled himself into a sitting position, gingerly propping himself up against the sick-room wall, and Shikiki snorted, shaking her head.

“No way that would be allowed. Your *reiryoku* is way, way too high to risk it,” she said bluntly. “Retsu-sama already sent a message to Second for the Onmitsukidou and some of them will be coming through the divide, too. They want people who have tight reiatsu control and who can move easily between locations if need be. From outside, nobody can sense my spirit power, so I’m an obvious choice to go. You, on the other hand, you’d be one of the worst. Even if you were well enough — which you’re not, you’re only feeling better because you’re no longer on your feet — Retsu-sama wouldn’t sanction it.”

“But...”

“Sending a Captain through would cause panic across Seireitei,” Shikiki said sensibly. “You know it and so do I. Captains aren’t deployed in things like this unless necessary. Retsu-sama will go, most likely, because this is her squad and it’s her duty to lead the rescue party, but an outside Captain? Nuh-uh. Did your fever take away all of your political common sense, Juu-nii? If this is what being in love does to you, remind me never to try it.”

“Gah,” Juushirou rubbed his brow ruefully, realising with a jolt the truth in his companion’s words. He had come here on a whim, driven

by panic and nostalgia, but Shikiki's reproach was like a dash of cold water gushing over his body, forcing him back to his senses and making him re-assess his actions in a calmer, more practical light.

"Gah?" Shikiki tilted her head. "Was that a comment or a grunt of agreement? It's hard to tell."

"It was a grunt of reluctant acknowledgement," Juushirou raised his gaze. "All right. I won't go. You're right, it's foolish, and I'm letting my heart rule my head. I'm frightened, and I acted like a panicked civilian instead of a military officer in uniform. Mitsuki's life is precious to me, but if I push to go to Rukongai, I'll cause greater ripples for a whole lot more people, won't I? I'll stay here, Shiki-chan. I promise. Even if you go, I won't try to follow. You have my word."

"Good," Shikiki looked relieved, getting to her feet and patting him on the head as though he was a small child. "I'd better head back to Retsu-sama's office, then, and find out what's going on. Unless I miss my guess, some of the Onmitsukidou just arrived, and that means it won't be long before the gateway opens. If I'm going, I'll need to be ready at a moment's notice."

She bent to kiss him on the brow, then,

"Try and relax, even if it's hard," she whispered. "I'll try and find Mitsuki-dono, I promise. I'll try and save everyone, but her in particular. I'll tell her you're waiting for her... maybe that'll help."

With that she was gone, leaving Juushirou alone in the sterile chamber, and he sighed, sinking back against the bed with a groan of resignation.

Whether he wanted to go or not, his body had already gone on strike, refusing to move more than it had to, and he half wondered whether during her healing, Shikiki had used her spirit power to relax his muscles, making it impossible for him to get up. He had felt the dull hum of energy that heralded the arrival of Seireitei's black-clad secret forces, among them the familiar spiritual signature of his old school friend, Shihouin Kai, and so he knew Shikiki's judgement was correct. If things were happening, it would begin soon.

Kai didn't need to come himself, but he did, because it's Mitsuki. I'm sure that's the case — he came because one of our class was in trouble, and he might be able to help where nobody else can.

Juushirou closed his eyes briefly, ordering his thoughts as fear threatened to overwhelm him once more. In the back of his mind was her image, laughing and joking, those soft grey eyes that could be both gentle and kind or thundering like angry stormclouds, the thick

dark hair and the delicate complexion that had made her appear both fragile and beautiful to his young, adolescent gaze. He had never met anyone like Mitsuki in the years before or since he had been a student at the Academy, and although Shikiki had brought him back to himself enough for him to control his panic, he knew that, if she was dead, he would not be able to keep it together.

Better nobody sees me, though, if that happens.

Juushirou's gaze flitted to the door.

Shunsui didn't follow me as far as Fourth. When Shikiki came out, his reiatsu disappeared, so I guess he went back to Eighth. I'm glad... right now I don't want him or anyone else lingering around. I want to know what happened, and no amount of company is going to make the wait for news easier. When I know what's happened, then I'll deal with it — but God, if Mitsuki's killed, I don't know how I'll process that. How I'll tell Naoko. How I'll face Sora. How...

Rest, Juushirou. Whatever news is to come, it hasn't come yet.

The gentle tones of In, the black fish of his *zanpakutou* spirit soothed him, her long, spectral tail brushing against his thoughts to reassure him.

Shunsui gave you the motif 'hope' when you were students. Now is one of those times you need to cling onto it.

Hope... huh.

Juushirou closed his eyes once more, certain that sleep could not possibly come at a time like this.

I'll try, In. I'm sorry, You. It's not easy, being a Captain and still not being able to protect everyone and everything, but... but this was Mitsuki's dream. Her goal, her reason for graduating and her aim in life. If... if it is the worst... then I'll try and cling on to that most of all. This is what she wanted... if the worst has happened, somehow... I'll just... just have to accept that.

“How is he?”

As Shikiki pushed open the door of her Captain's office, Retsu raised her head from the documents in front of her, casting her subordinate a questioning look. Despite the chaos around her, the Fourth Division Captain seemed as serene and in control as ever, but Shikiki was sharp-eyed and sensitive to her leader's feelings, and she could see the consternation lurking deep inside the older woman's dark eyes. Retsu was professional and would do her job to the letter, all too aware that, in a squad of shinigami with sharper than usual

emotional sensors, any crack in her composure would cause deeper shockwaves to rent through the whole operation. She could not show her feelings, but Shikiki was in no doubt that Retsu was as worried about Mitsuki and her companions as any of them.

“He’ll be all right, now. He’s resting,” she answered, closing the door and crossing the floor towards the desk. “I’m here and ready to go too, Retsu-sama, if you need me. I felt the Onmitsukidou arriving, so thought I should report to you.”

“The gateway will open in the next ten minutes,” Retsu rolled the scroll into a tube, putting it on one side and gesturing for the nervous recruit hovering by the door to take it and file it in the relevant place on the shelf. “I’d be glad if you came too, Shikiki-san. Your abilities may be of great use to us, and it would be a comfort given that we do not know quite what we are stepping into.”

“There’s still been no response?” Shikiki’s eyes became grave, and Retsu shook her head.

“We’ve tried on every frequency, and even one or two suggested to us in a kind message sent from Sekime-taichou, but nothing has worked,” she agreed levelly. “It seems there is no other option but to go in ourselves and see what has occurred.”

She led the way to the door, pulling it back and holding it open for her young companion to follow her down the hall.

“Kai-dono and three Onmitsukidou officers have arrived and are ready to accompany us,” she continued as they stepped out into the rear training grounds, making their way towards a knot of trees between which the Rukongai gateway was suspended. Indeed, as they rounded the corner of the old barracks building, Shikiki could make out the dark uniform of the secret operatives, the gold badge that glittered at the throat of one of them signifying him to be their leader and the Second Division’s Vice Captain, Shihouin Kai, although unlike the other Vice Captains, he wore no insignia on his arm. His amber eyes were expressionless and focused, and at Retsu’s approach he bowed his head towards her in acknowledgement of her summons.

“We are ready when you are, Unohana-taichou,” he said quietly, his words deferential and concise, betraying no emotion and asking no unnecessary questions.

“Thank you, Kai-dono,” Retsu acknowledged Kai’s words in the same matter-of-fact manner, inclining her head slightly in gratitude. “The gateway will open shortly. Please prepare your men for entry.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Kai agreed. There was the slightest twitch of his left hand, and immediately the three operatives tensed, preparing themselves for the moment they would dive into the unknown. It was impossible to know what lay on the other side of the divide, even if there was no immediate threat present, yet Shikiki felt no fear or apprehension in any of their auras, and this matter-of-fact approach to the job at hand settled her own heart. She knew, for Juushirou had told her, that Kai had been her brother’s classmate, and also a friend of the missing Edogawa Mitsuki.

Deep down, she was sure that the Onmitsukidou leader had come himself for that very reason, rather than dispatch his deputy, but despite that fact, no trace of his own concerns were etched on his dark features. The Onmitsukidou were largely a mystery to Shikiki, shrouded in secrecy and possessed of skills well suited to assassins and spies as well as the normal gamut of shinigami sword skills, but their presence here today made her feel safer. They were trained to kill without question in the face of an enemy — a ruthlessness that sat at odds with the Fourth Division’s pro-life mantra, but which was invaluable to Seireitei all the same.

On the far side of the gate, two Unohana shinigami hovered, relief peppering their expressions when they saw their Captain, and they too hastened forward, glad of someone to take the lead in such an unsettled situation.

“We’re ready to go, Taichou,” one of them, a thin young man in his middling thirties saluted Retsu sharply, and Retsu acknowledged him with a slight nod of her head.

“Be on your guard, all of you,” she said softly. “We have no idea what we might find on the other side, but most of all, we must do nothing to frighten or distress the Plus souls who call the Spiritless Zone their home. They will doubtless be confused if they encounter us, and we are not there to cause them any harm. We will head directly to the location from which the distress signal was sounded. There will be no deviations until we have learned what is amiss.”

Her gaze flitted to Kai at this juncture, who inclined his head. He did not speak, but in that one small gesture, Shikiki knew that he had accepted Retsu’s command as though it had come from his own Captain and would obey it without question.

Retsu pulled her *zanpakutou* from its sheath, the silver blade glinting slightly in the pale sunlight, then thrust it forward, slicing into the lock that held the specially crafted *Senkaimon* sealed closed. The filters and barriers that had blocked access to the lock were long

since dispersed, and so, with a shimmer of atmosphere, the air began to split apart, opening a dark hole between the trees that soon became big enough for a person to walk through.

“The gateway will only remain open for three minutes,” Retsu said softly. “It is a security procedure and it will self-lock after that time. The lock is timed and will not release again from this side for twenty-four hours. We must go quickly now — step into the gateway and do not stop or look back.”

Shikiki swallowed hard, darting forward into the blackness. All around her she could sense the muffled presence of her companions doing the same as she was, but it was so dark inside the gateway that she could see nothing or noone, not even her own hands before her face. The sound of footsteps and breathing alone gave away the fact she had company, and had not, in fact, been plunged into oblivion on her own. As Retsu had said, the gateway had quickly sealed behind them, and Shikiki wondered momentarily how, if the gate was locked, they would be able to return from the other side. Trusting that her Captain knew the answer, she forced her mind to the task ahead, trying to mentally prepare herself for whatever was on the other side.

Unlike most healing shinigami, Shikiki did not pick up pain and distress signals as keenly as her comrades, her powers more given to healing through other methods, and so when she stepped out into the green and lush landscape of the Hokutan district, at first she could discern nothing of concern. A green field spread out before them, the air clear enough that she could see the rise and fall of the river valley in the distance, surrounded by the mountains that lay far beyond. There was no sign of burning or ravaging, no enemy army waiting to strip them limb from limb, and Shikiki turned to her Captain, opening her lips to make a comment to this effect.

The moment she saw Retsu’s face, however, the words froze in her throat.

The Captain’s gaze was fixed off to the left, her dark eyes clouded and full of consternation, and her normally pale complexion unusually white. Tension rippled through her body, and, with a jolt, Shikiki realised the woman was still clutching hold of her *zanpakutou*’s hilt, as though considering whether or not to release it. To do so, Shikiki knew, would imply that whatever danger was here overrode the tight restrictions on sword releases within Rukongai, and this fact alone gave Shikiki chills. Whatever Retsu had picked up on, she was willing to throw the whole of the Spiritless Zone’s foundations to hell in order to release Minazuki, and that meant things were as serious as they

could possibly be.

“That way,” it seemed like hours, but in reality it was mere seconds before Retsu spoke, her words calm and even, belying the dismay reflected in her face. She raised her free hand to the left, and Kai exchanged glances with his Onmitsukidou companions, flicking his wrist before disappearing into a swift flashstep. The other operatives quickly followed suit, and Shikiki swallowed hard. Were they not going, then? Were they not needed? Was it...?

“We’ll follow them,” Retsu had sheathed Minazuki, letting out her breath in a heavy sigh as though by doing so she could calm her unsettled emotions. “Shikiki-san, you go ahead, since you have the least threatening reiatsu. There are Plus soul settlements nearby, and I can feel their confusion from here.”

She turned to the other two healers lingering nearby, looking troubled for a moment, then,

“Hiroki-kun, Imae-san, please go to them, reassure them that all is well and ensure nobody is hurt,” she said softly. “If you encounter anything of concern, send up a Kidou flare.”

“Within the Spiritless Zone, Taichou?” Hiroki stared at her, and Retsu nodded her head curtly.

“Their lives are more important than applying usual protocol,” she said gently, a faint reproach in her tones. “Go now, and swiftly. I shall make some examinations of my own in this area — there is something in the air here that I would like a moment longer to examine by myself.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Shikiki knew better than to argue when her Captain looked like that, despite her apprehension at being sent on ahead with only the black-clad secret operatives for company, and she slipped into shunpo, following the faint traces of reiatsu trail that the Onmitsukidou agents had purposefully left behind. They had not gone far, and, as she dropped out of her flashstep, she saw that they were at the perimeter of what appeared to be a makeshift settlement — a campsite that resembled those Shikiki had used herself in the field on more than one occasion. She had no time to dwell on this fact, however, for one of the black-clad Onmitsukidou waved her over, gesturing to a crumpled form that lay on the ground.

“This is one of yours, isn’t it?”

His words were cold and detached, rankling against Shikiki’s nerves, but she swallowed her emotions, coming across the grass to

join him. As soon as she laid eyes on the broken shape, however, she understood the reason for the question, for the corpse was saturated with dried blood, his ripped *shihakushou* caked to his body and his *obi* dyed so darkly red that it was impossible to distinguish the shinigami uniform from the casual wear of local peasant peoples. Bending down at his side, Shikiki hovered her hand over his wrecked form, searching for any sign of lingering reiatsu, but there was none, and the body was cold. She shivered involuntarily, then turned back to her silent, impassive companion.

“Yes,” she said, in tones calmer than she knew she could possess. “This one is ours.”

“There’s another over there,” the Onmitsukidou jerked his head towards the shelter of the tree. “Kai-dono’s investigating the heart of the camp. We suggest you stay on the perimeters till he gives you the all clear — the enemy might still be in location.”

With that he was gone, leaving Shikiki to gather her wits at his callous instructions.

She gazed down at the corpse once more, knowing that, in other circumstances she would have shed tears, but, right then, there was no time. Saying an inward apology to her dead comrade, she stepped over his body, moving towards the fallen shape of his companion. This one was more easily recognisable, his chest a mess of blood and bone from a knife wound, his eyes open and sightless, and Shikiki felt her heart ache with grief as she recognised his young features. They had been recruits together, she remembered sadly. He had been so excited when he had been chosen to go to Rukongai... and now...

“Shikiki!”

Kai’s voice cut through her bitter remeniscences and she raised her head, seeing the leader of the Onmitsukidou waving to her from near one of the tents. There had been urgency in his words, and Shikiki’s heart leapt at the implication of this. Was someone alive?

“I’m coming!” she exclaimed, hurrying across the ground towards him and only just managing not to trip over the uneven earth in her haste.

“Madeki-dono, I think,” Kai was knelt at the side of something still and heavy on the ground, but as she moved closer, Shikiki could sense the faintest of pulses, and her heart skipped another beat.

“He’s alive,” Kai’s next words confirmed her hopes. “I can’t wake him, though. I’m not sure what’s happened — I don’t see any obvious

wounds, but it could be something else. Be careful... tend him if you can. He seems to be breathing all right, but I don't know whether he's safe to be moved or not yet."

"I'll take care of him," Shikiki was on her knees before her companion finished speaking, chubby hands pulling apart her superior officer's *shihakushou* and fingers pressing against his ribcage to absorb the rhythm of the patient's pulse. "Did you... was there anyone..?"

"Four, in the tent. Dead," Kai's words cut across hers, and he got to his feet, brushing down the legs of his *shihakushou*. "I'll leave him to you. There are meant to be eleven — so far we've only accounted for seven."

The words sliced through Shikiki like a knife blade, and she bit her lip, knowing that, bad timing or not, the tears would likely come anyway. At her expression, Kai offered her a grim smile.

"It's not enough to take back yet," he said cryptically. "We need to find them all."

"Yes, sir," Shikiki said softly, and Kai nodded, turning on his heel and heading back towards the blood-soaked remains of the tent. She watched him go, all the time monitoring Madeki's pulse-rate to make sure that it did not falter. Someone else had been here before her, she noted absently. There were lingering traces of some drug in his aura, but it had been mostly neutralised by what she knew was a familiar form of healing Kidou. The spell she knew, but the gentle reiatsu she did not, and she drew her hand back, moving to smooth Madeki's rumpled *shihakushou* back into place.

Someone else already saved you. That means there's another healer here, somewhere... someone else who survived. Someone who had enough presence of mind to purify your blood and then take the transmitter, setting off the alarm? It's not a reiatsu I know, though. So... who?

She closed her eyes, spreading her senses far and wide across the campsite. Although she wasn't as naturally attuned to others' distress as some of her companions, with focus and concentration she could usually pick out the disturbed spirits of the wounded, and she scrunched up her brow, picking up each living aura in turn and analysing it before discarding it.

Onmitsukidou. The one I spoke to at the boundary... and Kai-dono. I don't sense the other two — I guess they've moved further afield, trying to trace what killed everyone. Madeki-dono is here, beneath my touch — that's what Kai-dono called him, so that must be right, even though it's my first time meeting him face to face. Someone healed him, though...

Something flashed against her thoughts, brief and feeble, yet unmistakably the signal of a third life force, and Shikiki redoubled her efforts, trying desperately to grasp onto its signal before it floated away from her again. It was disjointed and fragmented, the aura of someone who had been badly hurt, and, as she locked into it more closely, she realised with a jolt that it was not one aura at all but two, one suppressed so deeply that, had she not felt the same sensation against Madeki's skin, she might never have located it at all.

The other healer... and one more hurt?

Shikiki's eyes snapped open, and she gazed around her wildly, back towards the entrance of the camp.

There? But we looked there. It was there... surely...

Out loud she said,

"Kai-dono! Kai-dono, are you there?"

"I am," Kai emerged from the tent, casting her a quizzical look, and Shikiki gestured in the direction of the campsite entrance.

"Something... there," she said hesitantly. "I can't see it... but I can feel it. Someone's aura, and something else. I think... someone's trying to hide..."

"Hide?" Kai's eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "Where exactly do you sense it, Shikiki? By the trees? Near the dead guards? Where?"

"Between them. Closer to that thicket, maybe beneath it," Shikiki said slowly. "I'm not certain, but it seems as though... from there."

"Do you recognise the aura?" Kai's hand was already clasped around the hilt of his black-bladed weapon, and Shikiki shrugged.

"I thought I did... on Madeki-dono's body," she said helplessly. "I don't know whose it is, but someone neutralised whatever poison he took in, and it must've been a healer. I know the spell. It was that same reiatsu, alongside something too damaged to make out clearly."

She shook her head in frustration.

"I'm not as good at this as Retsu-sama and some of the others," she admitted. "I can't pick things up so easily."

"Unohana-taichou sent you on ahead because putting bits of people back together quickly is your chief skill," Kai said briskly, slipping his slight form into the gap between her and the shadowed area of thick vegetation she had indicated. "You've mended enough broken bones among my men for me to understand why she chose you. Being here... would distress the others and probably make them far less useful. If

you can keep a cool head, you can help. That's her reasoning."

He pulled the sword from his belt, running his fingers through the air near the forest thicket, then, muttering something under his breath, he drew the sharp end of the weapon in a swift horizontal line from left to right. The atmosphere shimmered slightly, and Shikiki's eyes widened as she saw what looked like a spectral curtain fall away, scattering into fragments of broken spiritual energy.

"Kidou," Kai said matter-of-factly, grabbing hold of a nearby branch and pulling it forcibly back to reveal what looked like the remains of a wide animal den dug deep beneath the roots. "You were right. They're in there."

"Kai-dono, please, let me! They're not... I don't think it's..." Shikiki protested, but Kai was not listening to her. He ripped the section of bush out, tossing it aside and dropping down in front of the opening, blue light flickering from his fingers to illuminate the darkness beyond.

"It's all right. You can come on out now, Edogawa," he said softly, his tones gentle as he set his weapon aside, reaching out his right hand into the tunnel as though in reassurance. "It's Kai. Shihouin Kai. Shikiki's here too, and people from the Fourth. Your signal was received. We've come to help."

"Shi... hou... in-kun?"

The voice was weak and blurry, as though the speaker was using all of her strength just to put the words together, and Kai's expression darkened.

"Yes," he said evenly. "Can you get yourself out? You've a comrade in there too, haven't you? We need to get them free too — Shikiki needs to look at them, see if she can help."

"I... I..."

Shikiki saw pale fingers emerge from the hole, trembling visibly as it clawed the air, and Kai grasped hold of it tightly, squeezing the hand as if to reassure its owner. He turned to Shikiki, eying her broad form for a moment, then,

"You look strong. Are you?"

"Strong enough," Shikiki reddened at the blunt appraisal, nodding. "Why?"

"Come help me get them out," Kai shifted his body around so that he was facing the hole more directly, not loosing his hold on the

fragile hand for a moment. “Edogawa’s at the end of her tether. She’s not going to get out on her own — we’re going to have to do it for her.”

“Edogawa...” Shikiki’s eyes widened, and she stared at Kai in disbelief. Kai nodded sharply.

“Yes,” he said, his tone preventing any further questions on the subject. “Are you going to help me or not?”

“I am,” Shikiki agreed quickly, squeezing her considerable frame down beside him. “What do you want me to do? I’m trained as a healer, but digging out holes isn’t my speciality.”

“Mine either, but you know, the Gotei gives its own challenges,” Kai said dryly. “Edogawa! Can you move yourself at all?”

There was no reply, and Kai gritted his teeth.

“At your limit, huh?” he murmured, more to himself than to his companion. “Right then. Shikiki, I need one of your barriers. Can you fire it into the hole? Is that possible?”

“Possible, but why?” Shikiki stared at Kai as though he was mad, and Kai clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth, sizing up the hole once more.

“I’m going to cut through the earth, or at least, try,” he admitted at length. “I don’t want to risk cutting through whoever’s in there, though, too. I can’t tell completely, but from the echo when Edogawa spoke, I think they’ve got through to an underground den or chamber that some animal once used but long since abandoned. They’re safe enough there, but I don’t want to leave them when they probably need help. I can’t tell if they’re both hurt, but you said you thought one was, and...”

“I did,” Shikiki agreed gravely. “I’m pretty certain, Kai-dono.”

“Then we can’t risk making those injuries worse getting them free, and we certainly can’t leave them there.”

Kai turned, scanning the landscape for his stray Onmitsukidou officer.

“Karaki! Find Unohana-taichou, bring her here at once!” he bellowed, and out of the corner of her eye, Shikiki saw the black-clad figure salute sharply, before disappearing into swift, clean shunpo.

“I sent the others to follow a blood trail into the forest,” Kai said blackly. “I should have waited, but it looked as though there was only

Madeki-dono here. Healer wits are still better than Onmitsukidou ones when it comes to things like this — I'd forgotten how good Edogawa was at Kidou. Maybe she thought that we were more danger coming, and so she hid."

"The shinigami at the gates were killed by a blade," Shikiki murmured. "Hollows don't carry swords. They were killed by... by people. Souls. Maybe... the people they were protecting."

"It doesn't bear thinking about, does it?" Kai agreed darkly. "Right now, though, our problem is getting out survivors. Aim as best you can. I'll slash through with Meimei Anshi and hope for the best."

"Yes, sir," Shikiki nodded her head, spreading her fingers out towards the hole opening. It was harder, guiding a barrier around an area she could not see, but, as her magic brushed against Mitsuki's aura, she found she could follow the shape of the other's body, realising that it was shielding the form of another. Shikiki didn't know this person's reiatsu either, but she managed to lock onto it enough to spread her protective shell, and, once she was sure it was firmly in place, she gave Kai a nod.

"I'm ready. And they're both alive, just about," she told him. "We can get them out, Kai-dono. I can tell. There's a lot of blood, but I can do something about that one. She's bad, but not beyond me. As soon as I can see what I'm doing, I can put her back together and stabilise her, I'm pretty sure."

"Good, that's what I wanted to hear," Kai said matter-of-factly, swinging Meimei Anshi speculatively a couple of times before driving the sealed ebony blade through the thick dry earth, sending a cloud of dust up all around them as he slashed savagely through the rock and root debris, exposing the ditch that lay below. As he had surmised, the tunnel led to an old animal earth, and, between Kai's efforts and Shikiki's barrier magic, the two sheltering healers were quickly exposed.

Shikiki had known it was bad, but as she laid eyes on the wounded woman for the first time, she felt her heart lurch in her throat. Blood caked the front of her uniform, a jagged slash through the black fabric peeled back to reveal an angrier hole in her gut through which severed bits of organs protruded. The glittering energy of someone's spirit blade also lingered there, struggling to knit the damage back together despite its gravity, and Shikiki saw the hilt of a weapon lying to one side in the dip, proof that the healing had been ongoing as they had arrived.

Her companion, the one Kai had called Edogawa, and who Shikiki now knew was Juushirou's beloved Mitsuki was white as a ghost, her entire body racked with shivers as she struggled to protect her companion from the elements. She had exhausted her own healing powers to keep her companions alive, Shikiki realised with a jolt, to the point where she had forced her *zanpakutou* to release not only once but twice to try and maintain the gored woman's grip on life. A pair of hazy grey eyes flickered up towards Kai's concerned golden ones, and for a moment, Shikiki saw relief glitter in their depths. Then the lashes fluttered closed, and Mitsuki slumped against the earth, the tension off her now that help had arrived.

"Edogawa!" Kai muttered a curse, slipping down into the ditch and putting a finger to her throat.

"She's fainted," Shikiki told him, moving across to Seri's side and spreading her barrier more firmly over the woman's ripped abdomen. "She's not hurt. This one is worse."

"She overshot her own abilities, didn't she?" Kai asked, and Shikiki nodded.

"I think so," she said soberly. "She used her spirit power on Madeki-dono, too, and I think, from the way this one's bleeding has more or less stopped, she used her *zanpakutou* a couple of times to try and mend the damage. Then the Kidou to keep them hidden when we arrived — it was all she could do, protect the one she was healing right then, even if it killed her."

"If we hadn't found her...?"

"She might have burned out completely," Shikiki agreed. "Retsu-sama will know better, though I can't see any blood on her that's her own. She's dishevelled, but all of the stains on her clothing link back to this person's reiatsu."

She sighed, shaking her head slowly.

"I don't know her name," she admitted helplessly. "I've never seen her before, although I know she's a comrade. Mitsuki-dono, too. I know who she is, because of Juu-nii... but... this is the first time..."

She paused, glancing at Kai quizzically.

"You came yourself to see if she was alive, didn't you?" she asked curiously. "I know you went to school with Juu-nii, and that being the case..."

"Edogawa is a friend of mine, yes," Kai agreed. "A rum Kuchiki, but

a friend all the same. Yes, Shikiki, I did. Professional it might not be, but when I got Unohana-taichou's message, there wasn't any other course of action I was going to take."

"Mm," Shikiki pursed her lips, then nodded.

"If it was Kirio-chan, I'd be the same," she admitted. "I understand... the bonds the Academy creates between people."

"Will that one live?" Kai asked, and Shikiki shrugged.

"Mitsuki-dono's sword has kept her alive so far, but probably my skills are better suited to this kind of thing than hers," she said critically. "I'll do my best to fix as much of the damage as I can, once we're back at Fourth, but right now I'm only rendering her safe to move. Obviously something pretty awful happened here, and if there's an assassin with a sword..."

"Maybe a crazed Plus soul contaminated and on the verge of Hollowfication," Kai ruminated out loud. "I've never seen it like this before, true, but Madeki-dono did send a message about potential contaminated souls just a short time ago. Now this... maybe it's more significant than we think."

"He did?" Shikiki looked blank, and Kai offered a rueful smile.

"That's information you ought to keep to yourself," he said honestly. "It's not meant to be general knowledge."

"Oh," Shikiki frowned, turning her attention to strengthening the barrier around Seri's body. "This isn't as easy as I thought. There was something dark in whatever cut her... maybe even spiritual poison of some kind, I don't think this was a sword, Kai-dono. The wound is all wrong... I think..."

"Hollow?" Kai asked, and Shikiki nodded.

"Yes," she agreed, "and one with a particularly nasty spiritual aura. Maybe a spider... or a snake, or something else with poisonous properties. It's hard to pin down which, but there's definitely some kind of residue that's making it harder to heal the wound. No wonder Mitsuki-dono was struggling to knit it with her sword."

"I see. If that's the case, maybe the soul turned mid-attack, then," Kai reflected, turning to sniff the air. "I'll take your word on the genre of Hollow, although I don't sense that kind of presence here."

"Me either," Shikiki admitted, "but then, there's not enough of her blood here, either. Probably it happened somewhere else. Maybe nearby. I don't suppose that my patient would've been able to walk —

I'd be surprised if she was even conscious."

"In emergencies, souls can do amazing things to overcome death," Kai said sagely. He sighed, getting to his feet and leaping neatly out of the dip onto the side.

"I'll recall my men, and wait for the rest of your people to get here," he continued. "We're still missing a couple of healers, since with Edogawa and this other girl, we've now accounted for nine. Two more, but given the brutality here, it's not a hunt I want Fourth Division doing. It should be left to us to carry out."

"I suppose so," Shikiki chewed on her lip. "None of it makes sense, though."

"We'll worry first about getting the wounded back to Seireitei, and then we'll start a proper investigation," Kai promised, his gaze flitting once more to Mitsuki's white face. "We'll talk to Edogawa, too, when she's more able to speak. Killing healers is the lowest blow of the low, so it won't be forgotten easily. You have my word, Shikiki — whatever happened here, we'll get to the bottom of it."

12. Stalked

Chapter Eleven: Stalked

“Keitarou-san?”

Tenichi raised a dusty fist, rapping lightly on the makeshift wall of the scientist’s hidden study, deep within the network of rotten barriers and unsteady shelters that in total comprised the heart of Keitarou’s Rukongai lair. It was hardly what the Gotei would imagine when thinking of their most wanted man, he reflected to himself, tapping his toe impatiently against the uneven hunks of gravel that someone had failed to sweep evenly back to create a pathway to the main door. Keitarou’s name was not often mentioned in polite Seireitei society, but when it was, it was with the grandiose exaggeration of the master villain, living the high-life somewhere outside of shinigami reach. There had been many theories bandied about, most across drunken ryokan tables on patrol when the sake had flowed freely, but though the majority placed this elusive man somewhere in the Real World, the reality could not be more different.

Impoverished and desperate, yet resourceful and opportunistic enough to survive and make the best of what he had. That, perhaps, was Keitarou’s true threat, Tenichi mused to himself idly, for even in a land with no resources, he had ways and means to act.

“Keitarou-san, it’s Tenichi. May I come in?”

How long had he been in Rukongai now? He had lost count, the days and nights moving along so slowly and he hardly noticed the rise and set of the sun hidden behind so much thick cloud. He knew, for his distant, if ever obliging babysitter Koku had told him that Keitarou had sent a ransom note to Hirata some days earlier, but nobody had mentioned the matter again to Tenichi since and indeed, they had seemed a lot more preoccupied since that message had been passed. Tenichi’s spirit power was still sealed, but his wits were well about him, and he had noticed how even the few Plus souls who had begun venturing out in his presence since he had helped Natsuko find water had once more withdrawn to their homes. It wasn’t him, this time, who was scaring them, of that Tenichi was sure. Whatever was wrong was in the air, heavy and intangible, and without his *reiryoku*, he had no way of analysing it any further.

At length there were the sound of shuffled steps, Keitarou’s slightly

uneven gait giving away his presence as he crossed the floor towards the cloth divide that acted as a door. The fabric twitched, then was pulled back, and Tenichi found himself face to face with the other man, his appearance somewhat disheveled and his eyes more than a little bloodshot, as though he had been working through the night. Perhaps he had, Tenichi mused, his gaze roving past the slim figure to the chaotic chamber beyond, and at his look, Keitarou laughed, nodding as though guessing his companion's thoughts.

"I'm sorry. I'd fallen asleep," he said apologetically, ushering the young shinigami inside and allowing the cloth to fall behind them both. He gestured for Tenichi to make himself as comfortable as possible, touching his finger to what looked like a basic, handmade Kidou lamp and illuminating the chamber in a fresh layer of light that made it easier to see without straining the eyes. "I've been quite busy these past two days — looking for information for you, as well as other matters. Even so, though, I've delayed and I'm sorry for it. You must be doubting my word very much right now, as so many days have passed and you still find yourself among us."

"Have you heard from my Captain?" Tenichi crossed his legs, leaning back against the wall and hearing it creak slightly under his weight. He hurriedly sat up straight, afraid the whole building might come crashing down around them, and Keitarou smiled wryly at his alarm.

"It's stood here a long time, I doubt you will bring it down," he said softly. "Most of the foundations run quite deep. We commandeered what we could — basic as it appears, it has to withstand some of the harsher weather and the strong winds that rattle through these parts on a regular basis."

"I see," Tenichi hesitated, then cautiously sank back against the wood once more, finding that this time the creak was softer and less alarming. "Keitarou-san, about my Captain?"

"Ah yes," Keitarou's amusement faded and he pursed his lips, apparently debating how best to begin his answer.

"You have heard from him?" Tenichi pressed, and Keitarou's eyes became near slits.

"Your Captain and I have no good memories and less connection between us than most," he admitted honestly. "If he knew I had you, it would bring everyone into the greatest jeopardy. I therefore sent Kurotsuchi to Seireitei with a letter, but with coin and a clear instruction to give the message to a low-born messenger. I assume it

reached its destination, but have no way of knowing for sure. All I can tell you is that there has been no activity in Seireitei around the Seventh Division. Kurotsuchi is there now, and sends me regular updates, but so far it seems that the Captain of the Seventh has no interest in meeting our demands.”

“Taichou’s abandoning me?” Tenichi’s eyes widened in dismay. “Over a few supplies and building materials?”

“I didn’t say that,” Keitarou held up his hands. “I said that I had had no response. Without knowing if the message got to him, I can’t say more than that. Besides...”

He schooled his features into a look of consternation, and Tenichi frowned at the shadows that reflected in his mud-slurried eyes.

“Kurotsuchi fed back to me some other distressing news at the same time,” he added, softening his voice as if hoping nobody outside would hear. “I’ve kept it to myself, but I’ll tell you, seeing as it connects to the Gotei. It relates to the Spiritless Zone — you know about that, I think?”

“No more than most,” Tenichi was startled at this sudden shift in subject. “It’s a designated safe area for pure Plus souls, somewhere to the West of Rukongai.”

“Indeed,” Keitarou agreed grimly. “Big Sekkiseki walls divide it from us, and those of us possessed of spirit power can’t pass through, even though the resources there are far superior to those here. If we could, probably we wouldn’t need to raid Seireitei so much, but that’s another matter. I don’t know any details, being that the Spiritless Zone is a shinigami domain and I have no interest in crossing shinigami paths if I can avoid it, but I believe there was some kind of distress alert issued around the same time I ordered my message to be delivered. It’s likely nothing — shinigami have those things all the time and most likely it’s just a drill or a Hollow incursion — but they seem to take stuff very seriously. All in all, it’s probable your Captain has other things on his mind.”

“I see,” Tenichi felt some of his hurt begin to fade, replaced with concern over the fate of those deployed within the restricted area. “What kind of Hollow would operate in the Spiritless Zone?”

“I wouldn’t know that. Kurotsuchi isn’t exactly in with the local leaders, and I’ve never been to this secure region,” Keitarou pointed out drolly, and Tenichi flushed red.

“I suppose not. Sorry.”

“It’s all right,” Keitarou shrugged, dismissing it with a flick of his hand. “In any case, that has little bearing on what I want to show you now. I’ve no intention of keeping you here long term, because I made you a promise and whether your Captain pays ransom or not, I will release you back to Seireitei. I want you to know I keep my word, and if you’re to help me bring supplies here, losing one ransom will not mean the loss of any lives. With that in mind, I’ve been going through the bits and pieces of maps I’ve managed to salvage over the years — some from old bases and hiding places that Kurotsuchi’s raided for me, and others which I’ve put together from memory. You wanted to find Daisuke’s grave — and so I’ll do my best to help you find it.”

“Koku said it would be dangerous for you to take me there yourself,” Tenichi murmured thoughtfully, and Keitarou nodded his head, reaching for the nearest and largest of several old, yellowing scrolls and spreading it out on the floor between them.

“It is. It will be,” he agreed matter-of-factly. “I don’t go to Seireitei because my face is known by enough of the higher ranking shinigami to make such trips an unnecessary risk. Looking at the maps, though, I soon realised that too much land has changed since my altercation with my cousin Nagesu, and the area where Daisuke’s body lies is no longer so clearly marked on the more recent maps I’ve managed to obtain. I’m sure I’ll know the area when I see it — but I’m not confident of giving you accurate directions. I want you to trust my word, even if you don’t agree with my past politics.”

He sighed, rubbing his eyes, and Tenichi was struck by the genuine weariness in the other man’s demeanour.

“More than that, though, Daisuke would want to see you,” he said softly, his voice echoing slightly with barely suppressed emotion. “He was like a brother to me, so you and Ketsui are as nephews would be. If I can take you to his final resting place, he’d be happy. For that reason alone, I intend to take the risk. For once, I’m going to come with you — because it’s important that I do this myself.”

“What if we’re seen?” Tenichi was anxious, and Keitarou shrugged.

“I know good Kidou, and I’ll robe for stealth,” he promised. “If anyone happens to disturb us, it won’t be me they see. If they find you, all you need do is tell them you escaped from being held captive nearby, and I’ll slip away while they search the area for clues. I’m good at escaping — better than most, you might say, since it’s that and not a sword blade that’s kept me alive as long as this.”

He smiled, eying Tenichi quizzically.

“Are you concerned for me?” he teased lightly. “Should not an enemy of the Gotei be arraigned and held according to Council justice?”

“Yes...” Tenichi hesitated, then shook his head. “No. I mean, yes, if you had been... if you were trying to hurt people and bring down families, maybe I would feel that way. But... I’ve seen things here... I dunno. You might’ve done things I don’t agree with, but you are looking after these people. They don’t have anything else... and if I took you away from them, they’d probably die.”

“Yes, they probably would,” Keitarou agreed gravely. “I’m glad you realise it, my boy. It means I can rest easy that, when you go back, you won’t tell anyone about your time here.”

“I’d already decided not to. It’s not as though anyone would understand,” Tenichi snorted. “The people here venerate you. You and Eiraki-hime, both of you can do no wrong. There’s evidence all around that you’re the difference between survival and devastation.”

He pressed his lips together, debating for a moment, then, “Keitarou-san, I have one question. If you can’t answer, then I won’t get angry, only... at the edge of the local village, there’s a patch of land that seems, well, especially forsaken. There’s a high fence of dead bush branches blocking the access, mostly, but I’m pretty sure something else lies beyond. Nobody seems to go there, though, and I wondered... what it is?”

“Ah,” After seeing Natsuko’s fear, Tenichi had expected anger or furtiveness from his host, but instead Keitarou smiled ruefully, nodding his head. “I didn’t think you’d overlook something like that — but it’s better you don’t go there. A very sick individual is housed in that building, as its one of the few places in this district which still has a locking door. We keep him separate from the others on account of his disease. He suffers with madness, and we’ve discovered that his ailment is contagious. I have been trying to help him, but I’m not a healer nor a psychologist, and progress is slow. When awake, he babbles incoherence, and when asleep, his nightmares give off such negative vibes anyone in the nearby vicinity is also driven mad with fear or rage. One soul even died, in full view of the whole village, and after that I forbade anyone from going there. Not that any of them wanted to — that’s why it became such an isolated place. I didn’t want to frighten you, so I didn’t mention it — but... perhaps I underestimated what you could handle. In any regard, it’s better to stay away. There’s nothing you can do to help. This is what spirit power does, when it rails out of control and corrupts the very core of

a being.”

“Is he... this person... a Hollow?” Tenichi whispered, and Keitarou shook his head.

“No, but you’re right, that is the next step in the process,” he said, shrugging his shoulders helplessly. “He has been like this for years — at least twenty — and I have managed to keep the Hollow at bay, but it is hard work and I may lose the battle. If worst comes to the worst, I may be forced to kill him. He is a dangerous individual, death lacing every thought and every word, and I wouldn’t like to guarantee your safety around him.”

“I wasn’t going to trespass,” Tenichi assured his companion. “I was curious, that’s all — but I won’t interfere any more.”

As Natsuko said. It conceals a monster.

He processed this fact carefully, analysing Keitarou’s explanation in his mind and finding that, although Keitarou had given no name, his account more or less matched with what the Rukongai girl had told him.

Keitarou-san didn’t lie to me, or try to stall me. He told me straight away — so Natsuko’s fear must’ve been for the creature inside. Understandable, too, given what she said and what I’ve just heard — a soul broken in madness on the verge of sinking into a Hollow state... but surely even Keitarou-san can’t reverse Hollowfication?

“Maybe you should be careful,” he added as an afterthought. “If this person is so dangerous, maybe they can also poison you.”

“Some would say I was already mad,” Keitarou said speculatively, and despite himself, Tenichi grinned.

“I suppose that’s true,” he agreed, “but I don’t really think so.”

“Ah,” Keitarou’s tired eyes lit up with something that might have been relief, or even pleasure at these casually spoken words. “Does that mean you’ve forgiven me for bringing you here by force?”

“I don’t suppose there was any other way of doing it,” Tenichi sighed. “I don’t like that you did, so no, not entirely. Ketsui will probably be worried, and my Captain and Vice Captain livid. Worse, Kikyue-dono will be on the warpath and I dread to think what she’ll do to me for being stupid enough to get abducted. Even so, though...”

“Even so?”

“I guess I’ve begun to remember other things, since I’ve been here,” Tenichi rubbed his brows. “When we were kids, the things you did

and the stuff you explained to me about the world around us. If you were the crazy homicidal maniac the Council believed, you wouldn't have wasted so much time with two stupid kids. Nor would you be taking care of however many Rukongai waifs, giving them your food and water when your own supplies are limited and unreliable. Perhaps you might say I've formed a more balanced view of who you are. My memories and everything the Gotei has taught me are rather at odds with each other... now I'm trying to find a happy medium that balances them both."

"You probably won't manage that," Keitarou said pragmatically. "I am the monster the Council likes to label me, and I did kill people. Endou Shouichi died on the end of my blade, and I've never denied it, nor apologised for it. I watched him slaughter hundreds of innocent Urahara, including your father... but the Gotei don't like to weigh those lives as equals when a Clan leader's life is on the other side of the scale. In my mind, Shouichi was the bigger monster — but I've long since learned my voice isn't one that will ever be heard, much less listened to."

"I don't know how I feel about that, yet," Tenichi owned. "I want to know more about Father... about his death."

"I don't think you really do."

"No, I need to," Tenichi made up his mind. "I need to know everything, now. Not just from you telling me, Keitarou-san, but from other places, too. I'm not sure how, not yet, but... after being here with you and hearing your side of things, I know that the official version won't do any longer. I have to find those missing pieces of the puzzle. His grave is the first step, but not the last."

Keitarou chuckled.

"That expression and those words remind me so much of your father," he said nostalgically. "Your brother may have his Urahara appearance, Tenichi, but Daisuke's spirit was partly handed down to you. Maybe it's a selfish motive in among those more altruistic, but I dearly wanted to be able to spend time with you like this. I don't suppose Ketsui was old enough to remember clearly what things were like before you were sent into exile, and his discomfort the last time we met made it clear to me that I probably won't ever be able to reach him on any level. You, though, I had hopes for. Not politically, but as kin, however estranged we have become."

"I'm not my father, Keitarou-san," Tenichi spoke quietly, pressing his lips together pensively. "I'm a shinigami. You won't change that."

"I don't want to," Keitarou assured him. "On the contrary, if people like you can be shinigami, then I have faith that the world is changing and will continue to move towards a more balanced future. When that happens, people like Daisuke won't have died in vain... and he can rest easy in his grave knowing his sons are both making him proud, defending the weak."

"You sound different when you talk about him," Tenichi acknowledged, and Keitarou nodded.

"He was to me what Ketsui is to you," he repeated simply. "I miss him very much. Just talking about him won't bring him back, though."

He set the map aside, folding pale fingers absently together before him as he considered.

"Tomorrow morning, Tenichi-kun — early, if possible, we'll leave this place," he decided. "I have delayed long enough, and it would truly be selfish of me to hold you here longer, much as I've enjoyed having your company. It will take a little while for me to find and break into a *Senkaimon* without being detected, and I'd like you to be ready to go at a moment's notice, since I won't be able to hold a gate open for very long. It's dangerous for the people here if I risk drawing attention to this location, so I want to make sure we're quick."

"I understand," Tenichi agreed frankly, relief glittering in his eyes. He grasped Keitarou's outstretched hand, shaking it firmly before getting to his feet. "I'll be up and ready, don't worry."

He is going to send me home. He's going to help me find Father and then he's going to let me go home. So long as he does that... I'll keep my word to him too. People in Seireitei might not understand, but they haven't seen the state of the people here. Protecting them is part of my shinigami duty, too — so I'll do what I can for them, even if it means taking a few little risks. In comparison to the life and death struggles of these people every day, it's not that much to do.

He pushed back the fabric divide, ducking his head and stepping out into the night air. The night was quiet, and though there was a certain mugginess in the atmosphere, there was a light breeze that made the walk back towards the hut he had been using as shelter not unpleasant. Maybe he was starting to acclimatise to Rukongai's sparsity, he reasoned to himself with a rueful half smile. Or maybe, just as he was about to leave it, he had gained perspective enough to consider his coming here not so wholly bad.

"Got you!"

The yell came out of nowhere, and before Tenichi could react, something dropped out of the sky above him, knocking him off his feet and pinning him to the ground, trapping his arms against his body with determined knees. A hand ran through his reddish hair, grasping it and pulling it back with a jerk, whilst a second arm snaked around his throat, pressing against his windpipe with just enough pressure to make him gasp.

“Shinigami aren’t welcome in this part of Rukongai,”

The words were little more than a hiss against his ear, the rush of hot air of someone’s breath making him shiver involuntarily. Whether it was a man or a woman, he could not tell, but as he struggled to pull himself free, the hold at his throat tightened, cutting off his breath completely for a full thirty seconds before loosening and allowing him to drag air once more into his lungs. Dust and dirt from the ground swirled up against his nose and mouth, making him cough, but whoever sat atop his prone body made no attempt to shift their weight. Instead there was a low, derisive chuckle, and Tenichi realised with a jolt that once more he had been taken completely off guard.

Fear rippled through him. Without his *reiryoku*, and in such a vulnerable position, how could he fight back?

Was it Kurotsuchi, bent on some nefarious errand once more, or someone else, someone with a deep grudge against shinigami who had watched him wander free around the village from behind the rotting curtains of the mud-splashed shacks?

“Get off him.”

Koku’s voice cut through the stifling darkness, every syllable ringing with blessed relief in Tenichi’s panicked ears. There was a snarl from his assailant, making Tenichi wonder if whoever had brought him down was actually human or part animal, but the choke hold on his throat was released, the hand on his head tightening its grip around his hair.

“I said get *off* him, Sakaki,”

Koku’s words held no emotion, nor were his tones hurried or panicked, and Tenichi heard the sound of shuffling footsteps against the dust as someone moved gradually closer. “Keitarou-san brought him here. He’s not someone you can kill, so get off him before you do something you regret.”

“I don’t take orders from *you*,” the person called Sakaki spat out the response, yet this time the words sounded more sullen and defensive

than they did feral or threatening. A glint of something silver flashed out of the corner of Tenichi's eye, and his heart jumped in his chest as he realised the reason the chokehold had been released was because his attacker had needed to draw a weapon. "It's a shinigami. Shinigami don't belong here. I have carte blanche with any who come... that's the rule."

"Tenichi-san is Keitarou-san's guest," Now Koku was right alongside them, and Tenichi heard what sounded like a brief struggle of wills, as Koku clamped his hand around Sakaki's wrist. The clatter of metal against hard earth made him realise that Koku had removed the weapon from the assailant's grip, tossing it aside out of harm's way. "If you kill him, you'll be punished. I don't care if you listen to me or not, but you should listen to Keitarou-san."

"It's nothing to do with you!"

"I'm sure you got the message that Tenichi-san was here. I sent it myself," Koku was unmoved. "I'll say it once more. Get off him. If not, I'll make you do it — and you'll be nursing broken bones."

There was a muttered curse, but gradually, Tenichi felt the jabbing knees shift against his back, then the weight lift off his spine, allowing him to take a proper breath of air into his lungs for the first time in what seemed like an eternity. He scrambled to his knees, drawing deep lungfuls of air into his body, and Koku cast him a glance, his expression pensive.

"Are you all right?" he asked softly, and Tenichi nodded, unable to speak. Koku's eyes shifted to someone — or something — above Tenichi's left shoulder, and his expression became chilly.

"You ought to go and think about this," he added evenly. "If Keitarou-san finds out, you'll be for it."

"I don't like them," now Tenichi could make out the sulky voice, and his eyes widened with shock, swinging around to see his assailant for the first time. Shadowed in the gloom, yet just about visible was the figure of a teenage girl, perhaps as young as sixteen or seventeen, a thick ponytail of dark hair pulled back from her face and angry, predatorial blue eyes boring into him as though he were no more than a rabbit being hunted by a wolf. "They shouldn't be here. They don't belong."

"No, but Tenichi-san won't be here much longer," Koku sighed, holding out a hand to pull the shinigami to his feet. Tenichi took it gratefully, still unable to take his eyes from the slender form in front of him.

“Don’t stare at me like that, else I’ll take your eyes out,” Sakaki’s anger was bubbling up inside of her once more, but Koku slipped neatly between them, folding his arms across his chest.

“Take your katana and go work off your temper in the forest,” he said bluntly. “If you come near Tenichi-san again, I’ll tell Keitarou-san everything I saw, and you know he’ll believe me. Maybe he wouldn’t believe it from Tenichi-san, but if *I* tell him... you know he’ll listen to me.”

Sakaki bristled visibly, but apparently realised she was beaten, for she stalked indignantly across the barren ground, bending to pick up her katana. Tenichi tensed as her fingers closed once more around the weapon’s hilt, but the teenager had no intention of continuing her assault, sliding it back into its scabbard with very bad grace. This done, she wheeled back towards Tenichi, spitting pointedly on the ground between them before turning on her heel and disappearing into the night.

Tenichi took another deep gulp of air into his lungs.

“Thank you,” he murmured, his voice hoarse. “With cuffs on, I couldn’t sense her... I thought she was going to kill me, until you showed up.”

“Probably she would have,” Koku said bluntly, and Tenichi shot him a troubled look. “Don’t look so bothered about it, though. Sakaki treats everyone like that. She likes violence. She’d kill most of the people here if Keitarou-san let her — only he doesn’t let her, and that courtesy extends to you while you’re here as Keitarou-san’s guest. Fortunately, she listens to him. She knows I’m right and she knew she was pushing her luck. If she thought she could get away with it unseen, that’s one thing — but with a witness, she knew when to pull back.”

“She’s just a kid,” Tenichi turned his gaze in the direction the girl had gone, and Koku snorted.

“Sakaki wasn’t ever a kid, not really,” he replied. “You wouldn’t have detected her, though, even without those cuffs. She has no reiatsu. You can’t trace folk like that, can you? Not here.”

“No,” Tenichi looked surprised. “But... I thought that only contaminated Plus souls lived here. If she’s not contaminated by reiatsu, then...”

“Oh, she’s contaminated, all right,” Koku snorted, shaking his head derisively. “If you were running the Spiritless Zone, would you want a

homicidal nutjob like that running riot around your settlement? Not likely.”

He sighed, stretching his hands over his head.

“I don’t think she’ll go after you again, though,” he added. “She knows I know she’s targeted you, so that’ll protect you. It’s a hassle, but seeing you dead isn’t much good, either. Keitarou-san likes you. He’d be upset if you died.”

He offered his companion a tired smile.

“I can’t stay with you, as I’ve other jobs to follow up tonight, but I will walk you back to your shelter,” he decided, “just to rub in the message in case she’s watching us from the undergrowth. Keitarou-san told me you were going to be leaving tomorrow, so you probably won’t ever meet the girl again. Try and put it — and her — out of your mind. There are some damaged folk in these parts — that’s all.”

“Mmm,”

Tenichi pursed his lips, remembering Keitarou’s words about the mysterious hut and it’s dangerous resident.

No kidding.

“I’d appreciate that,” he said out loud, nodding his head. “You’re right, tomorrow I’ll be going. After that, I guess I’ve overstayed my welcome... so it will probably be better all round when I’m back in Seireitei.”

“Hrm, maybe,” Koku cocked his head on one side, fixing Tenichi with a thoughtful look, but he did not demur, instead turning towards the main pathway and beckoning for his companion to follow him.

“This way is quicker,” he explained with a wry smile. “Come on. Follow me.”

Two days had passed.

Juushirou glanced across the small, plainly furnished chamber, taking in the darkness of the night sky beyond with a weary sigh. It was late, and his work for the day was over, but despite his tiredness, he could not rest — not just yet. Slipping his *haori* from his shoulders, he folded it and set it to one side, settling himself down at the side of the slim pallet bed that was the room’s most distinctive piece of furniture. Beneath the stark white of the plain-fabric covers lay the slender form of a young woman, her ebony hair brushed back from her face into a loose tail and her dark lashes resting against her

cheeks, her soft grey eyes hidden in sleep. She appeared fragile as porcelain, but the gentle rise and fall of her chest was proof enough she was real, and the sight of the covers shifting slightly with each breath reassured Juushirou that his companion was alive, although still very much lost to the world around her.

Mitsuki-chan.

Gently, though not without hesitations, Juushirou brushed a light finger against her pale cheek, drawing his hand back and folding it in his lap. She did not stir, still sunk in the exhausted slumber of one who had given everything and then some to carry out her duty, and, as he watched her, Juushirou felt his heart ache. Mitsuki was safe, and in that first moment when Shikiki had told him his old classmate had survived, he had only felt relief, crashing over him in giddy, jubilant waves. It had been followed swiftly by guilt and self-recrimination, however, as he had understood the full horror of what had occurred in the Spiritless Zone. Mitsuki had lived, but at the cost of seeing her friends and comrades slaughtered around her. What she must have endured, he could not imagine — and though she looked peaceful, he knew that, when she woke, those nightmares would be fresh in her thoughts.

He was happy to see her, but in the circumstances, happiness was not a suitable emotion. Seireitei had been assaulted, its healers violated, and, two days on, the Gotei were no further on in naming those responsible. Members of the Onmitsukidou remained over the divide, still scouring the landscape for the two missing shinigami healers, but Juushirou privately thought there was little likelihood of either turning up alive. It had been too long, and their absence at the crime scene had only increased worries for their safety. He had not known either agent personally, just as, of the Rukongai squad as a whole, only Mitsuki and Madeki counted as acquaintances, but he found he could grieve for those he had not met just as easily as if they had been members of his own squad. They had had lives and goals ahead of them, and those had been stolen away by some unknown evil.

Although at first, all three injured healers had been conveyed to treatment chambers within the Fourth, the scale of the tragedy coupled with the shock and trauma among its remaining members had left the division in a state of busy chaos, and the loss of so many good shinigami had meant workloads being doubled. Seri's condition remained serious, for although Shikiki had repaired a good amount of the physical damage to her organs, the deep, spiritual poison of the Hollow was proving more stubborn, and so she had been put under twenty-four hour surveillance, any change in her condition feverishly

reported up the chain of command to the harried Captain at the top. Madeki's condition was less severe, and for the most part, he had been left to sleep off the lingering effects of the anaesthesia, but once the Onmitsukidou had begun bringing back the mutilated bodies, the need for autopsies had overridden time for grief, and in the midst of this, Retsu had asked Juushirou a favour.

"Mitsuki-san has already proven how much she cares for her injured comrades," she had said softly, her gentle voice showing only very faintly the impact of such a horrific event on her nerves. "She is quite exhausted, and needs rest. There are no significant injuries, nothing that needs the attention of a healer. Yuuyugo will recover itself naturally, but I fear that, if she were to rise with all this uncertainty around her, she might try too quickly to throw herself back into the fray. That would be counter-productive — and as things stand, I cannot risk losing any more of my best healers through overuse of spirit power. I would like her to be somewhere well away from Fourth Division when she opens her eyes."

"There's a risk of her burning out?" Juushirou had asked anxiously, and Retsu had lowered her head, sadness in her dark eyes.

"If not for Shikiki-san and Kai-dono finding them, perhaps it would have occurred already," she said gravely. "They prevented that, thankfully, and she fainted, allowing her body to begin its own recovery. I expect her to sleep for some days together, but even when she wakes, her spirit levels will be unsettled and far below her normal ability level. If she were to begin healing again in that condition... it could do her permanent damage. Therefore, if it is not inconvenient, I should like to impose on your kindness and your personal concern for her well-being and ask whether there is a quiet, empty chamber within Thirteenth Division's barracks where she might be allowed to sleep and convalesce without pressure."

"Of course," Juushirou had agreed easily, nodding his head. "If I can help by providing that, then please, feel free to impose. It's no secret that I'm worried about her, and if things are that way, I'll make sure she doesn't have a chance to push herself too far."

"Mm," Retsu had been silent for a moment, then had turned to him, offering him a bittersweet smile.

"Mitsuki-san is sensitive, and I imagine much upset by what has occurred," she murmured softly. "If there is one person beyond Fourth Division who I believe might be able to help her face those things and begin to heal, it is you. I am not ignorant of the kind of bond you two shared as young folk, and I can see for you it remains as strong now."

That is exactly what Mitsuki-san needs in the days and weeks ahead. Thirteenth Division also has Naoko-san, who will doubtless be a comfort, and between you, I know I can count on your Division where she is concerned.”

“You have my word,” Juushirou had bowed solemnly, and that afternoon, with the guidance and supervision of one of Fourth’s remaining senior officers, Enishi and two of the lower seated Thirteenth members had gone to Fourth, bringing the patient carefully and steadily to her current resting place. It had garnered some interest, whispers and stares from the shinigami who knew nothing as yet of the tragic events within Rukongai, but Juushirou had made it clear to all that Mitsuki was a patient from the Fourth who was not to be disturbed and, with their usual loyalty to their Captain, even the most curious of recruits had obeyed the order without question.

Although he could still hear the sounds of his squad going about their last chores, inside of the chamber was tranquil, representing a false peace full of unanswered questions.

They left you alive, but that was more luck than anything else, wasn’t it, Mi-chan?

Juushirou’s hazel eyes softened, taking in every curve and dip of her face, noting to himself what had changed and what had not in the two decades or more since their tearful farewell in the grounds of the Academy. She still seemed almost as young as she had then, though her hair had grown longer and, as he gazed at her, he decided that she no longer looked quite as girlish, her time in the Spiritless Zone having brought her across the threshold into full womanhood. Absently he found himself wanting to meet her eyes, knowing it was irrational but desperate to see whether the years apart had clouded the soft grey gaze and changed the person he still considered his first love.

Maybe you’ve moved past our adolescent affection, but even if you don’t love me any more, you kept your promise. You came back, and that means we can talk. Whatever happened in Rukongai, if I can help, I will help. That might be all you want from me, now, but even if it is, I’ll give it without hesitation. That’s all I can do, since I can’t erase what you’ve seen or what you’ve been through. Rukongai is a place I couldn’t protect you — and I’m sorry for it, even though I know Shikiki was right and you didn’t want my protection.

“You’re here again, Taichou,”

Naoko slid back the door of the small chamber, causing Juushirou to turn in surprise, and at his consternation, a faint smile twitched at

the Third seat's lips.

"She's not going to disappear in the night, you know," she murmured, bringing the rest of her body into the chamber and crossing the floor towards him, a tray of tea and a plate of onigiri in her hands. "I brought you this, since I thought you might be hungry. You weren't in the mess hall, and some of the recruits were talking. I shut them up, of course, but..."

She trailed off meaningfully, and Juushirou took the tray, sending her a grateful smile.

"I'm sorry," he acknowledged. "I was in Ugendou, finishing off reports, as it happens. I've just come down here, now, but I'll keep it in mind. I have been very busy, and I expect I'll get busier, but I don't want to disappear from my squad's line of sight. It'll only worry them, and there's a lot of other things to worry about."

"It bothers you, doesn't it?" Naoko made no attempt to leave, but nor did she sit down, leaning up against the wall of the chamber instead, and Juushirou saw her eyes soften as her gaze rested on Mitsuki's sleeping form. "Seri was definitely gored by a Hollow, and a toxic one, even though everyone else at the encampment was killed by a blade of some kind."

"Of course," Juushirou agreed. "The behaviour of Hollows has been on my mind for a while, now, and I can't figure out why there'd even be one in Rukongai, let alone one hell-bent on killing healing shinigami. There's a lot of things that don't add up about what the rescue party found on entering the Spiritless Zone. Just being grateful Mitsuki was one of the survivors doesn't expunge the need for justice where the others are concerned. If I can help, I want to do so. Do you think that's wrong?"

"No, I'm glad," Naoko's face became shadowed and she sighed, spreading her hands. "Mitsuki aside, some of the dead are distant kin of mine. Seri is my second cousin. I'm angry. Livid, in fact, that anyone would attack healers as though they were disposable vermin. If you'd been determined to keep out of it, I'd have petitioned you to the contrary. I'm not an Unohana any more, of course, and I've no power through those channels — but I'd like to do my bit."

"I see," Juushirou inclined his head in acknowledgement. "I suppose that makes sense. In that case, when the facts are clearer, I'll be sure to keep you involved."

"Thank you," gratitude flitted into Naoko's sharp greenish gaze. "I appreciate that."

“Well, it’s not much, but it’s all we can do, now,” Juushirou reflected sadly. He reached across to brush Mitsuki’s pale fingers gently with his own.

“When she wakes up, who knows what she’ll say?” he murmured. “Who knows what happened to her, or what trauma she’s experienced. Despite that, she was brave enough to use all of her spirit power saving the lives of two of her comrades, although it put her own at risk. It’s our duty, therefore, to take up the fight as much as we can on her behalf as well as for those who didn’t make it back. The Spiritless Zone is a Seireitei project. It has implications for everyone, and it’s something Mitsuki and her poor comrades believed in. That’s enough of a reason to find out who wanted to sabotage it, and why.”

“I agree,” Naoko nodded firmly. “Then I suppose we’re waiting on the official report from the Shihouin’s shadow-troops?”

“If by that, you mean from Kai’s Onmitsukidou...”

“I think that’s what I said,” Naoko observed dryly, and Juushirou shook his head ruefully.

“Even now, you can’t resist a dig at him, can you?” he remarked. “Yes, that’s what we’re waiting for. Two healers are still not found, and they want to have the whole scene canvassed and all the evidence brought back before we jump to any conclusions about what happens. True, I have doubts and theories and things I’d like to know more about, but in this case, I think probably to wait is the right decision. We need testimony from those who were there,’ his gaze shifted back to Mitsuki, “and that can’t be rushed.”

“True,” Naoko pursed her lips together in displeasure, “though I heard that Madeki-dono’s colour had improved. Probably he’ll wake first, so that might take some of the pressure off Mi-chan. He was in charge, so debriefing is his job, really.”

“Maybe,” Juushirou acknowledged. “Mitsuki was the one with Aomori Seri, though, and Aomori’s injuries were unlike any of the others. Shikiki thought that happened to her outside of the camp, because despite all of the blood, there wasn’t much of Aomori’s in the vicinity. It might be that what Mitsuki knows is as important — I suppose we’ll see.”

“Sora’s still chomping at the bit to get here to see her, by the way,” Naoko changed the subject, clearly not wanting to dwell on this more than necessary, and Juushirou sighed.

“I’m sure she is,” he said guiltily. “It’s not my fault, but I’m sure

she's cursing me above all people for keeping her out at the moment. Unohana-taichou asked me to ensure Mitsuki was kept quiet, and, her aside, not to allow anyone bar myself and my top seats to enter here whilst she still slept, in case all the spiritual activity around her disturbed her sooner than necessary. Other than me, and of course, Unohana-taichou herself, that limits it to you and Enishi, nobody else. Unohana-taichou was quite clear that she didn't want anyone from outside divisions coming to gawk, and though Sora has better right than most to visit Mitsuki, she also isn't what you might call 'quiet company'. When Mitsuki wakes up, that's different — probably Sora's brand of hyperactivity will be welcome then, but while she's resting..."

"It's all right. I told her pretty much the same, and that it was Retsu-sama who gave the order, not you," Naoko assured him, stretching her arms over her head and stifling a yawn. "She's not happy, but I made sure she knew that Mitsuki was being isolated for her own healing good, and that her life wasn't in danger. It isn't, is it?" this last with a sudden expression of doubt, and Juushirou shook her head.

"No. No, it isn't," he said honestly. "She'll recover, it will just take a little time."

"Then we'll save Sora as the secret weapon for when she's more alert," Naoko said decisively, though relief flickered in her eyes. "In the meantime, I intend on being on hand in case she wakes up sooner than we think and needs a friendly ear. I owe her for all the times she listened to me after Suzuno died... and it's never too soon to repay a debt to a friend."

She moved forward, bending to pat Mitsuki warmly on the shoulder.

"She's a very precious person to lots of people," she murmured, more than half to herself. "Nobody is going to let her fall into danger again any time soon."

"Naoko..." Juushirou murmured, and Naoko shot him a smile.

"I'm going to turn in," she reflected. "It's late, and I'm up at dawn with recruit drill, since Fukutaichou's pencilled in to do some swordwork with Tsukabishi and Kira instead. You shouldn't stay up too late either, Taichou — or am I wrong when I say you're going to talk to Ketsui about Tenichi in the morning?"

"I can't leave it any longer, though all of this has distracted me," Juushirou acknowledged. "I'll do it then, Naoko-chan — and you're

right. Hard as it is to leave her, I know she doesn't need me hovering over her twenty-four seven. We both have other duties to attend to, and I can't let them fall by the wayside."

He got to his feet, scooping up his folded *haori*.

"I'll summon Ketsui tomorrow," he added. "Goodness knows it won't be easy news to break, but it has to be done, and I'm the one who has to do it."

So, Tenichi had found Kohaku's hut.

Keitarou walked pensively between the rows of briars, noting absently as he did so how much more barren and dead this area was from the main village where the bulk of the contaminated Plus souls made their homes. It was as though something dark and noxious had poisoned the air, stealing away the last gasps from any animals that dared encroach here, and the branches of the trees were little more than bleached skeletons, long since surrendering themselves to death. Here and there Keitarou's feet crunched slightly against the fragile bones of fallen birds who had been foolish enough to try and use these trees for perches, and the silence that hung heavily all around him seemed oppressive, and if it had been possible, Keitarou might have thought it had made air thicker, rendering it harder to breathe.

For him, though, this pathway held no fear. Unlike the frightened villagers, he knew what lay at the end of the long, winding track.

He paused for a moment, listening not to the absent sounds of the night but for the traces of reiatsu that told him in which direction Tenichi was currently heading. A faint smile touched his lips as he recognised the feeble flicker of the boy's cuffed presence, moving away from his position.

Koku was guiding him, and this reassured the scientist all the more. *I answered his questions as best I could, and he seemed to accept what I said, but in case he changes his mind, it's better someone makes sure he gets to bed safely and to sleep. You always know exactly what I need from you, Koku. There's too much of danger in this place and too much of grave importance. I don't want to drag one of Daisuke's sons into that darkness, not yet. Maybe not at all... we'll see. For now, I need your trust and your faith in me to grow, Tenichi-kun. There's plenty of time for other matters later, if and when they arise.*

He stepped past the quietly bubbling puddle of water Tenichi had brought forth by splitting the stone, squeezing deftly between the tangle of dead bushes and onto the narrow stone track that lay

beyond. The hut loomed out of the darkness like a monster, silhouetted by the light of the feeble Rukongai moon, and as Keitarou drew closer to it, he reached down to his belt, pulling a silver key from the folds of the old, worn fabric. It was rusting at the fob, the chain that had once held it bent and warped from years of use, but it was still functional and he slid it between the slats of wood into the well concealed keyhole, twitching it slightly to release the mechanism and allow the door to swing open silently.

Blackness greeted him — an oppressive, stifled darkness that smelt of stale air. If things such as fear could have a smell, Keitarou was certain that that too would have formed part of the odour, and he wrinkled his nose, taking a deep breath as he prepared to duck inside the building.

“Why is that shinigami still here?”

Sakaki’s voice struck out of the darkness like a sudden candle flame, and Keitarou jumped, swinging around to face the angry teenager with a muttered curse of dismay. Sakaki stood in the hazy moonlight, largely concealed by the shadows but still, Keitarou could make out the displeasure on her young features, and the glint of her silvery sword, tapping impatiently against her shins. She would not attack him, he knew that beyond all doubt, but he cursed himself again that he had not heard a single sound of her presence during his approach.

“You really are getting good at stalking, Sakaki,” he said at length, his voice a forced attempt at lightheartedness, but Sakaki’s scowl deepened, and she shook her head.

“I want you to tell me why,” she said flatly. “He’s a shinigami. Okaasama said you wanted him here, and that he’s important to you. She said that, and so did Katsu-nii — but I don’t understand why. He’s nothing to do with us. He’s an enemy. He’s wearing the black shroud of those Gotei people. Do you want him to ruin everything?”

“Tenichi isn’t an enemy,” Keitarou sighed, sliding shut the door of the hut and reengaging the lock as he realised he would have no peace until he had settled his companion’s complaints. “I brought him here because he’s of use to me. To us. He can get things we can’t, even that Kurotsuchi might not be able to reach. And, more than that, it turns out he’s a member of a squad that’s conveniently placed to some other business of mine. I want to use that connection as best I can — and therefore winning his trust is important to me.”

“I don’t like it,” Sakaki was sullen, her lips pouting as though he

had just refused to buy her some new trinket. “I want to kill him, but nobody will let me. They said you’d be mad, if I did.”

“I would not be happy,” Keitarou agreed gravely, resting his hands on her shoulders and looking her straight in the eye. “We have an agreement about that, and I wouldn’t like you to break your word. It would upset me very much, Sakaki-chan — and that would not be good for either of us, now would it?”

“I don’t see why he’s so special,” Sakaki muttered, kicking her foot petulantly against the ground. “I don’t remember making anyone any promise about not killing shinigami. On the contrary, I thought that was what you wanted me to do? Isn’t that why you had me trained to use this sword? What was the point of that, if not...?”

“Tenichi is family,” Keitarou said simply, and Sakaki snorted.

“He is not!”

“He is,” Keitarou put a gentle finger to her lips, warning her not to raise her voice too much in the heavy gloom. “He is the son of my cousin, Daisuke — a man I viewed like a brother and a martyr to our cause many, many years ago. He is a Kotetsu — and therefore, he is beyond the scope of your blade. You’re sworn not to kill family, aren’t you?”

“Hrmph,” Sakaki looked dissatisfied. “I didn’t realise it extended to shinigami, though.”

“I am a shinigami, Sakaki, at least in terms of my sword and my skills,” Keitarou reminded her softly. “Would you hold the same view of me?”

“No, but...”

“Tenichi’s clothing is the uniform of the Gotei, but we will claim him all the same,” Keitarou’s gaze flitted back to the hut, then, “I have had assurance that that’s the case, and I believe its information I can have trust in.”

“I don’t like it,” Sakaki repeated. “I understood about not killing you or Okaasama, or Katsu-nii. That’s fine. I get that. They’re off limits. And the thing in there... whatever it is...” she swung her sword disparagingly at the building behind Keitarou with a snort that told him she considered the hut’s contents so thoroughly beneath her notice it didn’t merit a proper mention. “I don’t kill the people here because I don’t care about things that can’t fight properly and I don’t have any interest in them, either. But now you keep adding people to the no-kill list. That creepy Kurotsuchi was the start, then that smug

idiot Koku, now this Tenichi person. How many more are there going to be, Otousama?"

"There are plenty enough shinigami to keep you busy without concerning yourself with those who live here," Keitarou said reasonably. "Did I not just give you the chance to slash your way through a squad of them in the Spiritless Zone? You can't be hungry for blood again so soon, Sakaki-chan. I've spoiled you already — you shouldn't be so greedy."

"Mm..." Sakaki sighed, and Keitarou saw grudging acceptance in the girl's vivid blue eyes. "I suppose so. That was fun. I enjoyed that. But..."

She paused for a moment, then,

"Katsu-nii goes to Seireitei. He goes there a lot, and he gets to kill there too, as well as play with Hollows," she said bleakly. "I can't do that. If shinigami come to Rukongai, they're mine — but they don't. And when one does... I can't even kill him, so it's frustrating. I hate shinigami. They're the enemy, right? They're the ones who think they're better than us, and therefore they should all be taught a lesson. I can't do that easily here, though. I want to, and I'm better at it than Katsu-nii, but I can't."

"I know," Keitarou patted her reassuringly on the shoulder. "I know, and I'm still thinking about that. I'm sure there is a way, we just haven't found it yet. Between you and I, Sakaki, I would sooner send you to Seireitei on an assassination mission than your brother. You're right when you say that you're better at it than he is, and more attuned to it... that's why you got to train with a sword and he didn't. Just be a little patient, all right? I will find a way... you have to trust me."

"I do..." Sakaki admitted reluctantly. "It just isn't fair, Papa. Katsu-nii gets to have all the fun."

Despite himself, Keitarou smiled, amused at the fond affectation. Sakaki was an adept and ruthless killer, but she was still a child, and sometimes, he mused pensively, she still looked for his reassurance and guidance. Violent as Sakaki was by nature, she was very attached to both of her parents, and no matter how much blood she spilled, he took comfort in the fact that she would sooner die than disobey his orders.

"You won't tackle Tenichi again, will you?" he asked gently, and Sakaki grimaced, shaking her head.

"I promise," she said slowly. "If you say not, then I won't. I don't like it, though. I don't think he can be trusted. He smells funny — like outside. Like the other shinigami. I don't like him being here, it's like he's spying on us."

"Or we're spying on him, maybe?" Keitarou suggested lightly. Sakaki's eyes widened with surprise, and Keitarou patted her on the head.

"You did good work in the Spiritless Zone," he told her. "You made me very proud, you and Katsura both. Having you both return safely, though, that was the biggest relief to both your mother and I. We would not do anything to put you in any danger, my girl. Tenichi will not be able to hurt you. I guarantee that I would kill him myself before I allowed that to happen."

"That wouldn't be fair," Sakaki objected, putting her hands on her hips. "If you killed him, I wouldn't get any of the fun!"

"True," Keitarou laughed, patting her on the back, "but some things are my duty as your father. Now, run along and get some rest, all right? As it happens, I have work to do tonight, since I will be taking Tenichi away from here tomorrow. He's asking questions about this place... so I think it's better he goes before he discovers any more about our Rukongai. I don't believe he'll betray us, but I don't want to frighten him just yet."

"He could use a little frightening," Sakaki said contemplatively, "but all right. If you're getting rid of him tomorrow, I guess I'll do that."

She glanced at the hut, then shuddered.

"If you're going in that place, I'll pass," she added. "I don't want to go mad, thank you."

She leaned over to kiss her father lightly on the cheek, then skipped away into the darkness, and Keitarou rested his hand on the wood panel door, a frown touching his features.

An assassin who can't go to the places where people need assassinating. A problem to which I have yet to find a clear solution. I'm sorry, Sakaki. You'll just have to wait a little longer. I don't want to waste your potential by throwing you into danger too quickly. I need you — all of you. All of you, and...

He moved his hand back down to the key that still hung in the door of the old hut.

I need what lies in here, too. If this time I'm to better the Council and

the Gotei at their own game of cat and mouse, I need everything I can get.

13. Daisuke's Grave

Chapter Twelve: Daisuke's Grave

A lingering mist hung around the forest as Keitarou opened the *Senkaimon*, stepping out into the woodland before turning and ushering Tenichi to follow him. The gaping split in the atmosphere shook and shuddered closed, and Tenichi took a deep breath into his lungs, relishing the fresh, crisp scent of District Seven's fragrant woodland. After the stale, cloistered atmosphere of the Rukon Valley, every breath tasted twice as sweet, and he stretched his hands over his head, enjoying the visible sensation of flourishing life all around him.

It had been more than two decades since a previous Endou leader had ravaged the local villages, razing peaceful stretches like this to the ground in their pursuit of those with spirit power. To the east, Tenichi could just about make out a jagged swathe of savaged earth that, stripped of the ancient trees that had once lived there, new settlers had turned and tilled to farmland, replacing the relics of devastation with the basics needed for survival.

To the west lay the remains of the forest, untouched and beautiful. Tall elms stood proud like dark-skinned sentries, their long branches reaching out to one another to criss cross the sky above them and make the sun's light mottle against the ground in unique and dazzling patterns. Vines clung to the lower reaches, winding their way from tree to tree, whilst the floor beneath their feet was dotted with small shrubs and other plants, many flowering bravely despite the uneven favours of the sun. Around the trunks of some of the trees were clutches of overgrown ferns, their fronds casting the earth in darker shadow, and faintly Tenichi could hear the buzzing of insects darting from bloom to bloom through the greenery.

It was an overgrown paradise, a thick woodland left to its own devices in the aftermath of Shouichi's violent raids, and though in a few areas, Tenichi could just about make out patches of grass, for the most part it was impossible to tell exactly where the forest ended and the earth began.

Tenichi's gaze softened with nostalgia, remembering briefly the trees he and Ketsui had played among with the children of their village before the rogue shinigami had come and set their homes and livelihoods alight. This was not an area of District Seven he knew, yet

the layout and the flora were very similar, and so he could almost imagine himself back there, in a time and place before everything had changed.

“It seems peaceful, but we can’t stand here and take in the view,” Keitarou pulled his cloak more tightly around his body, lifting his hood up to cover his face so that his features were cast in shadow. “This is definitely the right location, but it will require us to walk. Whatever fate preserved this stretch of forest, it’s grown up far more since the last time I was here, and I’ll take a minute or two to get my bearings.”

“Mm.”

Tenichi reluctantly drew his thoughts back on topic, nodding his head. “Is there anyone nearby? I can’t sense anyone with these cuffs on.”

“I don’t have the means to remove them, here, and I’d rather not leave any unnecessary evidence lying around here,” Keitarou read the hint in the shinigami’s words, shaking his head. “If I release you, they’ll sense you. Come for you. I can move quickly... but that would be far too great a risk for both of us. It would be hard to explain why you were here in my company, and I have no desire to remind the Gotei that I still exist.”

“I suppose that’s true,” Tenichi acknowledged. “I’m sorry. I didn’t think.”

Keitarou did not reply, but Tenichi was sure he caught the glimmer of an amused smile before the other man turned away, raising a black-robed arm to indicate the path they should take through the trees.

Although his gait was uneven and his steps stiff, Tenichi found that Keitarou was far more prepared for the challenging nature of the landscape, and more than once he himself stumbled and tripped, feet caught by this vine or that trailing branch snaking across the hidden pathway in front of him. Each time he faltered, Keitarou turned to wait for him, no impatience in his aura, and something in this reminded Tenichi once again of his childhood. In the shade of the trees’ reassuring boughs, he could almost see Keitarou as his father, waiting patiently for his young son to scramble over the obstacles and reach his side. Then, he remembered fondly, the plants had reached above his knees, poking at his legs through his thin *hakama*, and a smile touched his face. It was as though Daisuke’s ghost was there to guide them, for despite Keitarou’s words about finding his way, it was not long before the scientist stopped, bending awkwardly to touch the

ground, then nodding his head.

“Here,” he said, his words barely more than a whisper. “This is the place, Tenichi-kun. I’m sure of it. Your father lies here.”

“This place?”

Tenichi stepped forward, resting his hand on the bent, withered trunk of a particularly old tree and scanning the surroundings for any sign that someone had been interred here, but the green carpet that swathed his feet showed not a single break, and it was impossible for him to distinguish this area from the rest of the forest floor.

“You’re sure that this is the place, Keitarou-san? It looks just like the rest of the wood to me — how can you be sure?”

“Time has grown it over, hiding him from prying eyes and returning him to nature from whence he came,” Keitarou’s eyes clouded, and Tenichi’s doubt faded slightly as he saw the genuine pain glittering in his companion’s pale eyes. “This is the place, though. That tree you’re resting against was here then, stooped over me while I dug the hole and protecting me from prying eyes.”

He knelt stiffly on the ground, his hands pressing together briefly as if saying a fleeting prayer, then he sighed, turning so that Tenichi could see his features clearly. There were unmistakeably tears in the muddy brown eyes, and though Tenichi was sure that his companion had better control than to let them fall, something in their raw honesty made the young shinigami feel suddenly guilty for having doubted in this man at all.

Keitarou-san’s feelings for my father — whatever happened before or after, Father was someone he loved... someone he valued enough to risk taking the time to give him a proper, peaceful burial in a place of beauty, and more, enough that he’d risk his safety again to bring me here himself.

“I’m sorry, Tenichi-kun. This was all I could manage,” the Urahara murmured now, bending to brush aside the blades of grass and the delicate blossoms that now crowned the site. “There is no proper memorial to show where your father sleeps his final sleep. Endou Shouichi wanted my life, and I had another, more innocent soul to protect. This was all I could do for him... I realise it wasn’t enough.”

He patted the earth lightly.

“Here is the proof if it,” he added softly, beckoning for his young companion to move closer, and as he did so, Tenichi could see that, hidden beneath the heavy foliage of the determined plants was a jagged slab of dull grey stone, less than a foot long and no more than

a few inches across. Moss and lichen had begun to cling to the edges, turning the surface a mottled, grey-green hue, and Tenichi felt sure that if his companion had not pointed it out, he would never have noticed it at all.

“This stone was flat and as smooth as I could manage for a grave marker,” Keitarou continued evenly. “I could not write his name here, of course — if I had, well, you know exactly what would’ve happened. Daisuke was known to the wrong people and they would’ve thought nothing of digging him up and dragging his corpse through the towns in glee. I wanted to remember he was here, though, so I marked this stone with the edge of my sword. To anyone else it would mean nothing, but to me...”

He trailed off, and Tenichi knelt beside the slab, a strange feeling welling up inside him as he placed his fingers tentatively against the damp surface. Though time and weather had worn away much of Keitarou’s carving, with the tips of his fingers he could just about feel the outline of the crude mark, and a lump rose in his throat as he recognised what his companion had written.

“Tomo,” he murmured, and Keitarou nodded.

“Daisuke was more than just a ‘tomo’ — more than a friend, more than a cousin,” he said sadly. “That is the truth, Tenichi, and I will tell you no other. Whether you hate me or not, I have not lied to you. I promised I would bring you to your father’s final resting place, and I have. This is where Daisuke sleeps, here, deep within Endou land. My being here is dangerous for both of us — but if I want you to trust me, I need you to know I’ll take risks in order to keep my word. Now we’ve renewed our acquaintance, I don’t want this to be the last time we ever speak. On the contrary, I hope very much this will form a beginning, not an end.”

“I already said I’d help you get supplies... but you said yourself, if people saw us together, it would be dangerous!” Tenichi’s head snapped up, and he gazed at Keitarou warily. “We’re right in the heart of Endou land here, surrounded, probably, on all sides by people who wouldn’t hesitate to grab you if they got the faintest hint you were here. I know you and Father worked together, and I remember you coming to our home, bringing us sweets, laughing and joking with Mother. I know that Keitarou-san exists, and I don’t doubt that you were close. Father only knew that Keitarou-san, but... but I’m not him, and you know that. I know another Keitarou-san exists, too, and just bringing me here isn’t enough to make me turn against the Gotei and the life I’ve chosen. If you want supplies, then I’ll help with that —

but just then you sounded as though you wanted more from me, and that's more I can't give. The man who is wanted across all of Seireitei is the same person my father trusted. One side must be wrong... and I'm having trouble figuring out exactly which. I thought, if we came here, I'd understand more clearly — but now I'm just more confused. I... I only have your word for it that this is Father's final resting place... and... though you've been good to me so far, you did still abduct me from Seireitei. For all I know, you might have arranged this, too. I have to be sure."

He moved back, half expecting a burst of anger to come from his hooded companion, but instead the scientist chuckled, nodding his head.

"You are a smart boy, but then, I'm not surprised," he said appreciatively. "I know I can't win your trust just with words and pretty promises... perhaps I would've been disappointed if you had not doubted in me. No, Tenichi-kun, you are right to be suspicious. I am a murderer and an outlaw... at least by the standards of the current Council of Elders. I can't make up your mind for you what is wrong and what is right. Daisuke was tortured and killed brutally by the grandfather of the man you now call Captain, but if you have chosen Seireitei's side, then I can't and won't force you to see the world my way."

He rested a gloved hand on the boy's shoulder, but Tenichi pushed it away.

"What will you do to me, then, to buy my peace?" he asked hesitantly. "I've seen you alive and I could go back to Seventh and report all of this to my superiors. They'd come hunting you — I know too much about where you are and I'm dangerous to you. Given that, why would you take this many risks for me? I don't understand... what will you do about me now?"

"Do?" Keitarou seemed genuinely surprised, and Tenichi felt his conviction begin to waver. "Do you think I'd hurt a child of Daisuke's? You were like nephews to me — of course I wouldn't!"

"But I..."

"You knew when I came to see Irie, who I was," Keitarou smiled, shrugging his shoulders. "You could have turned me in then, but you did not. We are family, Tenichi, and family don't betray one another. You and I, we may not believe the same things yet — perhaps we never will, or maybe, as time passes, you'll come to understand my views. I am not sure of that, yet, but what I do know... what I am sure

of... is that you will not betray me. Your father died rather than give me up to his enemies... and I am fairly sure you are just like him, deep down beneath that shinigami's uniform."

He laughed at Tenichi's expression.

"Ah, you don't wholly trust me yet," he said lightly, "but Tenichikun, I trust you."

He turned as if to leave, then paused, eying his companion pensively.

"If you doubt my tale about Daisuke, there is one other who can corroborate it," he added, almost as an afterthought. "A young girl called Shikiki was in my care, then, and knew your father well. She was a ward of the Ukitake family, last I heard — I trust she still lives?"

"Ukitake Shikiki?" Tenichi's eyes widened, and Keitarou's lips pursed in humour. He nodded his head.

"A healer, with the power to reverse time within a shield?" he asked, and Tenichi nodded.

"I know her. Kirio knows her. We studied together... at school," he murmured, as fleeting memories of a small girl with wild curly hair flitted in and out of his mind. "Sometimes... she would play with Ketsui and I, when we were small. I had forgotten... I never thought... I didn't know she was with you when you buried my father."

"Shikiki was my ward, Tenichi, not Daisuke's, no matter how much time she spent with your family," Keitarou tut-tutted softly, shaking his head as if in reproach. "She was mine, and I came back for her, after your village was destroyed. She never told you, then, that she was with me after your father's death? I suppose I'm not surprised. I did rather abandon her... but then, she chose to leave me first, so it was a mutual state of affairs. She was eight years old the last time I saw or spoke to the girl — but I don't imagine she's forgotten me, or the day I committed my cousin's body to the soil. She used her magic to cleanse him of his wounds... thanks to her skill, he could be put in his grave with dignity, and left to rest as an Urahara should."

"I never realised," Tenichi swallowed hard. "I knew Shikiki had been in the village with us, and I knew... but so much happened, and at the Academy, she was always more friends with Kirio than with me. We knew each other, but... we were strangers, too. There was a divide between us by that point, something I found difficult to breach. She was part of the Ukitake family, and I thought, after we left, maybe

Father took her there before...”

Words failed him at this point, and Keitarou patted him reassuringly on the back.

“Go back to Seireitei and ask her for the truth,” he suggested. “Find all the answers you need, and do so in your own time. I can wait. When you’ve heard her story, maybe you’ll realise that I’m not here to deceive you at all... and if you need to get a message to me, well, there will always be a way.”

“Wait, where are you... what...” Tenichi began to speak, but before he could finish his sentence, Keitarou was gone, his reiatsu swirling and disappearing on the wind as though he had never been there at all.

Alone in the forest, Tenichi bent his gaze once more to the carved stone, resting his hand against it as though trying in vain to locate any trace of his father’s lingering reiatsu. Daisuke’s body would have long since been absorbed into the woodland, and even if Keitarou had told the truth, there would be no clear way to prove it.

But he was free.

Glancing at the cuffs that still encircled his wrists, Tenichi processed this thought with a jolt.

Keitarou had brought him back to Seireitei and left him, in the heart of the land patrolled by members of his squad. He had his sword, and he was unharmed.

Getting to his feet, he glanced around him for any sign of a clear pathway out of the forest, but every direction looked the same, dense tree trunks packed together around a sea of green and brown.

He rubbed at the spirit cuffs absently.

If I could get those off, I could send up a Kidou flare and someone would come find me. If I could just get them free, I could flare my reiatsu and someone would know where I was. Keitarou-san, you could at least have left me with a key. How am I meant to find my way out of here without help? I don't know where I am, and whatever bearings I had when we arrived, I lost as soon as we started trekking through the woodland. I...

A rustle from the trees behind him made him falter, swinging around with his hand on the hilt of his weapon, knowing it was useless to try and release it but unable to suppress the instinct to defend himself from harm. He could see nothing, but worse, he could sense nothing, his blinded spiritual senses confounding him and putting him all the more on edge. Was it a forest creature, harmlessly

passing through on its way to find food? Was it a Hollow, lumbering through the trees to attack him? Thoughts raced through Tenichi's panicked mind, and he struggled to get his racing heart in check. Was he going to die here, before his father's grave, without anyone ever knowing what had become of him?

Out of the corner of his eye he caught a brief flash of movement, and he turned again, breathing hard and squinting through the gaps in the trees, trying to make out a distinctive shape. To begin with it seemed he had imagined it, but then, beneath the low hanging branches of one tree he saw a figure, cloaked in heavy fabric, watching him. He tightened his grip on his weapon, preparing for some kind of assault, but the figure simply raised its head, and for the first time Tenichi saw the shadow of a face, young and pale, beneath the heavy hem of the fabric. Two vibrant, silverish eyes stared out at him, meeting his gaze without blinking or flinching away, and Tenichi found himself drawn to them, sucked in by the eerie glow that suddenly seemed to surround him.

He was tired. His body was heavy. He could no longer hold his sword...

Unnoticed, his *zanpakutou* slid from his grip, falling silently to the leafy floor below. He stumbled, crumpling to his knees and swinging out a clumsy arm in an attempt to steady his fall. His hands would not respond to his brain's instructions, however, and his fingers grasped thin air, his limbs flailing for a moment before dropping like dead weights at his side. Resignation crashed over him, as some irresistible magnetism seemed to pull his leaden torso forwards, and as the ground rushed up to meet his face, he found he could no longer focus on any of the individual plants. Instead, he seemed to be diving into a sea of green, dipping deep beneath their leafy waves and sinking down, down, down into a dark, enticing oblivion.

From somewhere, far away, he thought he heard the sound of footsteps, but he was no longer able to react. Something touched his arm, and then, as the fingers looped themselves around the spirit cuff at his wrist, he lost his battle to stay awake, smothered completely by the gentle dark.

The first thing Madeki was aware of when he opened his eyes was that, instead of the thick canvas of a travel-tent or the bright blue of the Rukongai sky, the sight that greeted him was row upon row of wooden beams, criss-crossed into a network of support for smaller polished panels fashioned in a lighter colour and interspersed with

what were unmistakeably the glow of kidou lamps. Blinking a couple of times to steady his focus, he did not attempt to move his body, instead processing the detail he could see from his laid out position, bringing his sluggish brain gradually up to date.

This was Fourth Division. Seireitei. He was home.

The flood of relief that should have invaded his heart at that deduction stalled and faltered, tugged back by something else lurking at the corners of his awareness, and as he closed his eyes once more, he saw her in blurry outline — the young plus soul with the gleaming sword, swinging her blade to slaughter his companions.

He pressed his lips together into a thin line, forcing himself to relive the memory of their confrontation over again. He had taken something in through the blade of his releasing sword — from the dull aching of his head and the weight of his limbs, he suspected it was Houten-yaku, and that the girl had probably obtained it from their own divisional stores. He had not seen any of his comrades lying pooled in blood, but he had not needed to — every life extinguished left an indelible mark on a healer's consciousness, and slowly and methodically Madeki went through them each one by one, working out who had lived and who had died.

The results were not good, and his lips thinned further.

Taichou will want a clear report on what occurred, and I need to bring that girl more firmly into focus. How she got into our camp, why she was attacking us — all of those things will need to be answered. Could I have prevented it? That too. As lead shinigami, I'll take whatever's meted my way in terms of punishment. In the meantime, since I seem to be in one piece, I shouldn't be wasting time lurking around here. I've all my limbs and I don't remember that whelp landing a blow on me. If she didn't kill me outright, she must've thought the drug would do it. Good thing for me that's not the case.

He grasped the edge of the thin pallet bed between his fingers, using his grip as a lever to pull his protesting body into a more upright position. The world around him swayed and spun, making him feel giddy and sick, but he held on grimly, riding out the sensation until it subsided into a dull ripple through his mind. Houten-yaku was swift acting and potent, and from his trembling hands he guessed that the amount he had ingested was well above the normal safe limit.

"Madeki-dono!"

The door slid back, revealing a chubby young woman robed in *shihakushou*, wild, wavy hair confined in a thick braid down her back

and concern in her aqua eyes. At his confusion, she paused, bowing her head towards him as if acknowledging that it was their first meeting, then she slipped inside the room proper, shutting the door behind her with a slow, sliding click.

“My name is Ukitake Shikiki, sir,” she said, her tones calmer and more formal, and Madeki realised that this was one of the members of his squad, one who had joined and ranked in the years whilst he had been away. Ukitake... the name triggered a faint memory, and absently he wondered if this girl was a relative of the District boy he had helped rescue from a cave during his time at the Academy. “Retsu-sama assigned me to keep watch over you and to make sure you weren’t disorientated when you awoke.”

“I see,” Madeki dragged himself fully into a sitting position, resting his hands on the bed in front of him as he steadied himself, then raising his dark gaze to her anxious one. “You’re a healer with this squad, then? You’ll forgive me if I don’t recognise your face or name, only...”

“This is the first time we’ve met,” Shikiki agreed, her tones still gently polite and deferential. “I was one of the party sent to Rukongai to retrieve you, and so Retsu-sama thought it as well I was on hand in case you needed assistance when you woke up.”

“I need to report to Retsu-sama,” Madeki said succinctly, and Shikiki nodded.

“Yes,” she agreed, “but right now isn’t possible. She’s with Aomori-san, and they can’t be disturbed.”

“Aomori?” Madeki’s ears pricked up at this, hope flickering briefly in his dark eyes. “Aomori Seri? She came back with me too?”

“She did, sir,” Shikiki nodded her head once more, the wild plait bobbing from side to side against her broad shoulderblades as she did so. “She’s badly wounded, sir, and in intensive care, but so far she’s still with us and I think, a shade stronger than she was before. The Hollow did her a lot of damage, but... sir?”

“Hollow?” Madeki paled, staring at the young woman, aghast. “What Hollow? There was no... I don’t... what are you talking about?”

“Aomori-san was attacked by a Hollow, though I don’t know how or where,” Shikiki said soberly. “She hasn’t been strong enough to wake and tell us, yet, but we thought it strange, too. Her injuries are not consistent with... it didn’t seem as though...”

“Our camp was attacked by a girl with a sword,” Madeki said

grimly, cutting through Shikiki's attempts at steering tactfully through the subject. "My comrades were slain by her blade, and she and I sparred a few times before she unleashed *Houten-yaku* on my sword and knocked me out for the count. I saw her leave the camp, but my memories are blurry and misshapen and at present I can't draw a clear likeness to mind. There was no Hollow, though. I would've sensed it. We would have... sensed it."

"I think Aomori-san was attacked somewhere else, but I don't know where," Shikiki came to sit beside the bed. "She lost a lot of blood, but there's not much of it at the place where we found her. Mitsuki-dono was doing her best to stem it, so wherever Aomori-san bled out, it wasn't at the camp."

"Edogawa..." Madeki put his hand to his chest, registering for the first time the faint glow of another's healing reiatsu against his own. He sighed, rubbing his temples. "Then she is also safe?"

"Safe, but still unconscious," Shikiki agreed soberly. "She's with the Thirteenth at the moment, regaining her strength. She used too much power healing you and Aomori-san, and so Retsu-sama wanted her far from Fourth and the troubles here until she was more able to deal with them. Madeki-dono, I'm sorry. Nobody else at the camp was found alive, and... and two officers are still missing, but... the Onmitsukidou who are investigating have told us to... well... expect the worst."

"Kikuchi Haseyo and Shakano Kazuki," Madeki said gravely, and Shikiki inclined her head.

"Yes, sir. That's what Retsu-sama said their names were, too."

"I sent them... with Edogawa and Aomori... on a particular errand to the borders of Junrin'an," now the trembling in Madeki's hands was less to do with the effect of the drug and more to do with his own anger and frustration. "If Edogawa and Aomori made it back alive, then that probably means you are right. Edogawa was given charge over the team and she would not have left injured comrades behind. She *would not* have. She would have found another way to send a message. Bringing Aomori back here is indication that the others were beyond her help. And, most likely, the cause of that was this Hollow you mentioned — because we certainly saw no sign of any such beast in Hokutan."

The bile rose in his throat at the thought and he closed his eyes, swallowing hard.

"Please, rest, sir," Shikiki had obviously seen his sudden pallor, for

he felt a gentle hand on his arm, another one against his back as she carefully encouraged him to relax against his pillows. “You are still healing yourself, and everyone is worried about you.”

“Mm,” Madeki did not fight against her ministrations, but his expression remained clouded and troubled. “I was in charge of them. Protecting them was my duty. In light of that, reporting my failure to my Captain is something I need to do.”

“Nobody thinks this was your fault, sir,” Shikiki protested. “Kaidono said that the scene was a horrific one, and that...”

“Ukitake Shikiki, you said your name was?”

“Yes, sir,” interrupted in mid-speech, Shikiki blushed, as if realising she had been about to go off on a tangent to a superior she had only just met.

“What rank are you, Shikiki?”

“Twelfth seat, sir,” Shikiki answered sheepishly, and Madeki nodded, mulling it over.

“I have not encountered a healer with such an aura before,” he said at length. “Where is your *zanpakutou*?”

“I don’t use one, sir,” Shikiki admitted. “I... I heal with my hands, and fight with them, too.”

“You mean with kidou?” Madeki was taken aback, and Shikiki shook her head.

“No, sir,” she responded honestly, holding her palms up to him and spreading her thick fingers wide. A pinkish glow began to glitter around the edges of her skin, then a wave of the same hue spread gently out from them, reaching tentatively but resolutely towards his upper body and encircling it in a warm haze of energy. As the barrier strengthened, Madeki’s eyes opened wide, disbelief in his expression as he felt his nausea fading away.

“That isn’t kidou,” he murmured, and Shikiki smiled.

“No, sir,” she agreed brightly. “It’s something I’ve always been able to do, since I was a child. I don’t know how — I can’t remember a time before I could do it, so I guess it was just born into me. Retsu-sama says that it’s very rare, and there aren’t many like me these days — in fact, I’m the first she’s trained. I’m not so good with sensing things as healers are, because I suppose I’m not one, not naturally. Whatever’s inside my barrier, though, I can mend it and turn it back to how it was before.”

“I see,” Madeki lifted his finger to touch the pink haze, then, “and you used this, did you, to help Aomori and Edogawa come back here alive?”

“I healed Aomori-san’s wounds, but I couldn’t remove the Hollow’s poison,” Shikiki lowered her hands with a sigh, the barrier fragmenting and disappearing into shards of light. “I’m not so good still with spells like that, since I’ve had to learn how to sense so many things manually instead of instinctively like most healers do. I try to help, though... and Retsu-sama says that, with more time and more experience, I’ll probably be an irreplaceable part of the Fourth’s emergency rescue team.”

“Well, you’ve certainly steadied my stomach,” Madeki allowed himself a humourless smile. “I think I can stand, now — and if Retsu-sama is with Aomori, I would like to go there too, please. Will you take me? I’d tell you it was an order, but I suspect Retsu-sama’s instructions already override my own.”

Shikiki eyed him for a moment, then nodded her head.

“Yes, sir,” she said evenly. “Aomori-san is sleeping three rooms along the hallway. Retsu-sama put a barrier around the chamber to prevent it from disturbing you, but since you’re up and awake, I’m sure she’d want to hear from you. If you really feel well enough to walk... I’ll take you there now.”

“Thank you,” Madeki shot her a grateful glance, reaching out a hand to the wall and using it to lever himself to his feet. He was still unsteady, his body heavy and lethargic from his unwelcome dosing, but he felt less scattered than he had moments before and, as he pulled the fresh robe down from the hook beside his bed, he found himself grateful to the young stranger for her strange yet effective spiritual power. He pulled the robe around his body, tying the sash loosely over his night clothes and glancing around him for his *zanpakutou*.

‘Retsu-sama confiscated it,’ Shikiki seemed to guess his motives, for she offered him a sheepish smile. “She said that it was better you didn’t imagine yourself ready for active service before she had decided you were ready.”

“She said that?” Madeki paused, staring at her suspiciously, and Shikiki grinned.

“Word for word, sir,” she said promptly. “She took your sword herself, but I don’t know where it is now. Fukutaichou has Aomori-san’s sword, so perhaps she has yours also — but I don’t think Retsu-

sama wants you collecting it just yet.”

“Some things don’t change,” Madeki muttered, but inwardly he was reassured by his Captain’s decisive instructions and apparently unruffled reaction to the crisis that had splintered their midsts. The Fourth were well used to violent injuries, but not among their own people, and so Madeki knew that, as he and Shikiki walked side by side along the empty hallway, the subdued atmosphere all around them was not his imagination.

Although it had been more than twenty years since he had set foot here, Madeki found that little he saw had changed very much. True, he reflected, glancing at Shikiki, the faces around him may not be the same as he remembered, but the building was as sturdy and firm as it always had been, laid out in utilitarian halls and passageways that intersected across one another in the most direct manner possible. Healing chambers lay set back from the wall in each direction, and, as Shikiki led him down a corridor to the left, Madeki ran his finger absently against the slats of wood that had probably been there as long as the division itself had had land here. It had once been part of the Unohana’s designated Clan property within Inner Seireitei, modified and adapted to suit the requirements of the growing Division’s several members, but Retsu had always been forward thinking and had therefore planned her barracks and her healing station from the start with capacity and facilities for far more than initially it hosted. The Division had doubtless expanded since Madeki’s stationing in Rukongai, and, apparently, had begun taking on District individuals, for Madeki knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that Shikiki had not been born of any Clan.

Ukitake Shikiki, huh. The world is becoming an interesting place... I wonder what else has passed me by during my long time away.

“Please, sir, wait here a moment whilst I report to Retsu-sama that you’re here,” at length, Shikiki stopped, turning to offer him a smile. “I know she can probably sense you are, but I ought to tell her, just in case.”

She bowed her head towards him, then pulled open the door of the small healing chamber, disappearing inside. She moved very nimbly for someone so broad-set, Madeki mused absently. More proof that the old adage about judging by appearance was founded in some wisdom.

This was the heart of the Division’s Intensive Care complex, with four or five individual chambers so close to the heart of the Fourth that they were easily accessible during either night or day. The walls for these rooms were generally thicker, a further narrow corridor

separating the hallway from the room's proper entrance to ensure the minimum amount of noise travelled in from the world outside. Along the wall to the left of the panel door Shikiki had disappeared into were long, oblong windows, cut approximately four feet horizontally and two feet vertically into the smooth bamboo-slatted wall. The glass had been imported especially from District Three, treated in some way Madeki did not fully understand so that the room's inhabitants were visible from the outside hallway, but for anyone standing within the chamber, it appeared no more than a glinting mirror reflecting back into the room itself. It was an innovation Madeki still remembered discussing before he had been stationed outside of Seireitei, and he still marvelled at the efficaciousness of it now. Patients did not react well to being gawked at by every passing individual, yet this way it was possible for a healer to keep a strict watch on their charge without increasing the patient's stress levels unnecessarily.

He moved towards the glass, resting a hand casually against the smooth surface as he peered within the room.

A thin, pale form lay on the bed, swathed in a golden sheen of Kidou and muffled in blankets up to her chin. Her face was greyish white, her lips faintly bluish, and one stick-like arm protruded from the covers from elbow to fingertip, wrapped in what was clearly a monitoring device designed to measure the levels of poison still in her system. She was breathing, for Madeki could see the blankets moving slightly, but the small, insubstantial gasps of air being taken into her lungs were far from reassuring, and Madeki felt a pang of guilt as he took in his subordinate officer's fragile state.

Shikiki said she was improving, but it really looks like she's only a shade or two from death.

Bent over the figure, on the far side of the bed was the black-and-white robed figure of the division Captain, Retsu's dark hair in its usual immaculate braid, and, as Madeki watched, a door behind her opened, revealing the young girl who had guided him thus far. At her entrance, Retsu raised her head, no apparent surprise in her features, and a few words passed between them before Retsu's gaze flitted to the glass divide, meeting Madeki's eyes for a brief moment through the one-way glass. Madeki drew back, startled — though he knew that it was probably coincidence, and that Retsu would surely not be able to see him through the mirror-surface, the comprehension in her dark blue gaze had made him wonder, just for a brief moment, exactly what his Captain was really capable of.

Retsu turned away, nodding her head and saying something softly to Shikiki. Shikiki bowed, then knelt beside Seri's bed, and Retsu

stood, smoothing down her robes and moving towards the door. She cast a brief glance back at Seri, and Madeki saw the deep concern lurking in his Captain's eyes. Then the moment was gone, and Madeki leaned back against the wood-panel walling, waiting with apprehension for his Captain to emerge.

"Madeki-dono," the greeting was soft and gentle, as even and calm as he remembered it, despite the tragedy, and Madeki turned towards her, lowering his head.

"Taichou," he murmured, and Retsu moved towards him, resting her hands on his shoulders.

"This is not your fault, and I will not have you assume the blame," she said quietly, and Madeki's head shot up, surprise glittering in his eyes. At his expression, Retsu nodded, patting him lightly.

"I can feel it," she confirmed softly. "It swirls from you like a beacon, child, but you are not to blame. I have had reports from the Onmitsukidou and Kai-dono is quite certain whatever attacked your camp took you all completely by surprise. You can help none of your comrades by letting their deaths weigh you down. Instead I need you to help me — and all of Seireitei — be their justice instead."

"Yes, ma'am," Madeki mumbled, words suddenly thick against his tongue, and Retsu offered him a sad smile.

"There is much we don't understand," she admitted, taking him gently by the arm and leading him along the hallway towards the cluster of chambers which comprised the Captain's and Vice Captain's office. The door of the Vice Captain's office was slightly ajar, and, as they walked past it, Madeki could just about make out the slender form of Unohana Eriko, dark, tousled head bent studiously over a large pile of documents and writing brush clutched tightly in inky fingers. Eriko was Retsu's first cousin, a woman ten years the Captain's junior but Madeki had always had the impression that she was older, her narrow, wiry frame aging her and the constant furrow of her brow behind thick-rimmed glasses only adding to the effect. Eriko was the youngest sister of three, plain and studious where her older siblings had been gregarious and beautiful and so, by mutual consent she had been dispatched to Retsu's care, proving to be an immediate hit among the junior officers on her appointment as division Vice Captain twenty seven years before. She had a severe look about her that often made those who did not know her think her frightening, but Madeki knew that Eriko had one of the kindest hearts in the whole Gotei and, if he sensed tension from her now, it was because the Vice Captain was still ruminating on the slaughter of some

of her precious lambs.

“Eriko has your sword,” catching his glance, Retsu paused, nodding her head. “It is quite undamaged, though clearly it was splashed quite liberally with *Houten-yaku*. The concentration of the drug was quite heavy... given the amount remaining in your bloodstream when we brought you back, it would’ve been impossible for you to pursue the attacker... or attackers... or mount a decent offensive against them.”

“I only saw one.”

The Captain unlocked the door of her own office, sliding it back and ushering Madeki into the cool, brightly lit chamber. Like Retsu herself, the room exuded calm, and as he stepped over the threshold, Madeki felt some of the tension leave his body. Retsu was an understanding leader who would listen to everything he had to say, regardless of how illogical it might sound. She would be able to help fill in the blurs and gaps in his thoughts, and, between them, surely they could piece together enough to act against those who had attacked the encampment so brutally.

Retsu knelt on a cushion, gesturing for him to follow suit, and he did so, offering her a respectful smile of gratitude.

“I would like to hear what you can tell me about this one,” only once he was comfortably settled did Retsu speak again, her features thoughtful. “Kai-dono believes... and certainly, from our initial examinations of the poor souls cut down, I would concur... that the encampment was attacked by someone with a sword. Would you agree?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Madeki agreed bitterly. “A girl with a sword, and long dark hair.”

“Could you describe her in more detail?” If Retsu was surprised, none of it showed on her face, and Madeki grimaced, shaking his head.

“Not yet,” he admitted, frustration lacing his tones. “I know I saw her... spoke to her... crossed swords with her before she drugged me, but at the moment all I see is a blur of black and a glint of her sword. I know she was young... but that’s all. I hadn’t seen her before.”

“Is there anything else you do recall?” Retsu asked gently. “If not her appearance, perhaps some other feature?”

“She had no reiatsu,” Madeki said slowly, and the Captain’s eyebrows twitched slightly, as though he had said something of great significance. “That part of it makes no sense to me, Taichou — how so

many people could be killed by a Plus soul with a katana is beyond me, but even so, I'm quite sure that's what she was. She left no trace at all — even when stood right in front of me, she resonated nothing.”

“A soul with no reiatsu is not uncommon within Rukongai, but one with killer instinct is,” Retsu rubbed her chin pensively. “Those who lose their wits and become mad are usually contaminated, en-route to Hollowfication because of spirit power they can't restrain. Yet this young girl had no signs of that? There were no indications that she had become damaged in such a way?”

“You read my report,” Madeki realised, and Retsu inclined her head.

“I did,” she agreed with a sigh, “but perhaps too late to be of material use. Nonetheless, the information in it concerned me. I wondered if, perhaps, this assassin had been one such soul?”

“I don't think so,” Madeki chewed on his lip, tasting blood. “We had encountered Plus souls with faint levels of contamination, but nothing of a level strong enough to cause Hollowfication. And I'm quite certain, Retsu-sama — the girl I confronted had no signs of that at all. She was completely without spiritual aura. A proper Plus soul — behaving very improperly.”

“I see,” Retsu tut-tutted sympathetically, folding her hands in her lap. “I must confess that the bodies of your companions would seem to support your claim. Not one of them bears any spiritual signature except their own. Slashed with a blade in such a haphazard way, I would have expected fragments of foreign reiatsu — but so far it seems they were cut with a normal weapon, not a spirit sword. More, whoever did it... left no trace of themselves. If the injuries were not so contradictory, it might be thought that these shinigami had somehow killed themselves.”

“They were murdered, Taichou,” Madeki said darkly, and Retsu nodded.

“I know,” she said simply. “Healers do not choose death against life, especially without any justification. Besides, Kai-dono's men found tracks leading into the woods. They stopped abruptly some way in, and whoever was there isn't there now. One of the Onmitsukidou officers is examining this scene more thoroughly... though it's expected that the blood found will belong to our slain.”

“The girl who brought me to you... Shikiki... she said that Aomori was attacked by a Hollow.”

“Yes,” Retsu agreed. “This surprises you?”

“It does,” Madeki nodded. “Aomori wasn’t with me when we were attacked. Nor were Edogawa or the two who still remain missing. I’d sent them into Junrin’an to follow up a lead of my own, relating to the report I sent you. I don’t know whether they did or didn’t discover anything of import, but if Aomori was attacked by a Hollow, it didn’t happen in Hokutan. I would’ve sensed a Hollow — we all would. The attack on us isn’t the same as what happened to them — and I’m pretty sure, Taichou, that if Edogawa returned without them, it means the other two are dead.”

“We believe that to be likely, too,” Retsu agreed pensively, and Madeki saw a flicker of real sadness in her gaze. “The Onmitsukidou have searched Hokutan without success and have expanded their search to include Nakaken. Now I know Mitsuki-san and her companions were dispatched to Junrin’an, I will advise them to search more carefully along the Southern road. If there is further evidence to be brought back, I should like to have it — although it is just as possible the Hollow incident was not connected to the assault on your group.”

“We had fought several Hollows in the last few weeks, leading up to my report,” Madeki agreed. “It might just be that someone took advantage of us being split apart to attack the main camp and cause confusion. I had thought of that too, Retsu-sama — but it doesn’t make the burden of it any easier.”

“Mitsuki-san has not roused yet, and when she does, I hope she will be able to tell us more about what happened in Junrin’an,” Retsu reflected. “Seri-san is healing, but very slowly — it would help to know precisely what kind of poison Hollow she encountered, as the remedies we are using are working, but not at the speed I would like.”

“Will Aomori live?”

“Her chances are still fifty-fifty,” Retsu owned, looking weary. “I am glad to see you risen, Madeki-kun. In a time of crisis, and even despite your own trauma, I’m very afraid that the division will need its Third Seated Officer in the days and weeks to come.”

“You... don’t intend on disciplining me for what happened in Hokutan?” Madeki asked hesitantly, and Retsu shook her head.

“I have no evidence to suggest you were at fault,” she responded. “Like I said, it is better now to look to finding justice, not laying blame. If your camp was attacked by someone who gave no warning of their presence, then even the most skilled shinigami would be put

at a disadvantage. One who even a healer cannot detect... is a concerning thing indeed. This girl you saw is the one lead we have, and your testimony vitally important to resolving this matter. The Spiritless Zone will be on hiatus until we can assure safety to any officers deployed there — and that means finding the real culprits, not pointing fingers among ourselves.”

“She was good, with a sword,” Madeki sat back, relief coursing through his veins at his companion’s matter-of-fact appraisal. “I could hold her off, though, and if I’d been able to release, I would’ve caught her. She fought like a savage, as though any method was valid as long as it got her where she wanted — but I don’t think she was insane. Not in the way of a tainted Plus soul, anyway. When I asked who she was and what she wanted, all she said was that she wanted us dead. No reason, no motive, just that. Then she launched the Houten-yaku at me, and after that it becomes a blur.”

“Houten-yaku from our own pure supplies, concentrated to a lethal level,” Retsu remarked. “It is fortunate that Mitsuki-san returned to the camp when she did, as without her interference we might have lost both you and Seri-san before we were able to intervene. It seems almost a certainty that Mitsuki-san was the one who sounded the alert to bring us here — though whether she knew the protocol for communicating with Seireitei via your transmitter, I’m not sure. When Shikiki-san and Kai-dono found them, Mitsuki-san was huddled over Seri-san, obviously trying to keep her alive, so I imagine she probably discarded the transmitter the moment she realised she might yet lose her friend. She was very brave, Madeki-kun... I am very proud of her, yet also worried for her.”

“Edogawa is a powerful healer,” Madeki mused, running his hands against his ribcage once more. “Shikiki said that she’d healed me, and I could feel it, faintly, then. She’s wasted in Rukongai, Taichou — especially now, with so much happening here. Her skills are valuable and ought to be utilised more on the front line.”

“There is time, yet,” Retsu replied. “For now, I shall wait and see how she recovers from this particular episode. Mitsuki-san wanted to go to Rukongai, and more, wanted to remain there when given the choice to return. You are right about the level of her ability, but she is not an Unohana, and it may take more time and experience in the field for her to fully prove her spurs to those who haven’t worked so closely with her as you or I. This is still, sadly, a very Clan-stifled world. But for that...”

She sighed, breaking off in mid-sentence, but Madeki suspected

that, if left to his Captain alone to decide, she would have not only Mitsuki but also the Twelfth Seated Shikiki at higher rank among her division. He wisely said no more, turning the subject back to the matter of the mysterious assassin.

“I will do my best to remember more about the girl who attacked us,” he said quietly. “I am quite certain she was a stranger, and not someone from any of the local villages we’d been patrolling and protecting, but it isn’t impossible that she might have been someone there who I overlooked. Have any of our records been brought back from the camp yet?”

“They have,” Retsu agreed, “though I have had little time to go through them yet. Some were badly stained with blood, but I have had Shikiki-san use her unique skills to clean them, and so I believe we have recovered most of the important documentation relating to your time in the Spiritless Zone. I will not trouble you with it now, for I can see you still need to rest, but when you are feeling fitter, I should like you to go through them with me. I don’t know if there are any clues there to what happened — but I am concerned by this talk of Hollows in what should be a protected area.”

“Whatever I can do,” Madeki assured her, and Retsu offered him a faint smile.

“In that case, you are dismissed,” she said firmly, “and under orders to rest and recuperate your strength. Eat a good meal and get some sleep. We will talk again tomorrow, if you are feeling up to it — perhaps by that time, Kai-dono’s Onmitsukidou will have finished compiling their report into what happened, and we can compare notes.”

Madeki opened his lips to protest that he was quite all right to begin work, but a certain look in Retsu’s dark eyes silenced him before he could say a word and he closed his mouth, bowing his head towards her instead.

“Yes, ma’am,” he said softly. “I’ll do that, and hope that before long Edogawa too can add her evidence to the discussion.”

So, Kohaku had been right.

Keitarou slipped deeper into the trees, pressing his body close against the ground as he watched them filter out of the shadows, little more than ghosts flitting across his line of site. They moved silently, each one cloaked in heavy fabric that hid their faces and concealed both age and gender, yet Keitarou was under no illusions as to who

they were.

Kitsune.

A faint smile toyed at the edges of his lips.

Just as I expected. I don't need you to hand them over to me as tribute or as part of a deal, Hirata — I just need to be one or two steps ahead of your game. This is your land, and these woods are barely flanked by any local settlements, left untouched even by the ravages of Shouichi-dono's regime. Well, of course they were. These began as Misashi's people, didn't they? Protected by him, I'm sure he had some power to send his Father's attention elsewhere. I wondered when I saw the maps Kurotsuchi gave me, and compared them with the older ones of my own. Why, when so many places were razed and destroyed, did this particular region survive untouched? There had to be a reason... and now, coming here for myself, I can see exactly what that reason was.

His expression became ugly, his eyes cold.

Places like Daisuke's village, perhaps. Places like that, where other, less favourable Urahara were trying to live their lives. If I had known then that these turncoat people were living so close to this land, I would never have brought your corpse here, my cousin. Too late, now — but at least bringing Tenichi here has served some purpose. Perhaps you guided me — if such a thing is possible.

Beneath the earth of the forgotten forest sleeps the one who protected, to his bed the foxes come. Swathed in shadow, they claim Heaven for their own, spirited away to a world without day or night.

The words rippled through his thoughts, strings of characters slashed in black like ink on canvas at the back of his mind. They were not his words, yet they burned into him anyway, imprinting themselves deep into his soul and resonating as though each character was imbued with some form of magic. It was true, he reflected pensively. Words did have power — but only now did he realise just how much power they could have.

Heaven. Heaven is Tenichi. Ten for heaven, ichi for first. The name Daisuke gave him, to celebrate the miracle of his first son's life. Daisuke always protected me, and died doing so — and this is the place he sleeps. Everything as you said it would be, my son. Everything just... as you said.

As though hearing his thoughts, one of the cowed figures paused for a moment, turning a hooded head in his direction, and Keitarou held his breath, suppressing his reiatsu down yet another level and keeping his body completely still beneath the barrier of Kidou he had chosen to swathe himself in. He could no longer run with the speed or agility of his youth, and using too much shunpo or magic would give

away his presence to bigger predators than these silent shadows, but he had no mind to be seen by them, either, not if he could help it.

There was a moment when nothing seemed to move, then the figure turned away, and Keitarou let out his breath in a rush. From where he was, huddled down beneath the useful cover of a particularly sprawling azalea bush, he watched the four or five figures gather around Tenichi's crumpled form on the ground, apparently examining him and conferring among themselves. No words were spoken, but Keitarou saw a number of fluttering hands convey short, sharp signals and, as one man, three of the dark clad shapes positioned themselves at Tenichi's head, middle and foot, lifting him up carefully and securely in their arms.

He did not resist, and Keitarou realised that they had done something to him to knock him out, preventing a struggle that might attract attention to their location.

True secret agents, then, skilled with hidden arts in order to cover their tracks.

Keitarou's expression became derisive.

They won't hurt him, though. He's a shinigami — he belongs to their master, and therefore they'll take care of him, before returning him for a reward. Once Tenichi is safely away from here, that's the time for me to act. I won't let him connect me to any attack on these people — whether he knows who they are or not. If I could send Sakaki, it would be simplest, but I can't do that at the moment. That means I need to think again, and that will take time. Hollow puppetry won't work with people like this — but so long as they're here, they pose a threat. I'll take pleasure from finishing them off, each and every one — safe in the knowledge that in doing so, I'll protect Kohaku and therefore our entire cause.

His gaze flitted across the forest, but as swiftly and silently as they had come, the figures had gone, fading into the mottled scenery like ghosts on the wind.

Well, Tenichi. You've given me more than I thought, and I thank you for that. You're being useful to me already.

Keitarou got up stiffly from his hiding place, brushing down his clothing to remove the dust and leaf litter from the fabric.

I should get out of here. I imagine those traitorous vulpines will contact someone in authority soon enough, and I don't want to be anywhere near here when they come. It was worth the risk, though, to see for myself the area in which they hunt. Now I just need to plan a little hunting of my own — carefully and methodically, with just the right amount of distraction to throw curious folks like Ukitake Juushirou off my scent.

His eyes crinkled in amusement as he remembered the hot-headed idealism of the white-haired student he had crossed paths with more than two decades before.

It's not that I don't want to meet you again, and see how you've grown up, Juushirou — but I suspect you'll disappoint me. In any case, such a pleasure can be postponed for now. I have other things that take priority. If you had any idea of the kind of weaponry I have at my disposal... but of course, you don't know. You can't possibly see all the things I can, or realise the scope of what I can do. This time, Soul Society really will capitulate, and it will happen from the direction you least expect it. Sharpen your blade, my District friend. Prepare for war, because a war is coming.

He pulled the *tantou* knife from his belt, carving it swiftly through the air to reopen the illicit *Senkaimon*.

Don't think I didn't know that one of those healers Katsura and Sakaki slaughtered was a friend of yours. I haven't forgotten the name Edogawa Mitsuki, nor the way she turned on Eiraki and rejected her. Till now, she wasn't important enough for me to kill — just a fringe Kuchiki fighting against the tide — but this time, her death serves two purposes. Firstly, to get those overly sensitive healers out of Rukongai for good — and secondly, to distract you and your penetrating, probing obstinacy onto other things. You see, Juushirou, I remember you. I remember that you have a lot of fondness for your old friends. I remember a battle in the snow when you were so reluctant to kill that Kyouraku boy — and that is your weakness. Burying one of those friends will derail your other investigations nicely and buy me time.

He stepped into the black abyss, swinging his blade behind him to seal up the gateway.

Yes, everything is going very well indeed. I'm glad to have touched base once more with your eldest son, Daisuke. I think it's going to be a more than profitable friendship.

14. Beneath The Earth

Chapter Thirteen: Beneath The Earth

The wooden shiro stood on the mount, the land around it jutting out over the flow of a winding stream. As Mitsuki made her way across the familiar bridge towards the front mon, she thought she caught a glimpse of guardians watching over the manor's peaceful terrain from afar. The castle was normally quiet and serene, its perfectly crafted wooden structure both reassuring and familiar, but this time it was impossible for the young healer not to see the scorch marks that charred the outer walls, the tears in the bamboo screens and, in places, the shattered roofs that indicated the one who lived within had come under direct attack.

Her heart weighing heavily in her chest, Mitsuki crossed over from the outer to the inner courtyard, making the now-familiar trek through the rows and rows of cherry trees that never ceased to bloom. Hidden within the swathe of pink was a small, delicate structure, the core of the shiro and the chamber of its sole inhabitant. Mitsuki could feel the apprehension welling up inside of her as she approached, uncertain of the reception she would receive or what she might find behind the wooden screens, but knowing she could not pull back.

Beyond the divide sat a young woman, her long, straight dark hair flowing loose and silky smooth to her waist. Mitsuki could only make out the vaguest outline of her body through the slatted screen, although the array of pastel colours of the woman's long, heavy sleeves fell through the gap, hinting at the rich silk used to weave the cloth together. Mitsuki pushed back the sliding door with some trepidation, unsure what she might find when she stepped within.

The room was empty except for the young woman robed in the juunihitoe of a high born court hime, with sugimi in delicate pastel shades of lavender, wisteria, powder blue and creamish white. These were covered by uchiginu in a pink so delicately pale it was almost white and embroidered with clusters of tiny sakura blossoms. Behind her, almost framing her slim form was a folding screen woven in green and cream, an image that changed each time Mitsuki came. The last time she had visited, it had shown a valley of flowers and trees stretching out for miles beyond the shiro's walls, but today there was no flora, and, despite the spring blossoms outside, Mitsuki could make out the shadows of winter trees, branches devoid of leaves as though they had shed them in mourning. Beneath the hazy trunks Mitsuki could see the indistinct shape of what might have been

a memorial, and her heart constricted. She bit her lip, shifting her gaze to the room's occupant instead.

Today she was paler than usual, her wan complexion greyish white and her eyes somehow huge in her tiny face, her features drawn down by tiredness. The thick layers of fabric belied her fragility, for the silk spread out around her kneeling form like a pool of colour, but as the woman raised her face to Mitsuki's, the shinigami felt a flicker of guilt rush through her body.

"I'm sorry, Yuuyugo," she whispered, tears glittering in her grey eyes. "I asked so much of you, and yet..."

"Shh," the woman raised a ceramic white finger to her lips, gently motioning with her other hand for her companion to sit down, and Mitsuki did so, kneeling properly across the other side of the bamboo framed chamber. There was little natural light, the whole of her surroundings closeted away from the outside world, but a cherry branch lay before Yuuyugo on the ground and, as Mitsuki watched, the spirit ran her finger over the wood, making the drooping petals of the sakura glimmer and spread with life once more.

"Give me a little more time," she murmured, in her gentle, formal Japanese. "Give yourself more time, too, Mitsuki-hime. You must heal and so must I... only then can you heal those outside."

Mitsuki opened her eyes as the *shiro* chamber flew away, replaced by the more mundane wood and panel structure of a very different room. Disorientated, she blinked, feeling the dampness of tears against her lashes. That alone, then, had been real — the pain reflected in her inner world cast into real grief that was impossible to fully hide.

"Mitsuki-chan?"

The voice was familiar, yet for the first few moments Mitsuki could not place it, so long had it been since she had heard it. She turned towards the noise, her body aching and twinging from her over-exertion, and she winced, cautiously trying to pull herself up onto her elbows so that she could bring the speaker into focus. There was the sound of steps, then a tall shape robed in black and white moved into her line of sight, thick auburn hair wound back from her face in a utilitarian tail and greenish eyes bright with anxiety and concern. As she met that familiar gaze, a rush of nostalgia ran through Mitsuki's battered body, and for a moment all memory of the horrors in Rukongai faded from the forefront of her mind as recognition and disbelief flooded her heart.

"N... N... Naoko... chan?" she whispered, and Naoko's eyes lit up

with joy at the hesitant words, nodding her head and moving to sit down on the edge of the bed.

“Yes, it’s me,” she spoke gently, in soft tones Mitsuki had not heard her friend use before. “I wondered if you’d recognise me — it’s been such a long time, so I wasn’t sure that you would.”

“Naoko-chan,” Mitsuki’s tears trickled down her cheeks, and Naoko hugged her tightly, stroking her muzzy dark hair soothingly. There had only ever been two years between them, but in those few moments Mitsuki was reminded of how strong and decisive Naoko had been back in their school days, at times when Mitsuki had been tongue-tied or reticent, unable to defend herself from the curious and sometimes unkind comments of others. That memory comforted her, and for a little while she allowed herself just to be hugged, taking reassurance in not being alone. The memory of the empty, cold campsite surrounded by the spectre of death lingered like a bad taste on her tongue, but here... wherever here was, even if it was just a dream... here she was not alone. More, she was safe. However it was possible, she was with friends and she was alive.

At length, Naoko detached her hold, pulling back to look at her friend at arm’s length.

“You still look tired,” she remarked, “but I’m glad to see you wake. Retsu-sama said you would, by yourself, because you were tired, not hurt — but we were worried.”

“Nao-chan,” Mitsuki reached up to wipe away the trickled tears, taking a shaky breath of air into trembling lungs. “Am I really awake? After so long... the first person...”

“You’re awake,” Naoko squeezed her hand, nodding her head. “You’re back in Seireitei. Retsu-sama got you alert and people from Fourth and Onmitsukidou came to find you. Do you remember? Shihouin Kai was one of those who found you, apparently...” she wrinkled up her nose, “though I’m sure you probably wouldn’t want to remember that.”

Despite herself, a faint smile touched Mitsuki’s lips at the derision in her companion’s voice.

“You... still don’t like him, do you?” she realised, and Naoko snorted.

“Chalk and cheese. Oil and water,” she said succinctly. “He was there, though. Still is, I think — but that’s another matter. They’re not to bother you till Retsu-sama says so, so you needn’t worry. Nobody’s

going to crowd in on you and harass you about anything, not yet.”

She indicated a pale blue vase stood by the window, fresh blooms decorating its rim.

“I came to bring fresh flowers to brighten up the room a little and I felt your reiatsu change, so I thought, if you were going to wake, I’d stick around.”

“I don’t remember help coming,” Mitsuki shivered despite herself, and Naoko cursed, hurrying to pull an extra blanket over her friend’s shoulders. “I remember... getting back to camp and setting off the alert, but after that...”

She jerked her head up, staring at Naoko in dismay.

“Nao-chan! What about Madeki-dono? Seri? What about them?”

“They’re both alive.” Naoko assured her. “Seri is still pretty sick, but she is doing better than she was. Madeki-dono is up and about, though grey as a ghost if you ask me. He’s all right, though, so you needn’t worry. You aren’t to worry about them or anything, not till you’re well. That’s why Retsu-sama sent you here. She wanted you away from the Fourth, because she knew you’d start trying to heal people before you — or Yuuyugo — were ready.”

“Yuuyugo...” Mitsuki bit her lip, remembering the fleeting glimpse she had had into her inner world and her sword spirit’s fatigued form. Slowly she shook her head. “I don’t think I can, not at the moment. I tried so hard to keep Seri alive, Nao-chan. I know I pushed myself, but I couldn’t let her... I didn’t want to...”

Her voice shook, and Naoko pressed a finger to her lips.

“Not now. Later,” she repeated. “There’s time to deal with everything when you’re feeling better. For now, you should take it easy. Retsu-sama was relieved that you came back safely — but she doesn’t want to overwork you before you’re ready.”

“Mm,” Mitsuki sat back against the wall, processing her friend’s words over in her mind. She ran her gaze over Naoko’s appearance once more, absorbing the neat black *shihakushou* swathed at the waist with a spotless white *obi*. At her waist was the distinctive form of the sheathed *zanpakutou*, Dokushou Houshi, and as her gaze strayed across the chamber, she saw Yuuyugo’s hilt and scabbard lying on a tray beside the window, the blade still not even in its sealed form, let alone able to go into shikai.

Drawing her thoughts away from this, Mitsuki turned her attention

back to her surroundings, realising with a jolt that, in her relief at recognising Naoko, she had not realised that the chamber she was in was entirely foreign. Naoko had said she wasn't at Fourth... but where was she?

"Where... exactly is this?" she asked softly, and Naoko's eyes widened, then she smiled, looking faintly sheepish.

"You've never been here, so of course, you wouldn't know. You won't know anything, probably, given where you've been," she mused. "This is my division's barracks, Mi-chan. The Thirteenth Division."

"Thir... teenth?" Mitsuki blinked, looking blank, and Naoko laughed, nodding her head.

"Yes," she agreed lightly. "You left the Academy early, so you never knew about it, but Genryuusai-sensei was working to set up a new division and it began the year after we left school. We went to Seventh District, first, to help train the Endou into something resembling human beings — and then we came here, to our own proper barracks as an official division of the Gotei. True, we're smaller than most of the others, but it's nice like that — it's a good division, and a safe place for you to rest up."

Her eyes twinkled slightly at this, faint mischief in their depths, and Mitsuki frowned.

"I didn't know anything about it," she admitted. "A Thirteenth Division? Your division? And it's been here for the whole time I've been gone?"

"Mm, pretty much," Naoko nodded her head, red waves bobbing. "I'm it's Third seated officer, by the way."

There was pride in her tones, a different kind of pride from the *hime's* arrogance and austerity the Naoko Mitsuki had first met had often exhibited, but from the contentment in the older woman's eyes, the healer knew that her friend was happy with things the way they were. "Of course, a big part of the reason you came here was because of the Taichou. He was very agreeable to the idea of it, in fact, and nobody else will bother you, since if they did, Retsu-sama would kill them herself."

"The... Taichou?" Mitsuki repeated dazedly. "Nao-chan's... Taichou?"

"Yes," now there was no hiding the mischief in the green eyes, an expression so uncharacteristic of the Naoko Mitsuki remembered yet

somehow one that gave her friend added life and softened her occasionally strident features, accentuating her natural beauty. “Oh, but I won’t need to explain any more. He’s coming here... looks like he realised you woke up, too. He’s come to see you -which will probably be my cue to go tell Sora you’re back with us.”

“Sora... chan... too?” Mitsuki’s heart skipped a beat, and Naoko nodded, getting to her feet.

“She’s at Eighth. Desperate to see you, but nobody would let her till you woke up, so expect a whirlwind,” she warned. “You’d think being Vice Captain for a couple of decades would have calmed her down — but if anything, she’s twice as hyperactive as she ever was when it comes to things that matter to her. She was hopping all over the place when she learned you’d come back in one piece — so I’ll go tell her, and maybe you’ll let her see you, later?”

“I’d love to see Sora-chan,” Mitsuki nodded quickly. “Wow... I feel like I’ve stepped through some kind of time warp. Nao-chan is a third seated officer, and Sora-chan is a Vice Captain. So much time has passed, it feels like a lifetime — but then again, it seems like nothing at all. I... I missed you both so much, Naoko-chan. And... and I’m glad you were here when I... woke up. I know... you know those people too. Seri... I know she’s your kin. You understand maybe best... so thank you.”

“Don’t mention it,” for a moment, Naoko’s pretty eyes became grave, then she sighed, patting Mitsuki reassuringly on the shoulder.

“Taichou’s here,” she said softly. “Sit tight and talk to him, if you can. He’ll be happy to see you so responsive, so don’t hold back.”

“But wait, why would I...” Mitsuki’s expression was one of complete confusion, but before she could finish her sentence, the door of the chamber slid back, and her words died in her throat, eyes almost falling out of her head as she recognised the thin figure that stood in the doorway. The white hair was longer now, tied in a loose tail at the nape of his neck with black ribbon, and the *shihakushou* that hung from his skinny frame was in starker contrast to his sallow complexion than the white and blue school uniform he had worn the last time they had met. His face was still pale, cheeks hollow yet hazel eyes bright with life beneath determined black brows, but it was not these things that drew the little gasp from Mitsuki’s lips. The figure that stood before her was her old friend, her confidant, even the man she had first confessed to loving — but about his shoulders he wore the unmistakeable *haori* of a Gotei Captain, and, as he hurried towards her, Mitsuki’s sluggish brain processed this with difficulty.

“Naoko’s... Captain?” she whispered, and at her words, Juushirou faltered, staring at her uncertainly.

“You didn’t know...” he murmured, and Mitsuki shook her head wordlessly.

“I’ll go to Eighth. I promised Sora as soon as I knew, she would,” Naoko glanced between them, then excused herself neatly, disappearing from the chamber and sliding the door shut behind her, leaving the pair of them alone.

“Juushirou... kun?”

Disbelief still laced Mitsuki’s words, and Juushirou smiled, scratching his head awkwardly as he came to sit down beside the bed.

“I guess you wouldn’t know,” he acknowledged, his expression apologetic. “I should have come without... it. I mean, it would’ve been less of a shock. You’re meant to be resting, and I didn’t mean to...”

He broke off, pursing his lips, then,

“Let’s try that again. I’m glad you’re awake, Mitsuki. I’ve been worried — we all have — ever since you came back.”

“Juushirou-kun is a Captain,” Mitsuki breathed, swallowing hard against the lump that suddenly rose in her throat. “Of all the things I expected when I came back to Seireitei... why didn’t I expect this?”

“If it bothers you that much, I’ll take the *haori* off,” Juushirou looked apprehensive, and Mitsuki shook her head, tears glittering once more in her grey eyes.

“No, not at all,” she whispered. “I just... was thinking... how proud I was of you. How glad... you managed to achieve...”

That was as much as she managed, for the tears overwhelmed her, and wordlessly Juushirou bent to slip his arms around her, holding her tightly to him. Mitsuki allowed herself to collapse against him, giving in to the raw grief and desperate relief that rent through her senses, the reassuring sense of her old friend’s reiatsu coupled with the strong rhythm of Juushirou’s heart acting as a soother to her wrangled nerves.

“I missed you so much,” she gulped out at last, raising sorrowful grey eyes to his. “I missed you so much, and for a while I thought... back there, I thought... maybe I’d never see you again.”

“You promised me you’d come back,” Juushirou’s words were calm and even, but one look at his eyes told her that he was not. “I believed

you, and you did.”

“Mm, but...” Mitsuki shuddered, closing her eyes, and Juushirou let out a heavy sigh.

“When you want to talk about it, I’ll listen,” he said quietly. “We’ve been apart a long time and a lot has happened. I know... how I think of you hasn’t changed, but I also know you’ve been through a lot. I’m your friend, first and foremost, and if that’s as much as you want right now, it’s all I’ll be. As a Captain, I want to help get to the bottom of what happened to your squad — but my first priority is you and making sure you’re all right. You’re my responsibility while you recover — mine and Naoko’s, of course — and so whatever you need, you let me know, all right?”

Mitsuki managed a little nod, and Juushirou stroked his fingers through her hair.

“Unohana-taichou wanted me to ask you one thing, and one thing only, about what happened,” he added reluctantly. “I know you probably aren’t ready to remember too clearly, but she wanted to know what kind of Hollow took down Aomori. They’re trying to neutralise the Hollow’s poison, and so... if you remember...”

“It was a scorpion,” Mitsuki’s eyes snapped open. “Seri was poisoned by it? No wonder Yuuyugo...”

“I’ll make sure the message gets to Fourth as soon as I leave here,” Juushirou did not give her a chance to dwell. “I wish I could stay here longer, but I really can’t. If I hadn’t felt your reiatsu change, I wouldn’t have come here now — but I have a list of things to do that’s getting longer by the second, and if Naoko’s buzzed off to find Sora, I can’t pass any of it over to her.”

“Naoko... is your Third Seat?” Mitsuki asked, and Juushirou nodded.

“An irreplaceable one, as it happens. I’d be lost without her — we all would,” he reflected. “Enishi too. You remember Houjou Enishi, of course?”

“Of course,” Mitsuki frowned. “Why wouldn’t I? I’ve been away, but I haven’t forgotten a single one of my friends. He’s here too, then? In your... Thirteenth Division?”

“Mm, sorry, I guess that was a bad question,” Juushirou scratched his head again. “Yes. He’s my second, has been from the start. Genryuusai-sensei set up Thirteenth as a place for District graduates to go, so that’s how all this came about. I wish I could’ve told you — but

I didn't know anything about it till after you'd gone. None of us did — I wouldn't have kept it from you otherwise."

"It doesn't matter," Mitsuki shook her head. "I'm just... glad. Glad you're here. Glad you're well. Glad Naoko and Sora are, and that everyone... everyone else is... well."

"Everyone is fine, so you do your best to get there, too," Juushirou told her. "In the meantime, since I have to go, are you hungry? I'll have Kira or someone bring you something, if you are — someone who won't bother you too much, but leave you in peace to eat."

"I... I'm not very hungry, yet," Mitsuki admitted, her gaze straying to Yuuyugo, "but if I don't eat, that won't ever recover itself. I probably ought to... though to be honest, Juushirou, I don't want to be on my own too much right now."

She eyed him doubtfully.

"Can I still call you that? Do I have to call you Ukitake-taichou, now? Naoko called you Taichou, so... since I don't even have a division rank, surely..."

"In public, maybe," Juushirou admitted sheepishly. "Otherwise folk might talk... a lot. In private, though, no way. I'm still the same person I was when we last saw each other — just a bit older and, maybe, a shade or two wiser with it. A lot has happened, but I'm still Juushirou."

"And I'm still Mitsuki. I hope," Mitsuki buried her head in her hands, weariness rushing back over her. "A lot is going on in my head at the moment, but... seeing some friendly faces has helped. I don't feel quite so bereft, somehow. It can't... undo what happened, but... at least I know that there are people here for me."

"And, unless I miss my guess, another one of them has just descended on Thirteenth's courtyard," Juushirou said dryly. "Sora's arrived. Hopefully Naoko's told her to tone it down, else I'll be having words with her myself."

He patted Mitsuki lightly on the shoulder, then,

"I'll go send a message to Fourth about the Hollow, and make sure you get some food brought up," he added. "If I've time, I'll poke my head around the door again tonight before I head back to my room, but if you want to see me for any reason, send a message for me. I'll come as soon as I can — you have my word on that."

With that he was gone, the flap of a white *haori* disappearing into

the corridor beyond, and Mitsuki bit her lip, sinking back against the wall once more.

Juushirou is a Captain. Juushirou-kun... my Juushirou-kun... is...

She swallowed hard, unsure what to make of the swirl of emotions that now rippled through her traumatised body.

Once he would've stayed here, as long as it took... he'd have waited at my side, regardless. I suppose a Captain can't do that. Not when so many people rely on him.

She pulled the blankets more tightly around her body, already able to hear Sora's familiar voice drifting allong the passageways towards her chamber.

What's with this heavy feeling? Get a grip on yourself, Mitsuki! Yes, you've been through some awful things, but that doesn't mean that you should expect him — or anyone — to drop everything to rush to your aid!

“MII-TSUU-KII!”

The door was flung back at that moment, and a black and white clad figure barreled into the room, grasping Mitsuki excitedly by the arms and giving her a little shake. “You are awake! You are here! You are real! I don't believe it — it's been way too long, but here you are!”

“Sora...” Mitsuki mustered a smile despite herself, and Sora sent the amused Naoko a dark glare.

“Thirteenth Division have been hoarding you away, and it's not been fair,” she added pointedly. “I've been worried out of my mind, ever since I heard what had happened.”

“Mi-chan probably doesn't want to talk about that, not yet,” Naoko leaned up against the wall of the chamber, folding her arms across her chest. “Give her some room to breathe, Sora. I feel the same way you do, but the girl's still delicate, and if you shake her around like that, you'll hurt her.”

“I'm all right,” Mitsuki assured her friend, even as Sora fixed her with a stricken look. “Really, I am. Just tired. Tired and... Nao's right, not ready to talk it through yet. I will be — I'll have to be, but for now... I'm just... happy to be back in Seireitei. And... to be with you both again.”

She grasped Sora's eager fingers in hers, then, “I'm not dragging you away from division duties? Naoko said you were a Vice Captain now, Sora-chan — is it okay for you to be here?”

“Shunsui’s my Captain,” Sora replied succinctly, as if that explained everything. “He’s happy for me to be here, since he knows I’ll report back to him when I get there.”

She sighed heavily.

“Besides, I spent the whole morning putting his office back into some kind of order after he decided to begin a sort out and then lost interest halfway through,” she added expressively, rolling her eyes to emphasise her frustration. “If I don’t keep his folders in order for him, they end up mislaid in the weirdest possible places, so in the end I kicked him out of his room and Kaoru, Shizuka and I tidied it up from top to bottom. He owed me, so he let me come as soon as Naoko appeared.”

“Kaoru? Shizuka?” Mitsuki looked lost, and Sora dimpled, nodding.

“Eighth Division’s Fourth and Tenth seated officers,” she explained. “It’s fun having subordinates — it makes doing tasks a lot easier, when you can delegate the dustiest bits to them and call it experience.”

She squeezed Mitsuki’s hand.

“Have you seen Juushirou, then? Nao said he was here with you, but... he doesn’t seem to be right now.”

“He said he had a whole pile of things he needed to do, but he’d come back later and if I needed anything, I should send a message,” Mitsuki pressed her lips together, and at her expression, Sora and Naoko exchanged looks.

“He is very busy, lately,” Naoko said thoughtfully. “He wasn’t so well earlier in the week, and so a few things got pushed onto the back-burner until he was able to look over them. He spent a night with the Fourth, and Retsu-sama wouldn’t let him come back till she’d checked his temperature personally and cleared him to leave. Then, of course, he’s been investigating a few things of his own in Seireitei, as well as assuming responsibility for you. Thirteenth isn’t as populated a division as some of the others, but it still has a fair number of duties to dish out, and he can’t pass all of them to Houjou and I to look over. We don’t have a Fourth Seat at the moment — our last one was killed in action three years ago, and Taichou only promotes people when he thinks it’s time to promote them, not to fill gaps. Atsudane’s a good officer, but he’s only just earning his spurs at Fifth seat, and Kirio’s way too inexperienced still to jump up from Sixth to Fourth... so we’ve got four officers doing the work of five, really.”

She shrugged her shoulders.

“I take on as much as he’ll let me, but he seems to have this bizarre idea that I’ll burn out,” she added ruefully. “Houjou takes the bulk of the kenjutsu and drill, and it all works out — but it means we don’t get as much time to ourselves as maybe we’d sometimes like.”

“Life in Seireitei goes on, huh?” Mitsuki murmured forlornly, and Sora sighed, hugging her companion impulsively.

“It goes on with you, too, now,” she said firmly. “Naoko and I are still your friends — your *best* friends — and we’re not going to let you talk us into otherwise. We’ve a lot to talk about, and I’m sure you do too, so when you’re fit and well, we’ll go out, the three of us, into Inner Seireitei, have some drinks and share some girly secrets like we used to — it’ll be fun. In the meantime, though, you need to heal and we need to find and kick the asses of whichever lowlife caused havoc in Rukongai. That fact itself is giving everyone headaches, and *nobody* is gonna get away with putting you through all that!”

Something in Sora’s impassioned declaration made Mitsuki laugh, and Sora shot her a confused glance.

“Mi-chan? Are you all right?”

“Yes, just realising how glad I really am to have you around me again,” Mitsuki tried in vain to stifle her amusement, but it was no use. “Naoko’s right. You haven’t changed at all — and I’m so happy that’s the case.”

“I haven’t — but other people have?” Sora arched an eyebrow. “People like Juushirou, maybe?”

“What do you mean?” Mitsuki’s eyes took on a look of dismay, and Sora sighed.

“You wanted him to stay with you, but he didn’t — right?” she demanded. “You’re hurt. I can tell you are, even though you didn’t say it. You wanted him here, but the idiot left you and went back to work.”

“Juushirou’s a Captain. I can’t interfere with that, it would be selfish and unfair,” Mitsuki objected. “Naoko said it — the division has been busy, and he’s got a lot of other things to do. I’m just one unranked officer from a foreign squad... in the big scheme of things, I’m less than important.”

“If you think that anything is taking priority in his mind over you, Mitsuki, you’re being foolish,” Naoko said categorically. “The other night, when we got word about what had happened in Rukongai, he was the first out of the doors, hurrying to Fourth to find out details

despite the fact he was running a fever. Nobody could stop him, and Houjou and I had to take charge of the squad in his absence. He spent the night at Fourth because anxiety about you and Rukongai made him push his body beyond its limits and he more or less collapsed. He's putting the division first because he has to — as Captain, we all need him to. But he's thinking of you every moment of the day, and don't think it's otherwise. Whatever *your* thoughts on the matter might be, *he's* as much in love with you now as he was when you said your goodbyes. He wears that pendant of yours all the time, pretty much — more than anyone, the Taichou is glad you're going to be okay."

"Maybe I'm being silly, but after being apart so long, it's hard to know for sure," tears of relief glistened against Mitsuki's fair skin. "Thank you for saying it, Nao-chan, though it shouldn't need to be said. I understand that the division should take priority. I'm just... a bit... wrenched about at the moment. I suppose... I don't want to be alone more than I need to, whilst I process everything that happened. It all moved so quickly... I'm still reeling from losing so many people who'd become like my family."

"Well, we're here now. We're here, Juushirou's here, and it will be fine," Sora said firmly. "I already told Shunsui, if we can get involved in investigating this thing, we should, and he agreed. Thirteenth are already involved, because you're here. That means Nao and I are right behind you, backing you up, and we'll get to the bottom of it. That's a promise. We won't give up until we do, no matter how long it takes."

Mitsuki was probably back on the other side by now.

Katsura rested his chin on his hands, his gaze seeing nothing of the battered landscape before him. The entanglement with the Hollow still weighed heavily on his mind, and, not for the first time since his return to Rukongai, he found himself plotting it over again in his mind, dissecting each and every decision he had made in the search for the moment he had moved away from his usual brief and hurried to the rescue of one of the black clad death gods.

What had made him do it? Now, back in such familiar surroundings, he understood it less and less. Did he love her? He dismissed this at once. He had liked her, yes, and admired her plucky spirit in the face of so much devastation, but there had also been a fragility about her — a gentleness that had reached out to the local citizens and reassured them. In a fight, she was no champion. That much had been painfully clear. Yet despite the fact each time must put her in considerable danger, she still chose to put on the uniform and

carry the sword.

Why did this bother him so much?

He grimaced, burying his head in his hands. The truth was, he had simply never thought about anything from a shinigami's perspective before. Seeing the pain of her comrades' deaths, and the frantic way in which she had tried to save them had, for the first time, made him see the enemy as something other than objects to be cut down. He had felt guilty for causing that pain, and, though they had had the most fleeting of acquaintances, as he thought back on it, he realised that he would hate for her to look at him with those eyes, knowing what he had done to her and her squad.

It was not a feeling he liked, nor clearly understood. Whilst defending his family and the people of Rukongai was second nature to him, he had never once felt guilt for the death of a shinigami, and it ate away at him more than he wanted to admit.

Almost like they were people... people like us, not... not really monsters at all.

"This is an unusual place to find you,"

The sound of Koku's voice made him glance up, ready with a quick and witty retort, but it died on his lips as he registered his companion's pallor, taking in the younger man's hooded eyes and the faint lines of pain that ran like furrows across his brow. As he shuffled up to make room for his companion on the dry stretch of narrow river bank, Koku dropped down beside him with a sigh, his hands trembling slightly as he smoothed out the rough fabric of his dusty clothes, making himself as comfortable as he could. He did not speak for a moment, and Katsura sent his companion a sidelong glance, wanting to probe gently at his thoughts but holding back, waiting for Koku's signal that it was okay.

"Not now," Koku murmured, answering the unvoiced question with a slight, tentative shake of his head. "Give me a few minutes — just let me settle."

Katsura's eyes narrowed into slits, but he reluctantly pulled back, leaning back on his hands and gazing up at the clouded, colourless sky that hung heavy over their heads.

"You didn't sleep much last night, did you?" he asked at length, and Koku flinched slightly, then sighed, shrugging his shoulders in a gesture that Katsura recognised as grudging admission.

"I had to take Tenichi back to his shelter, to make sure Sakaki

didn't gut him," he responded with a grimace. "And after that..."

He trailed off, but Katsura read the unspoken message in the younger man's expression, and his expression darkened.

"I don't know why you let him make you do so much," he muttered. "I've never understood that. We both know... it's hard on you. You need to rest too, and he's been making you run around after this shinigami, then on top of that..."

"It's not that big a deal," Koku assured him, shooting him a wan smile. "Don't look like that, all right? I have to be of some material use, don't I? There's no sense me being here, otherwise. It's all right, so don't fuss. I'm just a little tired today, that's all."

"It was... a hard night?"

"There have been worse," Koku was vague, his gaze turning away, and Katsura grimaced.

"You can't hide it that easily. You're pale, shaking and you look like you're about to heave your guts all over me," he said bluntly. "At least tell me if that's the case, all right? I don't have many more clothes to wear this month, not with everything else that's gone on, and it's not as though washing them clean is easy in this dried up wasteland of a place!"

"I promise I'm not going to throw up on you," despite himself, faint humour glittered in Koku's dark eyes. "I'll be all right, seriously I will. It's passing, and the fresh air is helping clear my head."

"Fresh air, huh?" Katsura sniffed, then snorted, shaking his head. "This isn't fresh air, Koku-kun. This is fetid, dry and stale air, full of decay and people's dissatisfaction. I don't know how you can breathe it and say you feel better — honestly, sometimes it just makes me claustrophobic."

"Well, I haven't been travelling in the places you have, so I guess I make do," Koku said contemplatively. "Speaking of which, are you going to tell me exactly what happened on the other side of that stone wall? Everyone's been pretty closed-lipped on it, but Sakaki was covered in gore and, now Keitarou-san's taken our unexpected guest back to the place he belongs, I figured it'd be all right to discuss it. Nobody here will hear us, and there aren't any shinigami in the wings any more."

"You're going to miss your babysitting duty, huh?" Katsura asked keenly, and Koku laughed.

“You’re changing the subject,” he pointed out, “and no, not really. It was nice in one way, having someone new to talk to, and finding out some things about shinigami I didn’t know — but on the whole, it was difficult. Too much enforced company is draining after a while — I’m not as gregarious as you are, and his being here caused tensions every which way.”

“I am changing it,” Katsura agreed. “What happened in the Spiritless Zone isn’t for you to worry about.”

“I do, though,” Koku admitted. “I worry that he’s sending you there to blood your hands on his behalf, and I don’t like that he is. It’s not fair on you, either, you know — Sakaki is one thing, but you’re not a killer, not by nature, and...”

“You’re worried about me?” Katsura arched an eyebrow, reaching over to ruffle his companion’s messy dark hair, and Koku winced, pushing him away.

“Oww... don’t! Don’t, my head... it’s not up to that kind of thing yet!”

“Oops, sorry,” Katsura looked contrite, withdrawing his hand almost immediately. “Are you all right? I didn’t make it worse?”

“No, I guess not,” Koku sighed, resignation in his expression. “I want you to tell me though, Katsura. It’s not as though I haven’t worked it all out for myself — but I want to hear your side of it. I am worried about you. I always am, when you go flitting off on one of Keitarou-san’s errands. Whilst I don’t doubt it’s all about keeping us safe, sometimes...”

He frowned, a shadow crossing his expression.

“Sometimes?” Katsura pressed, and Koku shook his head.

“No. Nothing,” he murmured. “Well? It would take my mind off my headache if you were to share a little bit with me. I know Sakaki killed people. I’m going to guess you did too.”

“I manipulated a Hollow...” Katsura said slowly, “and two shinigami died. Maybe three. They were fighting it — but it was stronger than they were. It was a fair fight, Koku — I made sure that it lured them out and no local people were hurt. They knew what they were facing — there were no sneak attacks.”

“Three shinigami died,” Koku murmured softly, closing his eyes for a moment and an indescribable expression crossed his features. An awkward silence fell between them, and Katsura was just debating

sending another psychic probe to poke through his companion's defences when Koku's eyes snapped open again, fixing him with a penetrating stare.

"I thought there were four."

"Oh, dammit, stop it with the psychic reflection," Katsura groaned, massaging his temples in frustration. "Ever since I first discovered I could speak to you telepathically, you've been doing this to me — pulling my skills back on me and reading bits of my thoughts instead of just what I send across to you. It creeps me out and I don't like it — this is my spirit power, and you shouldn't be able to do it. It's not fair play — it's bad manners, digging into someone else's mind!"

"You dig into other people all the time," Koku said calmly. "Besides, it's as you said. We have that bond. *You* established it in the first place. It's only natural that I should be able to manipulate it sometimes, too."

"I don't dig into your thoughts when you don't want me there," Katsura objected, and Koku let out a hollow laugh.

"Yes, and I'm sure I can guess at the reasons why," he remarked darkly. "Well? So there were four, then? Not three? What about the fourth?"

Katsura glanced around him, his expression one of consternation, and Koku reached out a pale hand to touch his arm.

"Keitarou-san's not here," he murmured. "He won't hear you, and there's nobody else nearby. You know that. You can sense them, even better than I can. Tell me what happened in the Spiritless Zone, Katsura. I need to know... it's bothering me."

Katsura ran his fingers through his muzzy dark hair with a heavy sigh.

If you say a word of this to Father, you're dead meat.

He sent the message across the divide psychically, seeing his companion wince slightly as the psychic impulse vibrated through his aching brain, and he sighed, feeling guilty.

I'm not talking about it out loud, so if you want to know, it will have to be this way. I never know when one of his people is around, especially since Kurotsuchi is so fond of spying on anyone and anything if it carries favour with the boss.

Are you afraid of Keitarou-san's reaction, then?

Koku's expression was pained, but he nodded in acquiescence,

returning his own question across the telepathic bond.

You sound like you are... as though what happened was a big deal.

I don't know if it is or it isn't, yet. I'm still trying to figure it out for myself.

Katsura groaned, flopping back on the ground and gazing up at the sky with a sigh.

The other one was a girl, Koku. A shinigami, sure, but a girl.

A girl, huh?

Koku pursed his lips, a knowing smile twitching at his lips.

A pretty girl?

She was, but that wasn't... I mean... it wasn't...

Katsura stalled, unable to find the words he wanted, and a sigh wafted across the psychic link.

If you have a weakness, it's for a pretty girl. Here was I thinking that there was doom and gloom tied up in this, and all that happened is you lost your heart all over again.

No... no, it wasn't like that...

What was it like, then?

Koku rolled over onto his stomach, resting his chin in his hands and fixing Katsura with a penetrating look.

If you let her get away from the Hollow, it must've been something, right?

I don't understand it myself.

Katsura grimaced, closing his eyes briefly and picturing Mitsuki against his thoughts.

Is that her?

Koku asked curiously, and Katsura's eyes shot open, indignation flaring in his dark eyes as he wheeled on his companion.

"Hey, I never meant you to peek into that!" he exclaimed, and Koku held up his hands in mock surrender, an apologetic smile on his face.

"It slipped over. It wasn't on purpose," he said sheepishly. "My brain isn't as focused as it usually is, and it's picking up signals from all over. I'm sorry. I'm not really trying to pry."

Katsura sighed, tension flooding out of his body and he dropped back on the ground.

Yes, that was her. Her name was Mitsuki. Edogawa Mitsuki. I don't know exactly why, Koku, but I didn't want to let her die.

Mitsuki?

Koku's brows knitted together, his lips thinning.

The beautiful moon... huh.

Yeah... so?

Katsura cast his companion a quizzical glance.

What does that have to do with anything?

I don't know... yet.

Koku sighed, shrugging his shoulders and offering a smile.

Sorry. I'm not really as clear as I should be this morning. I didn't mean to zone off like that. You liked this girl, though? Even though she was a shinigami?

It wasn't like the others.

Katsura rolled onto his side to face his companion, toying absently with the dry pebbles that littered the stream bank.

I liked her, and she was pretty, but it wasn't because of that. She was helping the Plus souls... and when the Hollow came, her first instinct was to protect them, not herself. I felt it radiate from her, like a beacon, when the Hollow was bearing down on her. It was going to kill her for sure, but she didn't run away from it, and because she was frightened, she projected her thoughts out into the atmosphere. I saw it... how much she cared about those villagers. I couldn't let the Hollow kill someone like that. She sounded like she cared about the same things I did... so... so I stopped the Hollow from hurting her.

You stopped it?

Koku looked suddenly anxious.

Did she see you?

Katsura didn't respond for a moment, and Koku groaned, rubbing his temples.

She did. You spoke to her, didn't you? She's seen you.

Well... yes.

Keitarou-san is going to kill you. I'm serious. You let a shinigami see you — what the hell do you think he'll say about that?

A lot, which is why I'm not telling him.

Katsura snapped back, his dark eyes defensive.

I didn't tell her my name, and it's not as though she knows anything about me. She thought I'd come from Seireitei, so even if she looks for me, she'll never trace me back here. It's fine, Koku. Really. It's not going to bring danger here. I just... I didn't feel like killing someone who wasn't hurting anyone else. That's all. I don't know why we were sent to take out that

squad, and I assumed they must be doing damage of some kind — but I don't think Mitsuki was part of that, and so I decided to let her live. Is that so very bad, really?

You know how I feel about killing people. Of course I don't think letting her go was bad.

Koku responded wearily, the lines of pain across his brow deepening as he contemplated his companion's words more carefully.

Letting her see you, though, that was bad. Speaking to her, that was bad. You might be right, but... I don't know. I have a bad feeling... you really shouldn't have done that.

I don't feel great about it, myself.

Katsura groaned.

It's done now, though. Done and past and over with. I don't intend to look for her again. I didn't fall for her, or anything stupid like that, and she didn't seem like the kind of girl who'd be pulled in by my lines or my powers, either. She was older than me... and I could only read her thoughts when she let her guard down and was panicked or unconscious. Trying to form any kind of understanding with her would be impossible and far too dangerous — plus, Father wouldn't like it if I decided to take up with a shinigami all of a sudden. You needn't worry that I'll try and see her again. I won't. It's done.

Mm.

Koku didn't respond at first, and Katsura shot him a sidelong glance, taking in the tension that rippled through his companion's young frame. Despite himself, he felt guilty.

You really are afraid of Seireitei and its people, aren't you?

No... not exactly afraid.

Koku answered cautiously, shaking his head.

I just don't believe in taking unnecessary risks. I don't want anyone hurt. We have a tough enough life... it doesn't need to get any worse. We could have a better one.

So Keitarou-san believes, but I'm not sure whether or not he's right, not yet.

Koku clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth.

Maybe Seireitei is a better place, or maybe it isn't. I just think the risks outweigh the benefits. We belong here. This is our world. We get by. I help, because I want to be useful — but sometimes I think things would be better left alone.

That's only because you haven't seen Seireitei. You don't know enough about it to know how much better life there would be.

Maybe I know too much about it, and that's why I don't want to go there.

Koku tilted his head on one side, as if considering the best way to phrase his next statement.

If I go there, everything will change. If I cross the border like you do, there's no going back. Beyond the Sekkiseki divide, everything is alien, and when it's done, it can't be undone. That bothers me most of all.

He stretched, stifling a yawn.

I need to sleep, but I don't suppose I'm going to, not now you've given me new things to think about.

Sorry.

Katsura looked sheepish.

It's your own fault, though. You asked.

I know.

Koku frowned, turning his head towards the direction of the village.

Someone coming?

Katsura instinctively spread his senses, scanning the surrounding area, but he could not pick up any trace reiatsu or the flicker of another's thought processes, and he sent his companion a quizzical look.

Are you sure? I don't sense anything.

Koku nodded.

It's Sakaki. Time to talk properly... and about something else.

His message was brisk and to the point, and Katsura felt the psychic link sever, as his companion cut through it on his side, flinging up mental barriers to prevent the conversation from continuing. It was a necessary precaution, Katsura knew — for although Sakaki could not penetrate their telepathic conversations, she was smart enough to realise when people were talking about her behind her back. Although he could pick up graphic images from her thoughts, Katsura had never been able to forge a psychic communication link to his younger sister. It was a fact she strongly resented, and so, to keep the peace, he had resolved to use the power as little as possible in front of her.

“Okaasama's been looking for you,”

Instead of any kind of greeting, Sakaki's first words were laced with an accusation, and she planted herself square in front of Katsura's line of sight, ignoring Koku as though he were not even there. “I told her you were probably doing something important, but you're just

hanging out doing nothing. Just because *he's* not here, it doesn't mean there aren't chores to do and I'm not doing your share for you."

"I didn't know she was," Katsura said mildly, offering her a smile. "I'll go see her now, if that's how things are. She's probably just worried, though. He's gone on a dangerous trip, and she'll be fretting about him coming back safely."

"He'll be fine," Sakaki said matter-of-factly, "but you're probably right. In any case, it was you she wanted, so I said I'd at least go hunt you down."

"Most people don't mean the 'hunt' in that phrase as literally as you do, Saki-chan," Katsura patted her gently on the arm. "All right, I get the message. I'm going. I was only talking to Koku, anyhow. As you said, nothing important."

"I don't know why you bother talking to him at all," Sakaki's lips puckered into an unattractive scowl, which she flung Koku's way. "He's just a drone. One of Keitarou-san's lackeys, and that's all. He's nothing. He's not like us. You shouldn't waste your time with him, or you might wind up as pointless as he is."

"Saki-chan..." Katsura began, but Koku held up a hand, shrugging his shoulders.

"I'm sorry if my presence offends you, Sakaki," he said evenly. "As it happens, Keitarou-san didn't leave me with any particular jobs to do this morning, so if there are chores that need doing, I'm more than happy to do my share."

"Suck up," Sakaki growled, sending him another derisive look, then turning back to her original target.

"Well? Are you going? She said now, and I don't want the blame if you keep her waiting."

"I'm gone," Katsura got to his feet reluctantly. "Are you coming with me, to make sure I don't stray? I'm sure you don't have anything nice to say to Koku, so there's no reason for you to stay around here."

"I don't have anything to say to him," Sakaki said bluntly, turning and poking out her tongue in the hapless Koku's direction. "He never treats me with any respect — you either. The only person he listens to is Keitarou-san, and then he sucks up and sucks up and follows every order he gets just so that he can get special favours among the other villagers. It's not like that changes what he is any at all. He'll never be anything different than another Rukongai drone, and that's all. He's not like us, so you shouldn't waste your time hanging out with him."

I'm your sister. He's just some kid Father found and took in because he thought he looked useful."

"You're not supposed to call Keitarou-san that, not even with me," Katsura chided lightly, and Sakaki scowled.

"He isn't here to hear it," she snapped back. "Only his minion, and I don't care what he thinks. Keitarou-san *is* my father. Yours too. That's what makes *us* special."

Katsura sent Koku a troubled glance, but the younger man laughed, a wry look in his brown eyes.

"Go," he said simply, waving his companion away. "Sakaki's right. You should spend some time with her today. I'm going to go back to my shelter and read for a bit, anyway. If anyone needs me, that's where they'll find me. Sakaki, you can tell Eiraki-san that if she has any duties she'd like me to attend to, I'll be willing — but I wouldn't *dream* of intruding on your family time."

Katsura hesitated for a moment, but Sakaki snorted in triumph, her long, delicate fingers closing tightly around his arm.

"We're going, then," she said decisively. "Leave the worm to dig around in his own dirt for a while."

I'm sorry, Koku.

The transmission was faint and fleeting, and Katsura did not dare look back, sure Sakaki would pick up on the sensation and realise what was going on.

Don't mind me. I'm fine. Being alone is probably better for now, anyway.

I mean it though. What she said... I am sorry.

Not your fault. Let it be. I'll talk to you later.

Koku sounded comfortable, even relieved with this arrangement, and Katsura let out a little sigh.

Don't worry. I won't tell anyone what you told me. I think it's better that nobody else knows about it, probably not ever, so I'll keep your secret. You can trust me.

I know. I always do.

With that, Katsura reluctantly broke the link, allowing his sister to lead him up the worn pathway that led to Eiraki's quarters.

"You shouldn't talk to him like that, you know," he murmured, and Sakaki sent him a quizzical look.

“Who? Koku? Why not?”

“Keitarou-san trusts him. That’s why not.”

“He trusts Kurotsuchi, too, but you don’t spend so much time fussing around him,” Sakaki pointed out frankly.

“That’s not the same thing at all.”

“Looks like it from where I’m standing,” Sakaki retorted, and Katsura groaned.

“Fine. I’m done. Let’s not argue,” he said at length. “I’ll come see what Mother wants, and try and put her mind at ease about Father. You come too — it’ll probably take the both of us, anyway.”

“I wasn’t going anywhere else,” Sakaki informed him archly, releasing her hold on his arm and stalking up the path ahead, turning back to glare at him. “Well? Get a move on, slow coach — I’m not taking the slack for you being late!”

It was a cold, bleak world, deep beneath the earth of District Seven.

Arched ceilings carved deep into the granite grey of the rock gave the feeling of space and air, though the chambers were self contained with false entrances and passageways leading off at every angle to confuse anyone who chose to stray into the darkened den. At first glance, the high ceiling and densely packed floor appeared crafted by professional artists, though on closer inspection the scars of the chisel and the pick gave away the fact that this was the remains of an abandoned Sekkiseki mine from District Seven’s more prosperous economic past. New mines had begun to spring up all over the Seventh, but the population were still recovering from the decimation of previous regimes. Few records remained outside of the Clan’s hands as to the location of the old mines, several of which had been exhausted when the original Sekkiseki divide between Rukongai and Seireitei had been constructed, and though a thin layer of the impure rock gave the walls of the chamber a strange, almost mottled effect, the majority of the raw Sekkiseki ore had long since been removed.

What remained in the crude pillars that supported the dips of the uneven ceiling was enough to conceal the spiritual presence of those who called this home. The halls were dark and dusty, now, indicating how few of the Kitsune people still chose to live in the security of the underground world, but, since the receipt of Souja’s urgent message, many had returned to their safehouse, and the sound of chattering children and whispering adults could be heard throughout the

domain.

They were a resourceful people, moving swiftly and decisively in times of crisis, and ready to discard everything of material use in order to protect their lives and the lives of their loved ones. Bonds between the Kitsune were stronger than strong, the kinship of people who had seen generations of threat and hardship and had faced them together, so there was no sense of panic despite the fact someone was clearly hunting them down.

An occupational hazard, in fact.

The young man with the silver hair cast a quick, cursory glance around him at the makeshift settlement that had sprung up once more in what had been for several years an empty great hall, food being shared out in small but effective rations and families huddled together, the older ones telling stories to palefaced young ones about each and every symbol the chamber's ceilings bore. Some of the little ones would be unused to the Sekkiseki, he mused, and would suffer from the classic lethargy and nausea that afflicted them all to begin with, when so closely surrounded by so much stifling spirit-stone. The Sekkiseki protected them but also killed them, and even in his short life he had seen many succumb to what the Kitsune referred to as *Sekibyou* or "Stone Sickness". His own parents were both among the dead, buried deep in the most hidden corner of the underground village, as well as two uncles, his grandparents, a cousin and even an infant brother.

Life was short and harsh, but that made it worth having, and he had never resented his lot. Karma had wished this life on the Kitsune, and they had accepted its terms with equanimity.

"Joumei-dono, we've returned."

As he crossed over the engraved stone floor towards the rear tunnels that led to a more private set of chambers, a man with shaggy red hair appeared beneath one of the arches, his body swathed in the black hooded robes that all of them wore when above ground. Though Joumei was the younger of the two, his companion bowed his head quickly, acknowledging the other's alpha position. Joumei had already seen the apprehension in the man's greenish eyes.

"I see," he said softly, then, "and?"

"We brought him back here," the redhead chewed on his lip, clearly agitated. "Izumi-hime said we should, and that you'd want us to... but..."

He faltered, and Joumei sighed, coming to rest his hands on his

companion's shoulders.

"This fear of shinigami must stop, Hiko," he said, faint reproach in his tones. "We are protected by shinigami. We live because of shinigami. It is not shinigami who are our enemies. You must stop fearing them, lest it puts you in danger in the future."

"I know," Hiko grimaced, looking ashamed of himself. "I understand that, Joumei-dono, but it's difficult. I remember what my sister said happened to Mother and Father, and after that..."

"You still came back here, when you could have fled far away," Joumei offered him a gentle smile. "You came back to your people, and we will protect you, too. This shinigami is very likely the one that Souja-dono and Hirata-sama are seeking, anyway. The report I received said he was youngish, fairskinned and tall, with reddy gold hair and that fits the description of the officer abducted from Inner Seireitei. If we can return him safely to where he belongs, we will not be punished, will we?"

"No," Hiko agreed cautiously, "but he will see us. This place. Souja-dono never... this is our safehouse, and if even one low ranking officer knew where to find us..."

"If Izumi brought him back, she will have taken care of that," Joumei said wryly. "He won't remember the route he took to come here, and when we return him, we can take the same precautions. We won't let him roam free here, Hiko, don't worry. He may be our guest and a victim of a crime — but among the Kitsune, foreigners are also prisoners and I have no intention of making any exceptions."

He clapped Hiko on the back, then,

"I'll go see my sister now, and see this shinigami for myself. I trust she took him to the usual place?"

"Yes, sir. I came to report to you — am I otherwise dismissed?"

There was no hiding the hopefulness in Hiko's voice, and Joumei grinned, nodding.

"Yes, you are. You can leave it with me, and I'll deal with it from here," he promised.

"Yes, sir," Hiko bowed his head again, making to disappear back into the shadowy tunnels, but then he paused, turning to fix quizzical eyes on his leader.

"Don't you think it's convenient, though, that the missing man turns up here, now?" he asked softly. "We looked, they looked, and

yet he was here, on Endou land, all the time?”

“The simplest explanation is that he wasn’t here, and he’s been released here now for a particular reason,” Joumei said candidly. “Almost certainly that means he was abducted by the person who wants to find us, and he was left as bait, hoping we would bite.”

“But...” Alarm flooded Hiko’s expression, and Joumei tut-tutted under his breath.

“A crude manipulation not worthy of acknowledging,” he muttered. “Our duty to the Endou outranks our will to protect ourselves, but that doesn’t mean we won’t succeed at both. Even if such a thing was done, no outsider can find their way in here. Even if they did, they would be sorely disadvantaged. We are used to the Sekkiseki, but unwanted visitors are not. They would not leave here alive, Hiko — I am very sure of that.”

“Some of the people are saying that moving further south would be safer,” Hiko admitted. “There are only forty or fifty Kitsune in total who answered the call this time, and some of them have very small children. It’s been said that the southern mine is a safer place for young ones, less likely to be found than here... is that true?”

“It may be,” Joumei said frankly. “In truth, I would rather have those families away there just to be on the safe side. It will probably come, but not just yet. Too much movement, even underground, may have the opposite effect and draw attention to us, not away. Be patient and trust me. I don’t intend on rushing into anything. Father never would have... and I take the safety of every single life very seriously indeed.”

“Yes, sir,” Hiko nodded, looking relieved, and as he disappeared into the black, Joumei sighed, clicking his tongue absently against the roof of his mouth.

The Southern Mine isn’t yet safe enough. The collapse of that chamber two years ago still requires work to make it stable and habitable again, and when I do give the order for the families to go, I have to be sure that they have all they need. You’re right, Hiko — this shelter is probably more exposed and therefore so are we... but I can’t leave here on a whim. It has to be the right time — and whilst we have a shinigami here, that’s clearly not it.

His lips thinned as he turned on his heel, ducking his head to enter a tunnel to the right, placing his feet carefully over smooth steps cut into the hard base rock. Kidou lamps did not function so deep within the Sekkiseki, but nonetheless there was enough light for him to see

his way, the glass half-jars affixed at intervals along every wall glowed with an eerie bluish light. Where magic had failed them, science had not — and Joumei had long since thanked his stars that he had come from a creative, innovative people who had always seen hardship as a challenge, not an obstacle to life.

Sekkiseki dust reacts with certain compounds to give off light, and, if trapped in the right conditions and if all air is removed, the reaction continues exponentially, fuelling and refuelling itself and providing light.

A faint smile touched his lips as he reached the foot of the stairs.

Basic chemistry, yet I still remember the surprise and awe with which Souja-dono viewed these lamps the first time he visited our domain. If the world of the Shinigami remain so dependant on their spirit power for every small thing, no wonder they have so many loopholes in their system. No wonder Hirata-sama still needs us, if the Gotei disdain their environment in favour of their spells.

At the foot of the stairs, round a tight, twisting corner was a large block of wood, cut exactly to fit the proportions of the old mining tunnel. He rapped on it three times, paused, then twice more, and after a moment he heard the sliding of a bolt before the door swung open to reveal a small, circular chamber beyond. This had once been a store-chamber, housing mining equipment, but now it was empty except for a flat, marble bier in the centre. The walls were carved with more of the symbols and characters that covered the columns and walls on the higher level — protective charms and ciphers intermingled with the long forgotten family crests of the original Kitsune who had fled here in fear of their lives over a hundred years before. None of them still lived, nor their children, but the distinctions of rank and status between the Kitsune families was still as solid as it had been back then. Of all of those who had sought exile and sanctuary before Keitsune's arrest, Joumei's family had held the highest rank at court, and so, some several generations later it was Joumei, young as he was, and his sister who held the reins of control over the whole underground tribe.

Hiko is right. Only forty or fifty answered the call this time. Others have integrated, found homes and settled outside of our protection. They sought normality, and perhaps, till this, I thought they could have it. Not everyone has as pure Urahara blood as Izumi and I. Hiko's mother was an outsider, and he's not the only one. Red hair is not an Urahara trait. Perhaps one day the Kitsune will be as everyone else — mixed and intermingled in with other kinsfolk and no longer identifiable nor threatened by those seeking an ancient revenge. Maybe that wouldn't be such a bad thing — better than see them killed for crimes committed by those they never knew.

He reached up to finger the uneven ends of the silvery hair that

hung loose around his shoulders.

Unfortunately for me, silver hair only runs in one particular Urahara Clan line. All of that family were condemned by Urahara Rikiya as traitors and permission was granted to kill us on sight. I can't imagine that Nagesu-sama seeks to hunt us after so long — but there are others who would know who we are if they saw us — know and want to kill us to avenge old wounds.

At his entrance, the room's occupant glanced up, the dark cowl of her hood still heavy around her head. She met his gaze for a brief moment, offering a smile, then turning her attention back to something huddled and black that lay sprawled out across the bier.

The shinigami?

"Is this him?" Joumei crossed the room in quick, even strides, and without looking up, the girl nodded her head. Her pale fingers drifted across the unconscious man's cheek and then his chin, pausing at his throat before running over the dusty seams of the black *shihakushou*. Without a moment of hesitation, she began to loosen the cloth between her delicate, fairy like hands, pulling the pieces of the *hakamashita* apart to reveal the shinigami's chest.

"Wait," Joumei rested his hand on hers, and she glanced at him, a question in her eyes. At her expression, Joumei laughed, then slowly shook his head.

"He's not a test subject. We can't dissect him," he said softly, his tones light and joking, and his companion snorted, pulling away from his grasp and returning her attention to the man's clothing. Turning back the folds of the *hakamashita*, she gently teased out the small greyish tag of fabric that bore the 'Shoubu' flower of the Seventh Division, then released her hold, allowing the cloth to fall back across his skin. The shinigami did not stir, and Joumei knew that he would probably continue to sleep for some time.

"You don't fool me," he said wryly. "You weren't just looking for that tag — you wanted to take skin samples, didn't you?"

The young woman didn't answer, instead reaching up to knock back the hood of her cloak. A cascade of fluffy silverish curls fell out across her shoulders, several strands of it woven with gold and blue beads bought at local markets and engraved by hand with the same symbols that hung over their heads and on the walls. Her cheeks were pale, though her brows and lashes were dark, and when she smiled — a rare thing, Joumei reflected — she dimpled, giving her the almost cherubic prettiness that always took strangers off their guard. She was petite, built on a much smaller scale to him, possessing all of her

mother's tiny but perfectly formed features. A gust of wind might blow her away, their father had often joked, but Izumi's angelic appearance masked a razor sharp brain and a shrewd wit. Izumi did not speak — though nobody had ever been sure whether it was because she could not or simply did not, and so her only form of communication was via hand signals which few of the other Kitsune understood. To Joumei, sometimes even these were not needed, for he knew his sister's mind better than anyone else. At twenty years old, she was his most precious treasure — and the thing he had sworn to his father as that man had lain dying that he would protect above all others.

“He belongs to Souja-dono and Hirata-sama. He's not ours to dissect,” Joumei said now, turning his gaze back to the shinigami's features. “I know why you wanted to — but that's the exact reason why you can't. Souja-dono told me the missing shinigami's name was Kotetsu Tenichi. He's an Urahara... just like us.”

Izumi looked thoughtful for a moment, then turned to scoop up Tenichi's right arm, pushing back the fabric of the *shihakushou* with the disinterested composure of a scientist or physician who undressed strange men on a regular basis without a single thought. She held it up, tapping her finger against the spirit cuff, then grimacing as though she disliked what she saw. She thrust the arm out towards Joumei, Tenichi's fingers dangling limply back and forth, and the young man frowned, squinting at the metal and then nodding his head.

“Rough metal, crude workmanship — functional but not pretty,” he agreed. “What do you think? Someone who didn't know his trade but muddled through? Or someone who knew his trade but lacked the proper resources to give it proper finish?”

Izumi pressed her lips together, then held up two fingers, and Joumei nodded.

“Yes, I think so too,” he agreed, taking the arm in his grasp and indicating for her to release her hold. “It's working rather too well to be the former, unless it happens to be a very lucky coincidence. I can't sense the slightest flicker of his own reiatsu, though he's not hurt or damaged in any way and seems quite healthy, if a little thin and dusty. Even given the Sekkiseki, I'd be inclined to say whoever made it designed it with security in mind. It could almost be an Urahara — that kind of caution suits us.”

Izumi's head shot up sharply, and Joumei's jaw tightened grimly.

“Maybe,” he agreed, the unspoken question hanging in the air

between them, understood by both at once. “Izumi, while he sleeps, there is something we ought to find out. Hiko said it, and I thought it too — his being here like this, now, so close to our forest is a little bit of a convenient coincidence. He’s covered in dust and grime — if you want to take samples of something, take samples of that. I’d like to see where he was being held originally, if we can nail down a location — and also, any foreign reiatsu that’s seeped into his *shihakushou* during his stay there. It will probably take some time to get results, especially now we’re under curfew, but I want you to do it anyway. Souja-dono said that none of the other abductees left a trace of spirit power anywhere about them — but something tells me that this one isn’t like the others. Whoever took Tenichi-dono asked for us as the trade. They also let him go near where we are, which bothers me.”

Izumi’s fingers fluttered silently, a question in her eyes, and Joumei shook his head.

“I’m pretty sure this has nothing to do with a dissatisfied strand of the Endou, but that doesn’t mean that it’s not tied up with District Seven somehow,” he said at length. “Take as many samples as you need, even if that does mean cutting bits from his clothing.”

He set down the arm on the bier, flicking a finger disparagingly at the grimy, frayed remains of the shinigami’s *obi*.

“No Captain will let him wear that on parade again, so you can take as much as you like from it, I expect,” he concluded. “Leave him decent, but take what you can. If he’s like the others, he won’t remember where he’s been, and I’d rather he slept while we investigate. I’ll send word to Souja-dono when it’s safe to — but for now, if someone’s hunting us, I’d like to know who and why.”

Izumi nodded her agreement, reaching down to pull a sharp knife from her belt.

“Don’t hurt him, though,” Joumei cautioned her. “If he is Kotetsu Tenichi, then hurting him would be unforgivable.”

Izumi’s lips twitched down slightly, but she made no demur, instead reaching for the abused *obi* and beginning to slice sections off in a calm, methodical manner.

“You didn’t see anyone else in the forest, by the way?” Joumei asked casually, and Izumi paused, tilting her head on one side as if considering the question carefully. At length she sighed, then, reluctantly, she shrugged her shoulders. With the free fingers of her left hand she twitched a brief, abbreviated message.

“Kidou?” Joumei’s eyes darkened. “You’re sure it was Kidou you sensed?”

Izumi nodded her head, returning her attention to the *obi*.

“Well, if so, it certainly wasn’t this guy who fired it — not with cuffs like that,” Joumei sighed, rubbing his temples. “Whoever it was didn’t want to be seen, which probably meant they came here to see. Find out what you can from his clothing, Izumi, and then, when you’re done taking samples... wake him up. Seal him in here, but wake him. I’ll speak to him and find out what he knows. Whatever he tells us, though, and even if he is Kotetsu Tenichi, some things can’t be helped. He stays within this room and he sees nobody he doesn’t need to see until Souja-dono comes to claim him and take him back to Inner Seireitei. If someone is playing games with us, I’m not going to leave them a paper trail. Whether they took Tenichi-dono for their own gain or to sniff us out, they’re not going to find these foxes so easy to ensnare.”

Author’s Note

Cookies for anyone who spotted the anachronism in this chapter ;)
Also, observant folk may have noticed some characteristics in Izumi’s appearance that are somewhat familiar to someone in modern canon...

Name Kanji :)

*Since we’ve a few characters lurking in this story who are new or newish, and others whose names might become relevant as time goes on, I thought I’d give a quick kanji rundown of some of these individuals. The last few chapters have confirmed what has been hinted at up to this point — that is the biological bloodlines between Keitarou and some of the other characters. As I think I’ve said before, **Keitarou**’s name 敬太郎 means “respectful first son” or ‘respectful great man’, whilst **Eiraki**’s 永瀧 means “eternal waterfall”. The ‘raki’ kanji is a more unusual reading of the word ‘taki’ (waterfall) usually reserved for names, which in simplified modern Japanese is normally written as 滝. I think I may have previously referenced her name with the modern kanji, but I think given the era I’m setting this, it’s more appropriate to use the original character as given above.*

*All Kei and Eiraki’s children are all named after trees. I don’t really know why, except that they provided good solid imagery for another theme of the story. So far we’ve seen a fair bit of **Katsura** 桂 (Judas tree, or Laurel). I don’t know if people know this, but “Aizen Katsura” carries another meaning in Japanese, using different kanji for Aizen than that chosen by Kubo Tite. Kubo’s ‘Aizen’ means ‘dyed indigo’, but there is a tradition in, I believe, Nagano Prefecture at one of the temples of a Katsura*

tree which is famous for the making of romantic vows. This is known as the Aizen Katsura (the Love Vow Laurel/Judas tree) and a novel was written about it, as well as film adaptations made. There are, so I've read, other 'aizen katsura' trees in other parts of Japan, including the Oosaka region. Katsura's rather fated meeting with and continued interest in Mitsuki, then, can perhaps be seen in this light — although it's far from a romantic connection in the traditional sense. The katsura has another reference in Japanese literary imagery and, perhaps, cultural folklore. I really don't wholly understand where it comes from, but there's an old story about a laurel tree in the moon... well, Mitsuki's name is beautiful moon... and so there is that connection again. Finally, there is the more boring western interpretation in the name "Judas" tree...

Oh, yes. Katsura also means "wig", but erm not using this kanji ;)

We've also seen a lot of **Sakaki** 榊. Her name means 'sacred evergreen', and the kanji for her name is actually made up of a combination of the characters for 'tree' and 'god'. There is no real connection between Sakaki's character and any legends or history surrounding the tree in Japanese tradition, and I chose it largely because it had a very old provenance in keeping with the setting of the story.

Attentive people will have noticed the references to a mysterious third name, **Kohaku** 杞白 (white river willow), who Keitarou referred to as "son" in the previous chapter. Kohaku is also the Japanese word for amber (琥珀), as one reader has already pointed out to me. I don't want to spend a lot of time explaining my reasons for choosing to write the name like this instead of with the 'amber' kanji, but suffice it to say the willow seemed a suitable tree for the character in question. The 'haku' or 'white' can also be read as 'shiro' and is sometimes translated/interpreted as innocence. This character has been referenced before in my fanfiction, though I'm not saying how and where ;).

As regards the others lurking in Rukongai, I haven't decided quite yet how many characters from my rough notes to involve and include, and so only a couple have properly introduced themselves to the audience. **Koku's** "黒" was explained in an earlier chapter, whilst **Kurotsuchi Masaya's** name 正夜 means "true night"

I feel I ought to explain here that the name Kurotsuchi actually means "black earth", but the kanji that Kubo used for the canon character's name is not pronounced 'Kurotsuchi'. Instead, the character's name is a combination of the Japanese for black, "kuro 黒" and the Japanese for earth, "tsuchi." The kanji Kubo chose to use is the character 涅. Maybe I'm reading too much into this, but that kanji appears often in religious themed words relating to the death and rebirth of Buddhist figures, as well as being the first character in the Japanese word for Nirvana, "Nehan."

The kanji's actual meaning is "black earth", but I'm sure that Kubo had other reasons for using that particular kanji. For the purpose of this fiction, therefore, it can be assumed that Kurotsuchi Masaya is probably not my character's birth name but a name given to him by Keitarou after Keitarou saved his life, effectively "reincarnating" him as his servant.

*Finally, the Kotetsu boys need a mention here, too. They have appeared already, back in Third Chronicle, of course, in the refugee village, and it was their mother that Shunsui spoke to about Keitarou when they were first gathering information. Now grown, both are obviously shinigami. Their family name, Kotetsu, is taken from canon. **Tenichi** 天一 means "Heaven's first", and **Ketsui** 決意 means "resolve."*

Hikifune Kirio (曳舟 桐生) belongs to canon ;)

15. Kai's Report

Chapter Fourteen: Kai's Report

“...In conclusion, there seems very little doubt that the members of the Fourth Division's squad in Rukongai were murdered, most likely by a dead blade wielded by one of the Plus Soul residents.”

Kai addressed the sombre chamber, his golden eyes guarded yet the tension in his compact frame giving away the deep anger and indignation he felt about what he was saying. It was the next day and, at Retsu's behest, a Captain's meeting had been convened — although any prior agenda had been thrown out of the window the moment the subject had turned to the Fourth Division's plight. For once, every single Captain was present, the long white *haori* of each squad leader in bright contrast to the heavy dark robes each shinigami wore beneath. Although several of those present were also Clan leaders, within Inner Seireitei's Gotei boundaries, the rule was that *shihakushou* must be worn when on duty, and for once, nobody had tried to flaunt the ruling to show off their noble status. Even Shunsui had shed his familiar pink *haori* for this meeting, feeling that such bright colours would be in poor taste when so much of Seireitei was in mourning, and so it was a sober group of individuals who stood in silence, listening to the Onmitsukidou leader give his report.

Kai stood at the head of the chamber in the full formal black and gold of the Shihouin Clan. Although the active Vice Captain of the Second Division, on this occasion it was his position as head of the Secret Operative Forces that required his presence, and as such, he had discarded his adjutant insignia, preferring to attend the meeting in his Clan robes instead of his squad ones. Somehow this only added to the gravity of the occasion, and although his voice had not deviated from its calm and objective explanations, nobody in the room was fooled by his disinterested pretence.

“Are there any leads as to who this resident might have been?” the Captain of Second Division, Shihouin Midori, Kai's older sister and a ruthless swordswoman in her own right was the first to break the silence, fixing her brother with a sharp, questioning look that gave no hint whatsoever that she was addressing a much beloved kinsman. Kai grimaced, shaking his head.

“No, not as yet,” he admitted, “although I've left two of my officers

in the vicinity to speak to people and, I hope, pick up some clues. There was a trail of blood leading into the woodland, but the trail went cold about halfway in and there's no sign of where the assailant might have gone next, nor any bloody weaponry or clothing concealed thereabouts. The victims at the camp site in Hokutan have all been examined both by my people on site and then Unohana-taichou's own people back under proper medical autopsy conditions, yet no trace of foreign reiatsu was found on any of them. I've spoken myself to Madeki-dono on my return here this morning, and taken a description of the person he remembers attacking them — but so far, none of the local citizens in Hokutan match the profile we're seeking."

"A dead end, in fact," Shunsui murmured, pressing his lips together in consternation. "Madeki-dono's witness testimony is concerning, though. A young girl — barely more than a child — with no discernable reiatsu and no special blade ripped apart good and well trained members of a reputable squad, leaving most of them dead, then disappears into nothing as though she were never there?"

"Do you think my officer is mistaken in his account, Kyouraku-taichou?" Retsu's voice was soft, but it carried a warning edge, and Shunsui shook his head, holding up his hands in mock surrender.

"No, not my meaning at all," he said quickly, a rueful look in his dark eyes. "I'm sure that Madeki-dono's testimony is correct simply because it sounds impossible — besides, he's not an officer given to exaggeration or panic. What he's told us is consistent with the evidence Kai's just given a summary of, too — but it's the very fact of it that's bothering me. A young girl is someone no shinigami would suspect of doing something of this nature. It's perfectly possible that that fact itself led to her being able to enter the Fourth Division compound."

"You mean, by pretending to be harmless — perhaps, even, hurt?" Juushirou asked sharply, and Shunsui nodded.

"It's possible, isn't it?" he glanced across at Kai for confirmation, and the darkskinned officer inclined his head.

"We're working on a similar theory," he agreed. "Madeki-dono didn't see her arrive, and so we've no surviving witnesses to how she managed to gain entry — but that seems a very plausible ruse to me. According to Madeki-dono, she was quite willing to use whatever methods she could to achieve her aim, and though good with a sword, he didn't call her exceptional. Whoever we're looking for is willing to resort to anything if it gets her ahead, and that could well include pretending to be helpless in order to lure her victims in."

“What about Aomori Seri in all of this?” Shiba Kyouki, Captain of the Fifth Division interjected, a questioning look in her bright green eyes. “The girl was attacked by a Hollow, correct?”

“A scorpion Hollow,” Juushirou confirmed gravely. “Mit... Edogawa isn’t yet well enough to give formal testimony to anyone, but she did confirm that Aomori had been attacked by a Hollow in scorpion form. Where or how this came about isn’t yet clear — but it doesn’t seem to have been part of the same incident at all.”

“Madeki-dono said that he sent Edogawa and three companions on an errand in Junrin’an,” Kai said grimly. “Aomori is still battling for her life, but the Onmitsukidou will need to speak to Edogawa soon, Ukitake — as will the Fourth, no doubt. Once I heard where Madeki-dono had sent them, my people split up to search the southern road and its near vicinity. There, we discovered the bodies of two shingami agents. Unohana-taichou has this morning identified them as the missing members of her squad, meaning that now all eleven are accounted for. They, too, were slain by a Hollow. There are clear signs of meshed reiatsu at the scene, indicating a fiercely pitched battle between them and it.”

“On Kai-dono’s request, Third Division dispatched three scientists to the Spiritless Zone to process and record each different aura for further analysis,” Urahara Nagesu, head of the Urahara Clan and Captain of Third Squad added quietly. “We hope to have a clear report in a few days, but it will take a little while to untangle the different flares of spirit power. From initial observations, though, it looks as though a Hollow attacked a local settlement in Junrin’an and the Fourth Division members headed it off. Two were killed in battle and Aomori sustained a serious injury. Somehow, she and Edogawa escaped, and it seems as though the Hollow was destroyed — but I can’t see any obvious connection between that happening and what Kai-dono describes in Hokutan.”

“I think it unlikely we will find a connection,” Kuchiki Guren, head of the Kuchiki and Captain of the Sixth rubbed his chin pensively. “A Hollow attack — albeit a rarity in the Spiritless Zone — in the southern region and a sword attack by a spiritless child in the northern region seem to have nothing to connect them together. More likely the first incident is a consequence of these tainted souls Madeki-dono sent a report to us about a short time ago — and it was mere coincidence that the assassin chose this time to attack in Hokutan.”

“With all respect, Guren-sama, I don’t like the probability of coincidences like that,” Shunsui murmured.

“It’s probably not a complete coincidence,” Shiba Hakubei suggested. “Fourth were split into two camps. Maybe the girl took her chance when numbers were less, fancying she had a better likelihood of succeeding if they weren’t all in one place. She couldn’t have known a Hollow would take on the others — but I think I’m right in saying that among the officers stationed there, Aomori Seri is one of the stronger Fourth Division fighters with a sword. With her away from the main camp, that left Madeki-dono as the only real sword fighter capable of holding his ground against a katana-wielding assassin.”

“Hakubei-dono may well be correct,” Retsu said sadly. “The strongest sword users among those dispatched to the Spiritless Zone were with Edogawa Mitsuki in Junrin’an. Whilst all of the officers at the Hokutan camp were capable of using their blades to heal, and had competent levels of Kidou, Madeki-dono was the only one with above average combat ability when it came to swords. Healers are not always the best fighters, and none of us anticipated an attack of this nature.”

“Perhaps that’s something the Fourth Division need to look at more seriously,” Midori pressed her lips together. “I realise now is not the time, Retsu-sama, but if, when things are less fraught, you want help from the Second in training your operatives to defend themselves with swords more effectively...”

“Your offer is appreciated, Midori-sama,” Retsu bowed her head in acknowledgement of her junior’s words. “As you say, when things are less fraught, Eriko and I will give it serious consideration.”

“If Edogawa and her companions were sent to route out Hollows, Madeki-dono dispatching the people he did to the southern area makes good strategic sense,” Kyouki reflected. “Like Retsu-dono says, nobody can account for a Plus soul losing her wits and launching a random, brutal attack like that out of the blue.”

“On the contrary, Kyouki-sama, we don’t believe it was random at all,” Kai said blackly. “More to the point, Madeki-dono was quite adamant that the attacker wasn’t mad, nor was she a soul in the processes of turning Hollow. She had an agenda and she fulfilled it. What that agenda was and how to explain it, that we don’t yet know. However, I — and my people — are treating this whole thing as premeditated murder, not insanity-driven manslaughter. More, if we have to question every settlement in the Spiritless Zone, we will find out who was behind the attack and we will stop it from happening again. I already have more officers assembled to enter the Spiritless

Zone when the time-seal on the *Senkaimon* can be released to admit them entrance.”

“The Spiritless Zone project is in shambles,” Midori reflected. “Even when we get to the bottom of this, it will take a long time and much money to get things back on track.”

“That could be seen as a motive,” Shunsui pointed out, and Minachi Atsushi, silent up till that point snorted, shaking his head in derision.

“You think that a Plus soul has the ability to comprehend where he or she is, let alone the political acumen to understand what the Spiritless Zone project is about?” he demanded, derision lacing his tones. “It’s one thing, accepting that some of the ragged folk in the Districts have fleeting grasps on literacy and policy, but for someone in Rukongai? Impossible. There are no ties between the ingrates there and the ones here. There is no way an urchin from that side of the Sekkiseki wall could begin to comprehend the complexities of Gotei law.”

“I think that assuming such a thing is impossible is a dangerous thing to do, Atsushi-dono,” Shunsui said casually. “They have a connection to us through the people of Fourth Division, and so it’s not possible to say they know nothing about the Gotei. It might be unlikely — but not impossible.”

“Those things are speculation,” the head of the Yamamoto interjected firmly, shooting Atsushi a glance to ensure his kinsman didn’t make any further inroads into the subject. Atsushi curled his lip in obvious displeasure, but he did not speak out against his family’s leader, and it was Hirata who finally broke the silence, his expression grave.

“Speaking of connections, is nobody going to raise before the Captains the matter of the missing shinigami?” he asked quietly.

“Missing...” Hakubei blinked at him, confused, and Hirata nodded his head.

“Two in Eleventh,” he agreed levelly, ignoring the black glare Atsushi sent his way. ‘One from Ninth,’ here Anabomi Seizuku reddened, avoiding Guren’s gaze studiously, “and one of mine, taken here within the confines of Inner Seireitei. Kotetsu Tenichi has been missing several days now. We have received demands that we cannot meet from individuals we cannot identify. It might be coincidence — but it seems odd that an attack be launched on the Spiritless Zone at the same time as members of the Gotei are being kidnapped and held to ransom.”

“You think there’s an organised, underground group at work here, don’t you?” Kyouki eyed him sharply, and Hirata shrugged his shoulders.

“It’s a possibility that needs looking into,” he agreed.

“You said your man was taken in Inner Seireitei, though,” Hakubei pointed out. “The Fourth were attacked in Rukongai. Not just that, but secure Rukongai. We can’t get through the Sekkiseki divide without the highest possible level of security clearance, and I mean that literally — that wall is a very effective spiritual repellant. Your own District supplied the stone, so you should know that, Hirata-dono.”

“True, but the timing...” Hirata rubbed his brow. “I don’t like it. It feels wrong.”

“If I may ask, Endou-dono, what demands were made of you that your Division cannot meet?” Seizuku found his voice, still avoiding Guren’s gaze and fixing Hirata with his attention instead. “The Ninth and Eleventh were asked for rudimentary supplies, food and such like. Surely Seventh could easily supply the same?”

“Seventh Division do not ignore the District people we uproot,” Hirata’s voice was soft, but there was a glint of the hawk in his eyes, and despite himself, Seizuku took a half step back. “The demands made on us related to secure information that, if released, would put the lives of trusted individuals in grave danger.”

“In short, they wanted Endou Clan secrets in return for this Kotetsu boy?” Kyouki clicked her tongue disapprovingly against the roof of her mouth. “Sly and underhand — no Captain Clan leader could possibly disclose something that would put his or her kin in peril, no matter what the risk.”

“I want to retrieve Tenichi unharmed, but so far searches have proven fruitless,” Hirata continued. “We will continue, but my concern is that the people responsible are getting bolder. Whether the attack on the Fourth is or isn’t connected, it shouldn’t be allowed to eclipse every other matter of concern. What if the next person targeted is someone’s Third seat or Vice Captain? If these people have access to Inner Seireitei, it suggests an internal leak... and if there’s an internal leak, who’s to say that the attacks on Rukongai are separate?”

“Careful, Hirata-dono,” Nagesu cautioned, holding up his hand in warning. “You’re making sweeping remarks that sound close to accusations. Unless you have evidence to suggest someone within Seireitei is involved in these abductions...”

“I am working on that,” Hirata said simply. “I am not making any accusations, Nagesu-dono. I have no leads as to who such a leak might be, or what connection or benefit they might have in any of this. All I know is that one of my division members was abducted between Thirteenth and Seventh one evening, and nobody saw anything. I was away at my Clan holding at the time, but Tenichi’s ransom note only arrived as I returned to my barracks. It seems as though someone knows or anticipates our movements. Although I have no suspects in mind, the logical conclusion is the involvement of someone within Seireitei.”

“When he puts it like that, Hirata-dono has a point,” Hakubei scratched his head. “It does sound like that.”

“Until we have proof, we’ve no benefit in chasing down that alley,” Guren shook his head. “It’s enough that the matter has been raised and noted as a concern. We will all be much more on the alert with our members, of course, and in looking for dissent within Outer Seireitei. At present, though, the pressing concern is resolving the murders in the Spiritless Zone. Eight officers lost their lives and one is still fighting to keep hers. Whilst I am not dismissing the value of the Kotetsu boy’s life, we have no idea where he is, nor do we have any evidence he’s been hurt. Our resources are strained — and for the sake of this world’s balance, we must resolve and repair the Spiritless Zone project as soon as possible.”

“Agreed,” Nagesu inclined his head. “Mareiko, I’m going over Madeki-dono’s report on soul contamination with a fine tooth comb as we speak. If you can spare time to come to my barracks, I would like your second opinion on the data, as time is of the essence.”

“I can manage that,” Sekime Mareiko nodded her head, wild blond hair flapping around her face. “I’m curious to see it myself. I didn’t think Hollows could get in, so if they did... I want to know why, too.”

“The Onmitsukidou will continue to investigate as long as is necessary,” Kai said softly.

“Thirteenth Division also volunteers its services, on both counts,” Juushirou added. “Firstly, Edogawa-san is in our care, and therefore we are involved. Secondly, my Third seat is kin to some of the hurt and deceased, and she is very keen to be actively involved in finding them justice. Finally, if there is unrest in the Districts, I believe members of my squad to be best placed to understand and mediate with them. It’s possible we might have better luck in locating Tenichi, and I feel some responsibility for the boy’s safety, being that he was one of my recruits.”

“Sora and I also intend to volunteer Eighth to whatever investigations pan out,” Shunsui nodded his head. “I have a few District souls myself, and I’ve sent Shizuka and a couple of recruits out into Outer Seireitei this morning to see if they can pick up any negative vibes. I can’t do much in Rukongai without explicit clearance, but we’ll do what we can to assist.”

“Those are our priorities, then,” Midori rubbed her chin. “Find the Rukongai killer and the Seireitei kidnappers, and teach both where they stand. Then we can look into how to rebuild the Spiritless Zone — and get Rukongai back on track.”

“I have a strong feeling it won’t be so easy as that sounded, Midori-sama,” Shunsui reflected ruefully, “but yes, that’s what we’ll do. When Mitsuki-chan is able to speak, maybe we’ll learn more — but for now, I suppose we’ll just have to return to barracks, read Kai’s report and try to pull together the threads before it becomes a far worse situation.”

When Tenichi opened his eyes, it was to find himself in yet another unfamiliar chamber. All around him was a smothering grey darkness, the imposing oppressiveness of stone walls that, as his eyes became accustomed to the dim light, he realised had been cut out of rock, rather than put together from finely chiselled slabs. A strange smell, a mixture of dust, human presence and something familiar he could not quite put his finger on pervaded his nostrils, not strong enough to overpower him, but present enough that it tickled at his nose, making him sniff. Somehow he prevented himself from sneezing, pulling himself unsteadily up into a sitting position. His fingers brushed against the hard marble of the slab on which he had lain, and he glanced down at it, a faint shudder running through his body as he realised how much like a funerary bier it appeared.

Funerary herbs. Embalming herbs. That was what he smelt in this chamber. The delicate scent of death — and, with a jolt, he realised he recognised which herbs, for, when his mother had passed away, Kirio had helped to gather them, preserving Irie’s worn body so that she had appeared to be simply sleeping as they had lowered her beneath the earth. Tenichi remembered this particularly, because he knew that his father had been so dead set against any form of cremation and, in the village in Seventh, had often used similar herbs to preserve the loved ones of his neighbours when they had passed out of this world. When Irie had died, he had struggled in vain to remember what particular blend of leaves Daisuke had so often selected, but Kirio had known, and it was that same perfume, the one that reminded him of

his long dead father, that lingered in the darkness around him.

Someone had prepared bodies for death here, maybe not recently, but recent enough that the scent had not completely faded away. Someone had used the same herbs as Daisuke and Kirio to send a soul's corpse to the next world, and for the first time, Tenichi found himself put on edge by this, uncertain whether he had been brought here to be dispatched in some ritually sacrificial way.

Pushing this thought out of his mind, he got to his feet, looking for some greater clue as to his surroundings, but the room did not contain any furniture other than the bier. On the floor beside it was a metal tray, containing a plate of roughly pushed together *onigiri* and a mug of what looked like tea, although when he picked up the vessel cautiously, it felt cold. Sniffing it, he decided it was indeed tea — and had been sitting here for some time, waiting for him to wake.

How had he got here?

He had been with Keitarou, in the forest, at Daisuke's grave, and then...

Frustrated, he shook his head.

I'm making a habit of this. I swear, when I get back to Seireitei — if I get back to Seireitei — I'm going to ask the Taichou if I can study with the Onmitsukidou a while and improve my ability to react in unforeseen circumstances. Obviously I'm a sitting duck — and someone keeps shooting arrows at me.

He set the mug of cold tea back down untouched and rubbed his wrists, realising that the cuffs still remained, the edges started to dig a reddish line against his pale skin. Struck by a sudden thought, his right hand flew to his waist, but the sword was no longer in its sheath and, as he glanced around him in panic, looking for it, he registered the fact that this time, unlike the last, it had been taken away. The scent of herbs taunted at his senses, and he gritted his teeth as an unwelcome swell of panic encircled his heart.

Did that mean he really had fallen into more hostile hands this time around?

Tenichi swallowed the lump in his throat, mentally adding Hakuda training to the stealth lessons. He was a strong fighter, but prone to relying on his sword more than his fists, and whatever had overpowered him had managed to bring him here with little or no trouble. Unlike in Keitarou's village, there was no way of seeing his outside surroundings, for the room had no windows and everywhere

he looked the walls were carved with eerie, unsettling symbols, slashed and cut over and over again into the rock as though engraved there by desperate hands. If he squinted at them sideways, one or two of them looked like crude renditions of what might have once been a family crest, but they were in the minority, and he found the odd, angular gashes somehow unsettling.

I'm not eating or drinking anything until I know where I am and who I'm dealing with. For all I know they could be laced with poison.

A sound from the door made him turn, seeing the heavy divide slide slowly back just enough to admit a slim, black-robed figure. From her physique, Tenichi was certain that this was a girl, though her features were covered from the nose to the chin by an additional length of black cloth, and only two eyes, penetrating and curious peered out for him over the hem of the fabric mask. Her head was covered, but stray wisps of hair peeked out around the folds, and two or three beaded strands fell casually across her shoulders. Her hair was silver, and, Tenichi realised with a jolt, so were her eyes, a strange, ethereal colour that made him feel giddy if he tried to meet her gaze. Despite the gilted shade of her hair, there was nothing in the girl's eyes or her posture that suggested excessive age, nor particular physical strength. She did not appear to be armed, and Tenichi was just gauging whether he thought he could overpower her and make a run for it when a shadow behind her told him she had not come to visit him alone. The man was a different prospect, lean but taller and Tenichi had seen those like him among his Gotei companions, not built up with muscle but capable of physical skirmish if the need arose. He too wore a mask over the lower part of his face, his head covered by a hood, but the blue of his eyes also glinted with a metallic, silverish sheen and Tenichi thought he could make out stray wisps of matching silver hair brushing lightly against the pale curve of his brow.

Kinsfolk, then.

"Who are you?"

The question was cliché and pathetic, but Tenichi asked it anyway. "Why am I here — and where is here? Why did you bring me here — what do you want?"

"That's a lot of questions, Tenichi-dono," the pair exchanged looks, but it was the man who spoke, the woman drawing back against the carved wall of the chamber as though her duty was to watch and witness rather than participate in whatever was about to take place next. "Unfortunately, they're not questions we can answer."

“You know my name,” Tenichi flinched, staring at the man in consternation. “Why would you know that?”

“News travels,” again it was the man who spoke, shrugging his shoulders as if the matter wasn’t all that important to him. “What’s more important is what *you’re* doing here, not what *we* are.”

“I thought I just asked you that,” Tenichi snapped back, and the man laughed, his voice muffled behind the cloth.

“I meant, what you’re doing in such a remote part of District Seven,” he said softly, moving closer until he stood less than a metre from his companion. They were about the same height, Tenichi realised, or maybe the stranger was a bit taller, but with the young woman there as well, he could not be sure that, if he launched an attack, it would be one he could win. He rubbed at the bracelets absently. Such a nuisance, at a time like this!

“You should be glad of those,” the man caught his movement, and although Tenichi could not see his lips, he felt as though his companion had smiled. “The bracelets, I mean. Because of them, your spirit power is sealed. Loose spirit power isn’t very helpful in a place like this.”

The woman turned her head, shooting her companion a meaningful glance, and the man sighed.

“All right. I know,” he agreed, leaning up against the bier and folding his arms across his chest. “I can’t answer your questions, but I will tell you the reason for mine. I and my companions are agents of the Endou Clan. We serve your Captain, Endou Hirata-sama. We are, therefore, very interested in your activities in the last few days.”

“Prove it,” Tenichi glared back. “You can say anything you like when I can’t even see your faces and I don’t know what kind of place I’m being held in. If you’re really the Taichou’s people, prove it.”

The young man glanced at his companion, who sighed, but slid pale, perfectly formed fingers into the folds of her cloak, producing a small metallic object which she held out. The man took it, rubbing it briefly to remove any stray specks of dust, then set it down on the bier, indicating for Tenichi to look at it. At first the shinigami was convinced it was some kind of a trap, but, after a moment he acquiesced, inching towards it cautiously and running his gaze over the small, rounded item.

His eyes widened in surprise.

“But that is...”

“The emblem of the Endou hunting bird, the insignia of the line that rules in District Seven,” the man agreed calmly, retrieving the trinket before Tenichi could scoop it up in his own hands. “It was given to us by the Lord Misashi when he first took charge of this region, and now we serve Hirata-sama as loyally as all who live here do — or should. That brings me back to my original question. You have been missing from your barracks for several days. Why, of all places, did you materialise here?”

“I can’t answer that. I don’t know,” Tenichi closed up, shaking his head impatiently. “Just like I don’t know how I came to be here.”

The girl’s fingers twitched and fluttered suddenly, and the man’s eyes narrowed.

“You came to see your Father’s grave,” he murmured pensively. “When my people discovered you were here, you were in the vicinity of Kotetsu Daisuke’s burial place. You were unfettered, except for your spirit bracelets, and you were certainly not unconscious. You arrived in our jurisdiction with your wits fully about you, and you did not come alone. I shall ask the question again, Tenichi-dono. How did you come to be in this remote part of District Seven?”

Tenichi stared at him blankly, his heart racing in his chest. Had one of these people seen Keitarou? Despite his uncertainty over the exile’s methods and politics, he had seen kindness in his time in Rukongai and he knew that, no matter what, he could not speak to anyone of what had passed between them during his few days absence. It wasn’t just about Keitarou himself, but the well-being of those the scientist protected, and Tenichi’s own refugee memories were still real enough for him not to want to bring fire and brimstone down on innocent, impoverished souls.

“I don’t know what you mean,” he said at length. “The first thing I remember was waking up surrounded by trees. That must have been here, but I couldn’t tell you exactly where. I stumbled around for a bit, and then... nothing. Now I’m here. You said I’d been missing for a few days? I don’t remember anything since I was at Thirteenth with Kirio, looking for my brother.”

“Kirio?” Suddenly the expression in the man’s eyes changed, and Tenichi saw him exchange another glance with his young companion. She shrugged, clearly answering an unspoken question, and Tenichi bit his lip. He had not meant to let his friend’s name slip into the conversation, but it was too late now.

“Are you talking to each other telepathically?” he demanded. “It’s

not fair, I can't follow what you're saying if you do that."

"We're not. We don't read minds," the man seemed amused, shaking his head. "You should be glad of that, I think, since I suspect you know more about where you've been than you're telling us."

"I don't even know for sure you work for my Captain," Tenichi snapped back. "You might have stolen that *monshou*, and nothing you've told me so far proves you're in his confidence. I was born in District Seven, too, so that doesn't make you special in any way. I have no reason whatsoever to trust you — even if I did remember, which, for your information, I don't."

"I see," the man let out a heavy sigh. "That will be your answer no matter what we ask, won't it?"

"It will," Tenichi said succinctly, "since I have no other answer to give."

"Very well," the young man moved away from the bier, crossing the floor towards the carved wall and running his long, elegant fingers through the cracks and jagged symbols. "Tell me, Tenichi-dono, do you read or recognise any of these signs?"

"Why should I?" Tenichi frowned, surprised and wary at the sudden change of tack. "They aren't Japanese."

"No, no they're not," the man's fingers slipped away from the stone and he turned back to face his prisoner. "They're ancient symbols — supposedly protective spells against outside invasion. Of course, it wasn't the symbols that protected the ancient people who lived here, but the very nature of the place itself. This is a haven and a hell, my friend — if you think that anyone from outside will come and find you here, you will be disappointed. I do work for your Captain, as it happens, but I have not yet informed him that you're in my custody. I can delay that a while longer, to give you time to think about what you've said. I'm sure you'd rather face my interrogation than that of the Wind Hawk... ah," as Tenichi's eyes widened in dismay, "so you have encountered Hirata-sama's sword in the past?"

"I've never seen it released, but I've heard plenty enough to know I don't want to," Tenichi said blackly.

"Wise sentiments," the young man agreed. "It is not a soul you wish to cross, and nor is Endou Hirata."

"Are you threatening me?"

"Of course I am," the man replied simply. 'I want to know what you

know, and I want to find it out via the quickest method. I'm not given to torture, so you needn't worry about losing limbs or breaking bones whilst under my care. I also don't stoop to poisoning precious supplies of food, so,' he nudged a foot towards the abandoned tray, "I suggest you eat what you're given, unless you want to starve. Your life is in no danger from me or any of my companions — you belong to Hirata-sama, therefore we would not harm you. However, if you were to lie to us, that might be considered lying to him. If you lie to him, that constitutes betrayal. As Hirata-sama's loyal subjects... we can't possibly accept that."

"Then tell me who you are. Show me your faces," Tenichi entreated. "I can't trust people who appear before me like shadows and tell me nothing at all."

"If we did, lives may be lost," the man touched his fingers regretfully to the black cloth. "I'm sorry. Until I know the reasons for your being here, I can't let you see my face or know any more about me."

Tenichi was silent for a moment, considering.

"I came here as I said I did," he said finally. "I was left here. Abandoned, if you like, by those who took me. They left me cuffed, so I could not read their spiritual signatures and track them through the forest."

"You remember nothing of your time in captivity?"

"Nothing," Tenichi gathered his courage, meeting the questioning pale gaze with resolute eyes. "Perhaps, if I think very hard, I remember brief sounds or smells but nothing familiar and I saw no faces. I remember no names. Something grabbed me in the darkness as I walked back from Thirteenth to my own barracks, but I did not see that person's face. They used some kind of magic, and I passed out. The next coherent thoughts I have were here, among the trees. I am from District Seven, it's true, but not from this part. The forest is very overgrown, and I wandered aimlessly through it."

There was a faint snort from the girl, and Tenichi stared at her, watching her fingers dance and twitch in what he suddenly realised was language.

"My companion thinks it an amazing coincidence that you happened to stumble right up to your father's grave," the man pressed his lips together, turning his gaze back on his captive thoughtfully. "It's well hidden, and few know of it. If you had no idea where you were, I wonder that you found it so easily. She thinks you had help —

someone to guide you, someone who concealed themselves with spells, but who was with you nonetheless.”

“With... me?”

“One more time, Tenichi-dono. Why were you in our stretch of District Seven?”

Tenichi groaned, burying his head in his hands, his fingers tugging agitatedly against his reddish gold locks.

“I was told it was here,” he said reluctantly. “Before I was kidnapped, I did research on my father’s burial place. I came to Seventh Division in the hope of finding it and paying my final respects. In Seireitei... in Seireitei is a person, a former classmate of mine, who was present when my father was buried. She told me where to find him.”

“Her name?”

“Ukitake Shikiki.”

Inwardly Tenichi thanked his lucky stars for Keitarou’s testimony, hoping against hope that the scientist had told the truth and that this part of his story, at least, would pan out.

“I see. Go on,” the man nodded at his companion, who made a note of this information on a sheet of parchment that had suddenly appeared from within the folds of the voluminous cloak, then turned his attention back to his original subject. “This girl told you where your father was, and when you found yourself here..?”

“I had studied maps enough to realise where I was. I knew the forest more than I should have, but if you’re working for Endou-taichou, he might discipline me if he knew I’d been digging into things in his District and his family’s past without permission,” it was amazing how suddenly the lies began to flow, meshing together and flying easily off the end of his tongue into a believable, plausible explanation. “I don’t want to face Tsumi no Fuuhi, so I lied and pretended I didn’t know where this place was. I did know. I always knew. Father was killed by Shouichi-sama, though, and because of that I thought Taichou would be cross. My father was considered a traitor, so... because of that...”

“Hrm,” the young man deliberated this for a while, apparently turning it over in his mind as he looked for flaws or loopholes. “And you saw nothing of those who kidnapped you?”

He gestured to the young woman, whose parchment had once more

disappeared.

“My companion felt certain she detected kidou when they found you, but with those cuffs, it couldn’t have been you that fired it,” he added. “They were there, watching us — watching you. You weren’t aware of this?”

“No,” Tenichi’s surprise was genuine this time. “I thought I was alone. With the cuffs on, well, anything like *kyokkou*, I wouldn’t be able to trace, would I?”

“True,” the young man acknowledged. “All right. Parts of your story do ring true with what I know about Daisuke-sama’s death and burial. The name Ukitake Shikiki is known to me. Perhaps you have told us the truth.”

“Daisuke... sama?” Tenichi blinked, and there was the muffled sound of laughter behind the black mask.

“Men of noble birth deserve titles befitting their rank, do they not?” came the cryptic response. “Daisuke-sama was an Urahara. Buried in common earth he may be, married he perhaps was to a local girl and his children considered District refugees... but he was born an Urahara. Not all forget that fact... respect for the dead is a valuable trait to have.”

“Respect for the...”

“We do not judge those who have passed before us,” the man cut across him, holding up his hands as if to indicate the conversation was over. “The dead have no voice, so we cannot hear their stories. I do not believe Kotetsu Daisuke-sama was a cruel man, therefore I see nothing wrong with respecting him or his right to sleep in our forest.”

“Does Endou-taichou know you feel that way?” Tenichi asked acerbically, and the young man shrugged.

“Probably not, but that’s all right,” he said pragmatically. “Some things are just a matter of logic and reason and require no explanation. Just like your quest for Daisuke-sama’s grave. Finding it is your right. All sons should know where their fathers lie, and be able to pay respects to those fathers. In that regard, at least, we operate on the same wavelength, Tenichi-dono.”

“Then will you tell me who you are, now you’re satisfied with who I am?” Tenichi demanded.

“Servants of your Captain. For your own well being, more information is not wise,” the man responded simply. “Your time here

will be of short duration, in any case. I will go directly and send word to Seventh Division that their missing member has been found. This room isn't the nicest of places to be, but I advise you get some rest. You are probably still tired from your ordeal — and as I understand it, the Gotei is a frenetic place of late."

He turned to go, but Tenichi lunged forward, grabbing him by the sleeve of his robe.

"Wait, what did you mean by that?" he demanded, confusion in his eyes. "The Gotei has been frenetic — why?"

"Ah, so you haven't heard?" the man pondered. "Some shinigami were attacked in Rukongai not so very long ago. Some killed, I believe."

"Killed?" Tenichi's face drained of colour, and at his expression, the man's eyes softened.

"You really didn't know, did you?" he asked gently, and Tenichi shook his head.

"How could I?" he asked, throat suddenly dry and his thoughts racing to the conversation he had had with Keitarou only a couple of days before.

"It's likely nothing — shinigami have those things all the time and most likely it's just a drill or a Hollow incursion — but they seem to take stuff very seriously."

Keitarou-san's never been to the Spiritless Zone, and he said himself that he wouldn't get all the details, even through this Kurotsuchi of his. He thought it was nothing — but it wasn't nothing. It was something very serious — no wonder the Taichou was too distracted to worry about me. In a crisis situation like that... and... oh God...

As another, more horrific idea occurred to him,

What if it wasn't the Spiritless Zone at all? Maybe Keitarou-san wasn't involved in it, but that girl... that Sakaki girl with the killer's instinct in her eyes. What was it she said about killing shinigami? What if it wasn't a Hollow? What if it was her?

His thoughts trailed off, and he shivered involuntarily, suddenly cold as his brain absorbed fully the implications of his train of thought. Maybe it had nothing to do with Keitarou's casual words or Sakaki's silver blade — but the twisting unease in his gut told him it almost certainly was.

"Where in Rukongai?" he managed at length. "What happened?"

Who..."

"I don't know the details. I'm not privy to that level of data," the man replied, gently shaking Tenichi's grip free. "It was in the area that the shinigami have shut off from everywhere else. I heard a Hollow had been involved... but I don't really know for sure."

"The Spiritless Zone... wait, a Hollow?" A mixture of emotions swirled through Tenichi's heart — apprehension, fear, then relief which he fought to conceal in his expression.

If it was a Hollow, then it wasn't that girl. If it was the Spiritless Zone, then it wasn't near Keitarou-san's terrain. Maybe Keitarou-san was wrong to dismiss the distress call as something minor, but at least I can rest assured he wasn't involved. Not that he should be, considering how much of a risk it would be to kill that many shinigami and still stay hidden. I'm letting my prejudices dog my common sense again where he's concerned. He's protecting those villagers and if he drew attention to them, it would all be over for everyone. No, this is something else. Those villagers are safe... at least for now, and I shouldn't be so automatically suspicious. Even if there is a mad-woman among Keitarou-san's coterie, it didn't sound like she was allowed to go killing people at will, and she certainly wouldn't have managed to get into the Spiritless Zone from the wasteland Rukon. Keitarou-san might be able to do it, but he was with me... not in the Spiritless Zone. He has spirit power, like me... and they'd detect him in a place like that as easily as if he were standing right in front of them.

He grimaced at the swiftness with which he had doubted his own convictions about Keitarou's motives.

I thought I'd decided to trust in him a little... so I will.

"So I understand," his companion agreed now, bringing Tenichi back into the main conversation. "All right. I suppose we're done here, now."

He cast his companion a look, and the young woman nodded, moving forward to take Tenichi gently around the wrists. Tenichi opened his mouth to ask further questions but, as his gaze met hers, the words became heavy and fragmented, sticking in his throat. He tried to pull his thoughts together, but he was suddenly tired, too tired to even remember what he had been talking about in the first place. If he could just sleep, just for a while... surely...

He was vaguely aware of someone catching him as his body fell towards the ground, lifting him and lowering him down on something hard and flat.

"I'll send a message to Souja-dono," he heard, the words so faint

and distant it was as though they were from another world. "I'll leave him to you, Izumi."

Izumi.

The name nestled for a moment in some part of his subconscious, before it too was overwhelmed with the urge to sleep. He tried belatedly to fight it, struggling to hold on to this one clue at least, but it was to no avail, and the darkness consumed him once more, sending him into the world of dreams.

"That wasn't the nicest of meetings to sit through, was it?"

Shunsui settled himself down on the roof of the Eighth Division barracks, leaning back on his hands and gazing up at the blue wisps of cloud that dotted the heavens overhead. "I don't think I saw so many grim faces, nor such a well attended Captain's gathering. You didn't even get to raise your concerns about the Hollows, Juu — I'm sorry."

"I know," Juushirou leaned against the railings, his own expression troubled. "In light of this, the behaviour of a few Hollows seems secondary. I'm happy that Mitsuki's back in Seireitei, you know, but I feel guilty for being even a little bit relieved she's all right. I went to Fourth Division this morning to ask for the latest news on Aomori Seri — so I could tell Mitsuki when I saw her this afternoon — and the mood there is unlike I've ever known it before. Madeki-dono is up and about, but white as a sheet and even if he's physically fit, I'm not sure he's mentally well enough to be resuming his duties. Eriko-dono looked like she hadn't slept in a week — which she probably hasn't, given that she's been given the chief task of overseeing the autopsies — and when Shikiki took me to see Aomori — just through glass, you understand, I wasn't allowed in her room — I never saw anything so tragically pathetic. If she lives — and it's not for sure yet — it will be a long convalescence. She may never take active service again... and she's supposedly one of the lucky ones. In light of that... how can anyone think about Hollows?"

"I know what you mean," Shunsui agreed, shielding his eyes from the sun and turning his head to look at his friend. "I am surprised, though, to find you here exchanging gloom and doom with me rather than hovering around your belle's sickroom. You needn't feel guilty that she lived and they didn't... but more to the point, she probably feels it and would no doubt benefit from your support telling her she shouldn't."

"Naoko's spending the morning with her," Juushirou said simply.

“I’m not the only one with claims on her time, and what happened over there has hurt Naoko too. Aomori is a kinswoman of hers, and I thought it might be better to give her a morning off active duties and let her take charge of Mitsuki’s needs for a while. I’m going there this afternoon — but for now, there are other things I need to look at.”

“That’s annoyingly mature of you,” Shunsui observed. “Are you trying to convince me you’re not thinking about her when you should be thinking about your duties? If so, it won’t work with me. I know you too well, and that lovesick, worried look in your eye isn’t all about the Fourth’s tragedy.”

“Is it that obvious?” Juushirou groaned, dropping down onto the roof top with a thump and eying his friend plaintively. “I haven’t seen her in years. When we parted, I wasn’t sure how I’d cope a day without her — but I have coped. Now, she’s here, and I... I want to protect her all over again. I know I can’t — I have other people to protect now, just like you do. I don’t want to smother her... but I don’t really know what I should do instead.”

“You could ask her,” Shunsui suggested. “That’s usually the quickest way to find something out.”

“I should’ve known you’d say that,” Juushirou massaged his brow wearily. “You’re supposed to be helping me, not telling me what I already know.”

“If you know, do something about it and let me sleep,” Shunsui closed his eyes, turning his head so that the sun’s warming rays brushed over his skin. “I come up with my best divisional policies when I’m drowsing, and I have to work out what orders to give Sora when she comes screaming for me. She’s been distracted by Mitsuki’s return, but she’ll realise soon enough that I’ve left a hefty pile of admission applications on her desk and I know she’s not going to be amused when she finds them.”

“You shouldn’t put so much work on her,” Juushirou smiled despite himself, and Shunsui shrugged, opening one eye lazily.

“I don’t,” he said pragmatically. “Some of it I give to Kaoru-chan to handle.”

“Shunsui!”

“I thought you were the one who insisted that when in uniform we should be professional and call each other strictly by family names,” Shunsui remarked benignly. “Is forgetfulness a symptom of lovesick mooning, or did you forget about that already?”

“In public, I do and I will,” Juushirou was unmoved. “We’re not in public, though, we’re on top of your roof — which, incidentally, is strange enough considering you have a perfectly good private chamber beneath us, not to mention a fully fitted office. Why are we up here again? Are you hiding from your Vice Captain?”

“Nah. Sora will come here if I’m not in the other two places, so it’s hardly well hidden,” Shunsui shook his head, closing his eye once more. “I just like to sun myself. And, whether you believe it or not, I do my best thinking up here. Sleeping really does help my brain function — that and sake, but with the current mood around Seireitei and after the sobriety of that meeting, I’m abstaining today as a gesture of mourning.”

“You didn’t even wear Riri’s robe this morning,” Juushirou reached across to brush his fingers across the fabric of Shunsui’s stark white *haori*. “You hardly ever do that.”

“A little jolly for the occasion, so it’s in my room,” Shunsui responded languidly. “I might wear it to tease and provoke some of my less fond colleagues, but mock the Fourth? Not a chance. Aside from not wanting to be slain alive by Dai-senpai...”

“I don’t think you can be slain dead, Shunsui.” Juushirou interjected facetiously, and Shunsui’s lips twitched into a smile.

“There it is again,” he murmured, “Shunsui. You’re going to have to be careful — you might find yourself doing it in front of your juniors.”

“A lot has changed, hasn’t it, since graduation?” Juushirou’s tones became pensive, and Shunsui nodded slightly.

“A lot has, and a lot hasn’t,” he agreed. “You’re thinking about Mitsuki again, I trust?”

“Mm,” Juushirou folded his hands absently in his lap. “A lot’s been going on here lately. The Hollows. Tenichi’s disappearance. Now this. I’ve wanted Mitsuki back for so long, now she’s here, and...”

“Ukitake Juushirou, if you dare go along the lines of blaming yourself for this tragedy on account of the fact you wanted Mitsuki home, I will slice your head open with Katen Kyoukotsu and pour some common sense directly into your brain cavity,” this got Shunsui’s attention, for his eyes snapped open once more and he grimaced, pulling himself into a more upright position. “There’s absolutely no connection. If you want the truth, I wanted her to come back with the last bunch of Fourthers, too... but you don’t see me blaming myself for them getting hurt.”

“I think you’re confusing common sense with Clan sake,” Juushirou returned neatly, “and I wasn’t going to say that. Give me some credit for growing up. I’m just not sure how to approach her right now. I want to be there for her, but only if she wants me to be. I realised the moment I saw her that it hasn’t gone away. I’ve squashed it down and got on with things, but as soon as I saw her it all came flooding back. I’m in love with her and I’m worried that will cloud my judgement as a Captain. No, I’m worried that it already has. My actions the night the news came through were irresponsible. If Naoko and Enishi hadn’t been on hand...”

“You had a lovesick tizzy and staggered off in a fever, it happens,” Shunsui said dismissively. “True, it happens more to you than to most folk, but you usually pull yourself together in the end.”

“But as a Captain...”

“As a Captain, you helped subdue the rampant bigotry of the Endou and turned some of them into quite nice people,” Shunsui cut across him. “As a Captain, you’ve managed just fine since Mitsuki went away, and your division all worship the ground you walk on. That doesn’t mean you can’t have personal feelings, too. All right, I grant that your immediate reaction was impulsive, but you were sick and it was a shock. That’s why you have subordinates — to delegate. And, if you’re concerned Mitsuki is going to compromise your leadership, you need to hash it out with her and find out where you stand. That way you’ll know... and you can both get on with things with the air clear.”

He arched a suspicious eyebrow.

“You’re worried, of course, that talking to her will elicit a response you don’t know how to deal with,” he added acidly. ‘In this respect, it seems, you haven’t changed much at all. It’s almost word for word the same conversation we used to have over and over again at the Academy. At the risk of turning the line into a cliché by the amount of times I repeat it, talk to her. I can’t read her mind. You can’t read her mind. The only person who knows how Mitsuki-chan feels right now is Mitsuki-chan. And, if I may say so, foisting the problem off on Naoko is cowardly. I realise Nao-chan has a claim on her too,’ as Juushirou opened his mouth to protest, “but the real reason is you’re afraid to be alone with your *himein* case you find out Rukongai’s changed her.”

“It just isn’t the right time for that conversation,” Juushirou retorted. “She’s lost her friends in the most grisly circumstances possible, and you think I should go and ask her if she still loves me? I don’t think so. I have some tact. Yes, it’s bothering me, but I’m not

holding off on it because I'm afraid to ask. I'm holding off because she's hurting and I don't want to make her hurt more. I'm trying to think of her... and using you to vent."

"What about thinking of me sometimes?" Shunsui asked plaintively. "You've completely ruined my late morning nap, and I can sense Sora's reiatsu heading back towards the barracks. I won't get a wink of sleep now — why is it your consideration extends to Mitsuki's rest and not mine?"

"You sleep more than enough for two Captains," Juushirou sent him a wry smile. "Don't look like that. I've known you too long to be fooled, and Sora won't buy it, either."

He sighed, slipping his fingers into the sleeves of his *haori* and folding his arms tight to his chest in contemplation.

"This Rukongai business bothers me," he added after a moment, and Shunsui cast him a curious look.

"In what way?" he asked. "I assume you mean beyond the fact eight good officers were murdered."

"Yes, beyond that fact," Juushirou agreed. "Kai and his companions haven't found this Plus Soul. I'm wondering if they're looking in the right places."

"Meaning?"

"I don't know, yet," Juushirou admitted, "just, when Kai talked about the blood path disappearing into nothing, it made me think. It reminded me... of something else. Something from the past... but I can't put my finger on what."

"Something from the past," Shunsui frowned. "Our past? I barely remember yesterday, let alone before that."

"You don't remember yesterday because Tokutarou-sama made the mistake of sending you some expensive sake as a gift and you felt the need to sample it," Juushirou reminded him. "That probably explains your resolve to abstain today, too, since I'm fairly certain you probably haven't got all of it out of your system yet... you were very lucky not to be late to the meeting this morning, and if Sekime-taichou hadn't tripped over her sandals and knocked over a bunch of Kai's files, you probably would've been scolded. Besides, yes, I mean our past. Something... like this... but not like it."

"Oh, because that narrows it down," Shunsui chuckled. "Look. Whilst you're probably right, a few more details wouldn't hurt. In the

meantime, how about the Tenichi matter? From what Hirata said, nothing new has come up?”

“Not yet, not as far as I know,” Juushirou looked grave. “I spoke to Ketsui, and he took it very calmly, but I’ve never seen anyone go quite so pale just from a conversation before. Tenichi is his brother but it’s more than that — he’s the only kin Ketsui has left, now that Irie-san has died. I want to find him, Shunsui. There are no leads at all, but I want to all the same.”

“Ketsui is lucky. He has an understanding Captain,” Shunsui observed. “Tenichi’s disappeared into thin air, though, or so it seems.”

“Just like the Rukongai assassin?”

“Ooh. Interesting connection,” Shunsui’s eyes glittered suddenly, as his shrewd brain knitted the ideas together. “Do we think there is one, then?”

“Tenichi definitely left our barracks. Kirio is quite sure of it,” Juushirou responded grimly. “Apparently the Eleventh did a late patrol that night, and would’ve been just heading back to base around the same time Kirio thinks Tenichi left us. I got Enishi to check with Ikata about it, and Ikata agrees that six or seven of his men were in the area, but none of them saw anything. Enishi asked each one of them individually but they all said the same. They patrolled, saw nothing, went back to base.”

“Meaning?”

“They didn’t see Tenichi pass by, either, which implies that he disappeared between us and the Eleventh. In short, around about the Twelfth.”

“And you suspect them of being the guilty agents, now?”

“No. I know that I was the one who raised the idea of an inside job, but the more I think on it, the more difficult a theory it seems to bear out in fact,” Juushirou shook his head. “I wish I hadn’t said it around Hirata, since from what he said at the meeting this morning, his thoughts are obviously heading in the opposite direction to mine, but when you look at it, there’s no real indication that anyone here in Seireitei conspired to get Tenichi kidnapped. More, what would the motive be? It would make no sense.”

“Nothing much here makes sense, at least at first glance,” Shunsui reflected. “Did you forget, too? We’ve discussed it before, but the Twelfth are an Urahara squad — and those people of Hirata’s were Urahara, weren’t they?”

“That’s true, but in a way that makes it even less likely to be them involved,” Juushirou shook his head. “It would be too obvious a connection, and besides, we’re talking about a generation of Urahara that are long since dead and buried, aren’t we? Nagesu-dono’s Urahara Clan isn’t big on vengeance, and although Twelfth is a separate squad, he was actively involved in selecting the current Captain and Vice Captain by giving his formal recommendations. Looking at those individuals, well, Michihashi we know from school days, and he’s a reasonable, rational, sane person who wouldn’t get messed up in anything untoward. More, I can’t imagine him letting any of his subordinates do anything to bring his squad or his Clan into disrepute. As for Sekime-taichou...”

“Ah, yes. Mareiko-chan,” Shunsui rolled his eyes. “Apparently Michihashi missed a Vice Captain’s meeting recently because she’d managed to spell-lock herself in her laboratory.”

“Exactly,” Juushirou pulled a face. “Subtle and underhand don’t really roll off the tongue, do they? No, I don’t suspect the Twelfth. However, Tenichi disappearing around there may still be significant. *Because* so many crazy noises and lights and explosions come from that area, I’d guess that most folk wouldn’t bat an eyelid about unusual spiritual behaviour in the vicinity of Twelfth’s barracks. Sekime-taichou is working very hard on these Kidou combinations and spells the Council and Nagesu-dono passed her way, so stuff like that is almost par for the course. Since mostly Twelfth keep to themselves and don’t pay attention to anything beyond their boundaries unless told to... it seems like the perfect place for an abduction, doesn’t it?”

“I could buy into that,” Shunsui agreed. “I’m a mite concerned, though... it sounds like, by eliminating Seireitei’s Urahara, your thoughts are heading back in the direction of another less popular member of that Clan.”

“Keitarou?” Juushirou looked troubled. “It would be easy to blame it all on him, wouldn’t it?”

“Easy in theory, but there’s literally nothing to indicate it’s that way at all,” Shunsui responded with a grimace. “It’s a good theory, and I’d subscribe to it willingly, but its not a presentable one since the Council would expect folk like you and I to start screaming hysterically about Aizen conspiracies the moment something bad happens. We’d need proof, and we really have none to speak of. Worse, if we focused on that angle and were wrong, the real culprits might gain ground. I believe he’s alive and so do you, but there are a fair number on the Council who think Kinnya-sama’s heroics finished

him off twenty odd years ago. We'd have to find evidence he'd survived drinking the *reidoku* and jumping into the *Senkaimon*— and since he apparently destroyed the Gate after him, we've no way of knowing where he ended up. If he did flee to the Real World, like most folk think, finding him would be next to impossible."

"Not only that, but there are so many threads," Juushirou groaned. "I can believe Keitarou to be behind the abductions — maybe all of them, but particularly the last one, since he'd have something to gain by the demands in the ransom note. Killing the shinigami in Rukongai, though, that serves no purpose — his enemies are here, in Seireitei, and, aside from Tenichi, nobody here has been threatened, let alone attacked or killed in cold blood. The Hollows have been behaving oddly, but Naoko has been monitoring them and you heard her say it for herself — there's no sign Chudokuga was at all involved in those events. To all intents and purposes, it looks like a vigilante District group with an unnatural level of spirit power might be behind most of what's going on, and, I don't know, something unrelated and strange has happened in the Spiritless Zone. It's no good to link Keitarou's name to crimes just because I want to see him guilty of them — and I'm worried that that's what I'm doing."

"Let's keep his name to ourselves for now and wait and see," Shunsui suggested. "The only thing for sure where he's concerned is that he will resurface at some point or other, so keeping on the alert and keeping an open mind doesn't hurt. More than that, we can't do, so for now we should put it aside and focus on what we do know. I want to see Keitarou caught as much as you — but till we can link any of this directly to his handiwork, we've no choice but to look at other angles."

"All right. Agreed," Juushirou nodded. "So, going back to Tenichi, if we're ruling out an inside operation by someone in Inner Seireitei... what do we have? Someone lurking in the darkness waiting to grab him unawares?"

"But an abduction that happened between your very alert division and an active Eleventh implies at the very least shunpo," Shunsui pointed out. "Otherwise someone would've seen something and clearly they didn't. The kidnappers must've been able to shunpo out, surely?"

"Mm," Juushirou agreed. "Or..."

"A *Senkaimon*," Shunsui's eyes became near slits. "That was slow of me. Maybe that sake of Nii-sama's had an effect on my brain after all — I should've seen that possibility sooner."

“Well, I didn’t either, not till Kai started talking about the assassin in the greenwood, so to speak,” Juushirou admitted. “I was trying to think how a Plus soul could vanish into thin air, and then it dawned on me how Tenichi must have. There used to be a gate between us and the Twelfth, but it was de-activated when some of the Twelfth’s barracks had to be rebuilt following one of their explosions and never reactivated again afterwards. That must’ve been more than a decade ago now — not long after Sekime-taichou received the *haori*, if I remember rightly — so I’d forgotten completely that it was there. Just because we’re no longer using it, though, I suppose it doesn’t mean others might.”

“Fine for Tenichi’s case, but do you think the assassin in Rukongai also escaped through a *Senkaimon*, when she has no spirit power of her own to call on?” Shunsui questioned. “Surely Kai and company would have picked that up real quickly. Unusual spiritual emissions in that part of Rukongai wouldn’t be easily missed, and there was a blood trail leading right to the spot.”

“No, for that reason, probably not,” Juushirou agreed. “In Inner Seireitei, though, it’s another matter. There are lots of gates here, now, and plenty of folk with spirit power to activate them. It’s not the protected science it once was. I’m willing to bet that Tenichi was snatched via *Senkaimon* and dragged off to some part of Seireitei where nobody would logically consider looking for him. On the current gate map, there’s no gate between us and the Seventh Division, but I had Enishi dig out an old version from our archived files, and I remembered right. It was situated almost right in front of the Twelfth — and that must’ve been the area Tenichi was when he was taken. With it being taken off the map and out of service, it’s easy to overlook. Especially given the state of Twelfth Division’s general habit of atmospheric pollution.”

“Have you told Hirata this?”

“No, but I will,” Juushirou responded. “I’m trying to work out a way to discuss it with him without him getting angry and demanding to raid the whole of Seireitei.”

“If anyone can do that, it’s you,” Shunsui reflected, “but you’re right. He’s taken it extremely personally... especially since that note came.”

“He wants to protect them,” Juushirou said simply, and there was no need to explain who ‘they’ were. “It’s a matter of honour and trust and he takes it seriously. So he should. I agree with him. The demands are unreasonable, but so is the sacrifice of Tenichi’s life.”

“Do you think he’s dead?” Shunsui asked after a moment, and Juushirou sighed, shrugging his shoulders.

“Hard to know when you don’t know your enemy,” he admitted. “I’m hoping not. Praying not. I guess the important thing is finding him, though, so we know either way.”

“Mm,” Shunsui’s insouciant features became grave. “Tell Ketsui I’m doing what I can to find him, too. I’ll hear Shizuka’s report later — maybe she’ll have found some clues. Sending girls is always better than sending guys for that kind of mission.”

“Shuunsui!”

Before Juushirou could respond, an indignant yell rattled through the air, sending a flock of startled birds who had been nesting in a nearby tree squawking into the air.

“Sounds like my Vice Captain’s made it back,” Shunsui reflected, and Juushirou laughed, getting to his feet.

“I suppose she found your gift,” he said, amused. “I’ll leave you to calm the mutiny — I’ve things of my own that need doing and I really do intend on seeing Mitsuki this afternoon, so I must get them done.”

“You’re not going to protect me from her wrath?” Shunsui looked wounded. “Some friend you are.”

“I’m not getting involved in a Divisional domestic,” Juushirou returned neatly. “I’ll see you later — what’s left of you.”

“All right,” Shunsui sighed, but nodded in resignation. “I’ll try and survive till then, somehow. Give Mitsuki my best and tell her I’ll drop by to see her when I can.”

“I will,” Juushirou agreed. “And I’ll think some more about what I said.”

“So will I, if I get the chance,” Shunsui promised. “I think you might be onto something, and it’ll stand deeper investigation.”

“I thought so, too,” Juushirou agreed. ‘And here’s Sora,’ as the door to the roof balcony was flung back, revealing an angry looking Vice Captain, “so I’ll take my leave. I’m sure she’d rather not have witnesses, and I’ve not had my lunch yet. I don’t need my appetite ruined!”

Before Shunsui could respond, he had slipped into shunpo, darting through the streams of light towards his own division. Once there he dropped out of the step, walking slowly and pensively across the

cobbles that led to the Thirteenth Division's main entrance. As he neared it, he paused, turning to glance around him, trying to place where the deactivated *Senkaimon* had once been. Further along was the Twelfth Division barracks, but the newer buildings meant the pathway now bent and twisted out of plain sight, and, with a sudden jolt, he realised that its layout would be to the advantage of any would-be kidnapper who knew Seireitei's geography.

Inner Seireitei was constructed this way after Keitarou was exiled or killed or whatever happened to him when Grandfather inflicted those wounds. He wouldn't know how to find his way around here, so maybe that proves I'm grasping at straws. I don't want to think of it as an inside job, though, either. The Twelfth is a mostly Urahara Division — just because Sekime-taichou and Michihashi aren't suspicious doesn't mean... but even so... it's making a leap when we've absolutely no proof, and Michihashi keeps a close eye on his members. I doubt they'd manage to do anything under his nose.

Juushirou pressed his lips together thoughtfully.

At least it gives me something else to dwell on beside Mitsuki. Whether Shunsui is right or not, I need to be a Captain first and anything else second. Right now, people are jittery and upset. I can't be either of those things, else everything here will fall apart. Looking into Tenichi's kidnap is important, too, so I'll deal with that for now. Mitsuki needs time to rest and readjust... and maybe... so do I.

Author's Note:

Today I turned 30. So, to cheer myself up, I decided to spam you people with a new chapter.

If reviewing, bring cake .

16. Childhood Bonds

Chapter Fifteen: Childhood Bonds

It was not the time for paperwork.

Souja chewed on the end of his brush, gazing down with a mixture of rebellion and resignation at the stack of neat white papers piled up before him on the desk. Since Hirata's return to the Division, the Captain had taken a much more active duty with his squad members, reminding them, Souja was sure, who was really in charge of Seventh and why. Souja hadn't minded ceding authority to his father, but the flipside of doing so had been relegation to his office for, in Hirata's absence and with the aftermath, the routine paperwork had become neglected to a point things were starting to become difficult. When two angry members of the Endou Clan had sent direct missives asking why their sons had not yet received communication from Seventh Squad about their eligibility for the Division, Hirata had decided that someone needed to see to the office work and, as the junior party, that person had been Souja.

Kikyue had begun the day in the office with him, sorting the stacks into piles in order of priority, but she had quickly become bored. Souja had soon seen the unpredictable, slightly impatient symptoms of Kikyue's Endou temper begin to flare up around the edges and, after she had managed to slash one important document in two whilst practicing warm-up parries with her sword in a quiet moment, he had dismissed her, certain he could get the job done more quickly alone. She had not made any complaint, and had hurried off to do her father's bidding, buoyed by the hope that it involved something more actively stimulating than filing parchment.

Still, she had been subdued since Tenichi's disappearance.

Souja swept his brush across the page, reaching for his personal seal to formalise the document before putting it to one side. Rubbing his aching wrist ruefully, he reflected on the fact that, despite her sometimes unorthodox reactions, there were probably few in Seventh Division who took squad loyalty more seriously than his younger sister. Events like this reminded him of the three year age gap between them, but, more significantly, of the fact that Kikyue had never had the benefit of an Academy education to bolster her confidence and show her the way. She was still very young in many

ways Souja was not — and though the squad feared her sharp tongue and impulsive blade, to him she was still little more than a child who, having grown into her spirit power too soon, was still trying desperately to be seen as an adult.

The division had heard nothing new relating to Tenichi's whereabouts since the initial ransom demand letter that had made Hirata so on edge. For Souja, whose gentle countenance masked a shrewd Endou brain, this was more alarming than the receipt of more threats, for it was a silence that neither Hirata nor the family as a whole had any control over. Protecting division members was a matter of strict Clan pride — members of the Seventh Division rarely died in open conflict because of the team-play ethics Hirata had instilled into them, and many of the squad's principal members had trained with the Thirteenth Division in the time of the interdict, learning new skills and policies as the entirety of the region overhauled its image. To have a member abducted had created shockwaves through the barracks, not least because, since Tenichi's transfer, he had become well liked among his new peers. The bonds between Thirteenth and Seventh had never been entirely broken, and Tenichi had been born in Seventh District, making him almost like a brother coming home to many of the lower ranking Endou officers. Even those of higher blood had acknowledged him as a worthy and solid member of their squad, for his sword skills were above average and he had not been reticent in sharing tricks and techniques with his new bunkmates that had come into good use in practical exercises. His abduction had made everyone indignant and uneasy, on edge about what might happen next. As Souja had heard one recruit say to another in the mess hall that morning, if someone with Tenichi's skills could be taken without a trace, what chance did those of them at low rank stand of escaping?

For Souja, although Tenichi's disappearance itself was troubling, the demands in the letter had added a whole new layer of concern. Unlike Kikyue, who knew nothing of the Kitsune's presence, Souja had grown up with the expectations that one day he would inherit the Clan, and therefore, all of its secrets. Hirata had not kept things from his only son — on the contrary, as soon as Souja had been old enough to hold a sword and swing it around experimentally, he had begun bringing his son to the Seventh barracks, introducing him to the life of a shinigami and, when on Clan soil, the secrets and spy networks that operated behind closed doors. The Kitsune were some of the Endou's most trusted agents, even though they were not of proper Endou blood. They had a blood debt of loyalty and honour to Misashi, who had shielded them for a long time in secret during Shouichi's regime and had ensured they were not purged when the rest of the Urahara

were slaughtered. They had had a common enemy, not just in Shouichi's violent policies but also in the actions of Urahara Keitarou, for they were the descendants of people who had turned against Keitarou's father, and Keitarou's reputation was of a man who did not ever forgive a betrayal. Though nobody knew where Keitarou was now, or if he even still lived, the Kitsune were always aware of the possibility of attack and this made them sharp, cautious agents, capable of stealth and secrecy that, on occasion, would rival the Onmitsukidou.

Souja had met members of the Kitsune throughout his childhood, but it was now, when the previous leader had passed away and left his son Joumei in charge, that the threat was all the more personal.

A wry smile touched his lips and he set the brush aside, remembering the first time he and Joumei had met face to face.

It had not been a friendly encounter. He had been seven or eight, full of his own importance and robed in the fine colours of the Endou, a young peacock preening for all to see. Hirata had taken him to the forestland beyond the manor, ostensibly to meet with an old and trusted friend, and, as they had moved deeper and deeper into the undergrowth, Souja had found his horse becoming separated from the rest. He knew now, for Hirata had told him so, that the separation had been deliberate. The Endou Clan leader and his Kitsune counterpart had been testing their children, bringing them into forced contact without the political ramifications and waiting to see the results.

Startled by a creature from the undergrowth, Souja's horse had reared up, depositing his finely clothed burden in a neat heap on the ground. As he had picked himself up, he had heard the sound of laughter from the shadow of the trees. If he closed his eyes, he could still see it now, the mottled greens of the landscape flanking him on all sides, and that voice, eerie and disembodied, mocking him from somewhere out of sight.

He could see nobody.

"Come forth!" he exclaimed in reedy, indignant tones, clenching his grimy fists against his body and wishing that Hirata had thought to let him ride with his training sword that day. His father had vetoed the idea, telling him that until he could use the weapon with confidence, he would not use it outside the manor grounds at all, but in that moment he would've liked to have had it at his side, the glint of metal in the sun telling whoever had dared mock him that he was not just any child going for a ride through the woods but the one who, one day, would be the guardian and overlord of all he surveyed.

“Come out and show yourself to me, coward!” he demanded, not caring how imperious his young voice sounded in the strange atmosphere of the cloistered forest. “I want to see the face of one who dares mock the heir to the Endou Clan!”

“If you’re heir to the Clan, you ought to have a better seat on your horse,” the voice was calm and even now, no trace of laughter in his words, and Souja swung around in anger, seeing a young boy of his own age duck his head beneath a branch and step into proper view. He was roughly dressed, a length of dusty fabric forming an obi at his waist and the folds of his hakama falling to uneven lengths, the hem of one leg loose and trailing against the grass. His hair was silver, a messy, unevenly cut mop that covered his head and brushed against his shoulders in feathery ends, and his cheeks were grimy, his skin ash pale as though he had not seen the sun in some time. He raised his head, meeting Souja’s gaze without an ounce of fear, and Souja’s temper would’ve been needled further by the glitter of humour in his companion’s expression if it had not been for the unusual shade of the child’s eyes.

They were almost certainly a pale shade of blue, but in the shade of the trees they appeared as silvery as his hair, not the dark, distinctive grey of the Kuchiki but a pale, almost metallic shade that seemed to shimmer unevenly beneath the mottled canopy of green and brown. For a couple of minutes Souja just stared at his companion, then, realising he was further embarrassing himself by his show of curiosity, he tossed his head, adopting the best superior expression he could manage and attempting to look down on the other boy — though the difference in their heights was actually a half inch in the stranger’s favour.

“Who are you?” he demanded, putting his hands on his hips and hoping he looked as imposing as his father could when facing down insubordinate members of the Endou council. “Why are you here, and how dare you make fun of me?”

“Fools are there to be made fun of,” the boy told him calmly, reaching up to push the long fringe of silver hair out of his face. His nails were ragged and uneven, Souja noticed with contempt, as though he had chewed on them like a wild animal starving for food. “You must be Souja. Father said you would be coming by here today.”

“Souja-sama to you,” Souja snapped back stiffly, Endou pride glittering indignantly in his pale eyes, but the boy only laughed.

“Earn that title and I’ll give it to you with pleasure,” he said, his tones playful and teasing, as though he considered Souja his equal, rather than his superior. “My people aren’t Endou, our loyalty is earned. Your father earned it, and so did your grandfather, but you haven’t, not yet. Prove

you're worth my loyalty, and I'll give you it with pleasure, but right now you look like a muddy idiot who can't sit up on his horse when it rears and bucks."

"How dare you!" Souja lunged for his companion, but the other boy was too quick, darting back into the trees and zig-zagging between the trunks as though he had been running through these woods for the whole of his life. He was barefooted, Souja realised with a jolt of dismay, and swift-footed, for as the young Endou heir gave chase, he found that his own sandals restricted his movement, getting caught on this bramble or that briar and at length he kicked them off in a fit of temper, hoping that his mother would never know he had done such a thing in front of a commoner. The silver-haired boy merely laughed at his pursuer's discomfort, leaping up into the branches of the trees with confidence and swinging his body onto the lower branch, using it as a spring to launch himself up the tree to a higher vantage point. Souja circled the base of the tree, glaring up at his prey, but unsure as to how he should reach them. If kicking off his shoes would make his mother squeal with horror, he thought darkly to himself, climbing a tree and wrecking his clan robes would almost certainly make her pass out with shock.

"What's the matter?" the boy's voice came down from amid the branches, slightly muffled by the foliage and taunting in its tones. "I thought Endou were birds of prey. Are your wings clipped?"

"Climbing trees isn't something Clan heirs do," Souja shot back, and there was a rustle of leaves before a cheeky silver framed face appeared between two lengths of wood.

"I think you're afraid to come up after me," he observed. "I think you're scared. You're a coward who fell off his horse and who now can't even climb a little tree."

"Shut up, I am not!" His mother's horror forgotten, Souja had launched himself up towards the lowest branch before he knew what he was doing, scrambling and scrabbling at the wood in an attempt to pull himself in the other boy's direction. For a while, his companion watched, as if fascinated by the spectacle, then he let out a laugh, disappearing back into the foliage.

"You'll have to work harder than that to catch me, Clan boy!" he exclaimed, and Souja's heart leapt in his throat as he saw a shadow shift below him, realising with a lurch of dismay that the stranger had moved from one tree to the next, easily passing between branches as though it were as simple as running on the ground. He glanced down, and immediately regretted it, for in his pique he had climbed several feet and now the grass seemed a long way below.

But, as his father often told him, Endou did not run away from challenges. They faced them and dealt with them and therefore brought honour to their families and themselves.

He gritted his teeth, determination flaring in his pale gaze and he grabbed the wood firmly in both hands, inching carefully along until he saw the bough of the next tree that his unexpected playmate had used to shift across. He followed suit, his footing less sure than his companion's, but he had no intention of backing down now. His hakamashita caught and tore on a stray twig, but he paid it no attention, his mind now firmly focused on the hunt. Though he was still just a child, Souja was an Endou at his core, and deep within him pulsed the predatorial instinct, telling him that he could not let this urchin get away.

That impulse made the transition between boughs suddenly easier, and he found himself moving with greater swiftness, drawing closer to his target with each swing of his arm. His cheek was streaked with blood from where branches had scratched his skin, but he ignored both the sting and the dirt, intent on catching up those few last feet.

Eventually he realised his prey had descended the trunk of the final tree, moving as nimbly as a monkey across the ground. Adrenaline surged within his young body, and he leapt forward, covering the three or four feet to the ground in one movement and reaching out a dirty hand to grab hold of the flapping fabric of the other boy's tunic. Both went down, rolling on the grass and mud, as fists fought to make contact and silk and rag became torn and muddy, streaked with stains from the grass with neither child caring about the state in which they now appeared. They grappled for a few minutes, then Souja, breathing hard, got the upper hand, pinning his skinnier companion with a whoop of triumph and staring down into those unusual silver eyes.

"I caught you," he said unnecessarily. "What do you say to that, now? Am I still a coward and a fool?"

"I guess you're not," the boy acknowledged, a rueful look on his face. "I yield. Please, get off me. I won't run off again."

"Tell me who you are, first," Souja did not make any attempt to move. "If I had my sword, I might slit your throat for your rudeness, so you can at least tell me your name."

"Your father wouldn't let you kill me, and nor would mine," the boy didn't seem frightened by Souja's show of victorious bravado, "but my name is Joumei. Ichimaru Joumei."

"Ichimaru..?" Souja's eyes widened with recognition, and Joumei nodded his head slightly in confirmation.

"The man your father came to meet? Yes, he's my father. You didn't realise that? Maybe you are a fool."

"I'm a fool who's sitting on you, and so that makes you the bigger fool," Souja snapped back, and Joumei began to laugh.

"True enough," he agreed, and there was something less mocking and more friendly in his tones now. "I beg pardon. I acknowledge your victory. Now, please get off me. You're heavy and I'm starting to struggle to breathe."

"I guess so," Souja shuffled back reluctantly, sinking down onto his haunches on the ground, and Joumei slowly picked himself up, rubbing his chest ruefully.

"You Clan sons eat too much fine fare," he reflected, then held out a grimy hand to his companion, "but I acknowledge you as the Endou heir. From hereon in I'll call you Souja-dono. I can't call you Souja-sama, because father says we only call the Heads of the Clan that, and that's not you, yet. But, when it is, I'll call you Souja-sama. I'll do as you tell me to do, like Father does for Hirata-sama."

"Who exactly are you?" Souja, slightly mollified, eyed the dishevelled boy with a critical, curious eye. "You look like a village peasant, but you don't speak to me like it. You talk as someone with pride of your own — please, will you tell me, from what family do you come?"

"I told you. I'm not Endou," Joumei twitched the fingers of his waiting hand again, and, with a moment of hesitation, Souja took it, allowing his new acquaintance to haul him upright. "My family are Urahara, going back generations. Father says our people are Clan born and should only bow heads to this Clan if they prove worthy. We have had enemies and allies among your people, so we have to be sure the masters we serve here are the right ones."

"Urahara?" Souja looked surprised. "From District Three?"

"Originally," Joumei agreed. "I was born here, though. So was Father. We came here a long time ago, when bad things happened in our own Clan. Our line is the highest born, and so Father is the head of our people, now. Misashi-sama protected us, and then, so did your father. He still does, and in return, we help him. We provide information to the Clan and he keeps us safe from those who might still see us dead. It's a complicated situation — so we can't trust just anyone."

He grinned, and Souja was faintly disturbed by the simple and matter-of-fact way his new acquaintance spoke of such heavy things.

"They call us 'Kitsune'," he added, "though it's a secret. Hirata-sama

brought you here, so he wants you to know about us now, but you mustn't ever tell anyone else about us. Not ever. Not even your family."

"Not even my mother?"

"Nope, not her, and not your sister either," Joumei shook his head decisively. "It's a Clan secret, between men of honour. You must keep it, because Hirata-sama and Father say so."

"All right," Souja frowned, but nodded his head. "I'll keep it. I have honour, and I won't tell."

"Then I guess Father will let you meet our people," Joumei observed. "Follow me and I'll take you to where they are."

Souja opened his eyes, nostalgia glittering in his expression. That had been their first meeting, but from then on, Hirata had taken him often to his meetings with the Kitsune and, as both fathers had hoped, the two boys had built up a strong friendship that surpassed the bounds of class or Clan. Souja had learned with regret how living underground and in close proximity to the Sekkiseki reduced the lifespans of the Kitsune people, but Joumei and his father had both always been pragmatic about it, and so he had never pitied them for their plight. On the contrary, when Joumei's father had died, he had offered his condolences, but had known that of all his acquaintances, Joumei was best prepared to deal with the situation and move on. They were a close people with tight bonds, yet a transient people who could drift in and out of each other's lives over the course of several decades. Their existence was hidden from all but the most high ranking Endou — so if someone wanted to hunt them down, that person was almost certainly from outside.

From the Urahara, perhaps.

He sighed, turning his gaze back to the paperwork with a resentful eye. Hirata had forbidden him from going to the forest or from making any kind of attempt to meet with Joumei, in case they brought the Kitsune under threat, and the enforced distance was a trying one. The Kitsune were used to being hidden people, and were better at protecting themselves than anyone else was at protecting them — but still, he was worried for them, knowing that there were many young children among the families that made their homes in the old Sekkiseki caverns.

Joumei will have thought it all through, though. He's always been more grown up for his age, probably because life is so short for them — they can't afford to waste time in idle things like childhood.

Souja rested his chin in his hands.

I wish I could ride there, just once, to make sure, but crossing Father is not something a wise man does. I haven't got through half of these documents, either. He'll probably skin me when he comes back if they're still undone, the mood he's been in of late.

He reached reluctantly for his brush, but, as the tips of his fingers touched against the wood, the dull hum of spiritual energy that prickled against his awareness made him pause, his brow creasing in confusion. He turned, catching sight of something small and black fluttering in through the open window of the chamber, and he let out an exclamation, all thought of work forgotten as he recognised the distinctive form of a Hell Butterfly.

Not just any Hell Butterfly, though. As he held out his finger to allow the insect to land, he caught sight of the silverish tinges to the tips of the insects beautiful, spectral wings, and his heart skipped a beat.

From Joumei. Not from Father or from anyone in the Gotei, but from the Kitsune.

The insect fluttered its wings, releasing the message it had been carrying into echoes of spiritual energy.

"Souja-dono,"

Joumei's voice was clearly recognisable, and Souja let out his breath in a rush, realising his friend was likely both well and safe.

"I'm sure you don't need me to tell you who this is from. In light of your Lord father's message to us regarding the safety of our people and the absence of one of your own. We've not come under any attack, but we have acquired an unexpected guest. Kotetsu Tenichi is currently in our custody. Please have Hirata-sama send someone to remove him as soon as you can, since his presence here is something of a hindrance."

The insect fragmented, disintegrating into glimmering shards of spiritual ash, and Souja shook his head in amusement at his friend's brief yet faintly ironic message.

The Kitsune have Tenichi. I wonder how that came about... sometimes the skills Joumei's people have for finding things out frighten even me. But they have him, and best of all, it doesn't sound as though the Kitsune have been put in harm's way. I must go report this to Father at once — maybe, if Tenichi is safe, he'll let me go retrieve him.

His eyes narrowed as he got to his feet, straightening his papers before scooping up his *zanpakutou* and moving towards the door.

No, he'll have to let me go. Nobody else knows where the Kitsune

hideout is, and nobody else is in their trust. Father can't go himself — there's too much to be done here — so that leaves me. I'd better start preparing my argument to travel, then... since he was quite explicit in his orders and he won't like changing them. Still, if it's the only way... and once Tenichi is safely back here, Seventh can investigate fully whoever was behind his abduction. No, I'm sure Father will send me, when he hears, even if he does grumble, since the longer Tenichi is with the Kitsune, the more chance he'll see or hear something that might put him in danger and them at risk. If I go, too, I'll be able to get a good idea for myself what the situation is — and hopefully, we can start putting the lid on this whole unfortunate incident.

The Thirteenth Division seemed strangely quiet that day.

Mitsuki set aside her book, glancing at the cover with a sigh. The volume had been brought to her by one of Juushirou's subordinate officers — a girl called Kirio, she remembered — in the hope that it might break up the tedium of her convalescence, but she had been staring at the same page for the past three quarters of an hour. Normally peace and quiet was exactly what she needed to focus, but that day it was too quiet, putting her on edge and straining her already shattered nerves towards breaking point. She was still weak and shaky — she had tried getting up that morning, but the sight of Yuuyugo's hilt still missing its blade had been enough to sap all the strength she had managed to muster and she had sunk back down onto her covers, frustrated and resigned to her fate. Retsu had known what she was doing, she mused darkly, consigning her to rest. She had given her everything to save those she could save, but it had come at a cost. The words of the healing Kidou spells still lingered on her lips, but she could not cast them, and, with Yuuyugo still in such a precarious state, she did not dare try. Fourth Division needed her to get well — and so she would try and do as her Captain had instructed, however hard it might be to be kept away from those who needed help the most.

A faint sound at the door made her glance up, cautiously allowing her senses to extend to beyond the divide as she tried to identify the reiatsu that lingered beyond. Relief flooded her expression as she recognised this one — since she had regained consciousness, only a few familiar auras had mingled among what had seemed like an army of strangers passing back and forth outside the door, but this one she knew and its ragged unsteadiness gave her reassurance.

The divide slid back hesitantly to reveal Madeki, and, at the haggard, tired look on the older man's face, Mitsuki knew she was not

the only one suffering from the memory of what had happened in Rukongai.

"I wasn't sure if you'd welcome my visit," he observed, by way of preamble, standing in the doorway and making no attempt to enter the small bedchamber, "but I needed to come and see for myself that you were all right. Nobody's let me near here till now — but Shikibu said you were awake and recovering, so I decided to stretch my legs and walk to Thirteenth. It's a nice day, out, and most of Thirteenth's lesser members seem to be on manoeuvre with Houjou, so I thought now was as good a time as any."

"I'm glad to see you," Mitsuki assured him, offering her squad leader a faint smile and gesturing for him to come into the room proper. He did so, pulling the door softly shut behind him, then crossing the two or three feet of tatami mat until he reached the end of the bed. He paused for a moment, a little awkwardly, then dropped his frame down on the seat at her side, letting out a heavy sigh.

"Fourth isn't a good place to be at present," he added, as if answering an unspoken question, and Mitsuki's smile faded. Slowly she nodded her head.

"So Ju... er... Ukitake-taichou told me," she agreed sadly. "I should be helping, but I'm not much use to anyone at the moment."

"You're better off here. We need you fully fit," Madeki assured her. "Retsu-sama was the one who sent you to Thirteenth to convalesce, so I'd wait for her orders before you return. We're short of people, true enough, but she won't take chances with your spirit power or anyone else's. Her judgement is sound, so trust it."

"I intend to," Mitsuki sighed, stretching her arms up above her head. "Part of me wants to be there, helping, but there's another... more cowardly part of me that's... relieved to be away from it. I know how bad that sounds, but I can't help it."

She shuddered, closing her eyes briefly.

"I'm sure you see them too," she whispered, opening them again and raising them up to her companion. "You can't not see them, or feel it, over again."

"Yes," Madeki agreed darkly. "I don't suppose I'll easily forget, any more than you will."

He hesitated for a moment, then,

"Coming back here is like stepping through a hole in time, with so

many things that have changed in our absence,” he observed thoughtfully. “I’d never set foot in the Thirteenth Division before today, but it’s a busy, thriving division and well established by all accounts. Most people seem to take it for granted that it’s here, whilst I’m still getting my head around to counting to Thirteen instead of Twelve.”

“I’m a little like that myself,” Mitsuki owned. “There are a lot of new people... it’s like being a stranger in your own world.”

“Yes,” Madeki mused. “We’ll have to get used to it, though. Retsu-sama seems certain that we won’t be allowed to return to Rukongai for a while. Maybe we never will — it’s hard to tell.”

“Would you want to go back?” Mitsuki asked doubtfully, and Madeki nodded his head.

“That was the job I chose to do, and I want to continue doing it,” he said frankly. “More than ever now, knowing that there are violent folks there who might cause harm to those who can’t defend themselves. Of course, we can’t go back in exactly the same vein as we were before — but yes, if I was allowed to choose, I’d go back.”

“I wonder if I would,” Mitsuki reflected. ‘Part of me wants to. Part of me loves Rukongai, and the people, and doing my job by them. The other part though,’ she shuddered, “is still drenched in blood. I can’t stop replaying the fight with the Hollow in my mind... and so long as that’s true, I’d be a liability in the field.”

“Moving on is a difficult thing to do,” Madeki agreed, “but as military officers and professionals, it’s our duty to do it, Edogawa. For their sake, we have to — honouring them is our duty, too.”

“Mm,” Mitsuki murmured. “I know it is.”

“Aomori is doing better, by the way,” Madeki changed the subject slightly, resting his hands on his knees and gazing at her pensively. “Retsu-sama thinks her convalescence will be a long one, but she’s not in any danger of her life, now. She opened her eyes for a short few minutes this morning — she’s still very sedated, and we’re keeping her that way, but she asked about you and we told her you were fine. She doesn’t know about the rest, yet. That can wait until she’s stronger — but I thought you’d like to know she’s turned the corner.”

“Oh!” Relief glittered briefly in Mitsuki’s grey eyes. “Thank you for telling me. I was so worried about her, out in the field, because she kept going down and I couldn’t...”

“Your sword saved her life, that’s beyond doubt. Your kidou saved

mine, too,” Madeki interjected frankly. “Don’t start regretting what you couldn’t do, Edogawa. You did everything you could out there and nobody thinks otherwise. It’s the opposite, in fact. You did well.”

He smiled slightly.

“For my part in it, I’m grateful,” he added, rubbing his chest pensively. “I wouldn’t be here if not for you.”

“I just did my job,” Mitsuki pinkened, looking embarrassed. “I don’t think I was all that brave. It was more a case of... instinct. That... and not wanting to be... alone.”

“Yes,” Madeki agreed gravely. “Coming back here alone would be... harder. I was very relieved when they told me you and Aomori had come back, too.”

“I suppose we’ll all adjust to the changes together,” Mitsuki reflected. “In truth, Buchou, seeing you here like this has made me feel a lot less anxious. Everyone I’ve spoken to wants to understand what happened, but you actually do understand. It’s not a feeling you can put in words — but I can tell you feel it just the same way as I do. Somehow, sharing that memory, horrible as it is... gives me some strength to overcome it.”

“We need to talk about it, though, if you don’t mind,” Madeki said gravely. ‘Your experiences, what you saw, and most critically, how Aomori got hurt and the others you were with killed. Oh yes, we’ve retrieved their bodies,’ as Mitsuki flinched, a question in her eyes. “We’ve brought everyone back to Seireitei, now. You, Aomori and I are the only survivors, and Aomori’s far too fragile to be interrogated yet. That leaves you and I, and they need our testimony. I’ve given mine, as best I can — what about you? Are you up to talking about it?”

“I don’t know, but I have to,” Mitsuki smoothed the bedsheets absently under her fingers, her apprehension clear from the trembling of those pale, slim fingers. “J... Ukitake-taichou hasn’t pushed me to talk about it — nobody has — but I have a duty to my division mates, too.”

She bit her lip, then,

“You know it was a Hollow, don’t you? Ukitake-taichou was asking me about the type, so that Seri could be better helped.”

“Yes,” Madeki agreed. “Aomori’s wounds were consistent with that, and you and she obviously faced something in Junrin’an that killed the other two.”

“A scorpion Hollow,” Mitsuki shuddered, swallowing hard as the images of Kazuki and Haseyo’s broken bodies once more taunted her consciousness. “I wasn’t... with them when it happened. I mean, when Kazuki and Haseyo were killed, I was... I wasn’t there.”

“Weren’t there?” Madeki blinked at her, confused, and Mitsuki nodded, memories of the event flooding back over her senses. She drew a shaky breath into her lungs, forcing the waves of rising panic back as best she could.

“We were about to head back to Hokutan,” she said softly. “We’d seen nothing amiss, and so we were going to report back. Has... Haseyo was talking about... the flowers, like it was peaceful and calm and all was going to be all right. We... we were about to set out when I felt something over in one of the local settlements. I... I sent Haseyo and Kazuki on ahead, then Seri. I stopped back in the settlement to make sure nobody was hurt. There had been a Hollow, but it had let Kazuki and Haseyo lure it away so the people there were unharmed.”

“Were these contaminated people, or not?” Madeki questioned, and Mitsuki shook her head.

“They were not.”

“All right, continue,” Madeki’s eyes narrowed thoughtfully, and Mitsuki knew he was digesting this carefully.

“I’d just finished making sure that nobody was hurt when I felt...” she faltered, clenching her fists against a fresh wave of panic, then, “I felt the Hollow kill Kazuki and Haseyo. It was quick, intense, horrible... and I knew I had to go after them, even though it was too late. I shunpoed as quick as I could, but I guess I was still reeling from the shock of it. When I got to the clearing, I saw the monster for the first time. Kazuki and Haseyo were beyond my help and I couldn’t see Seri. She’d hidden, but when I appeared, she fired Kidou at the Hollow. I thought... maybe we could take it down, but... but she was hurt, too, and she collapsed not long after I got there.”

She closed her eyes, tears bright against her lashes.

“I can’t fight with a sword like she can,” she whispered. “If I could, maybe none of this would’ve happened.”

“We’re not assigning blame,” Madeki rested his hand on her shoulder. “Retsu-sama gave me that lecture and I’m passing it on to you. I have six lives on my conscience, Edogawa, not to mention the responsibility for sending you and the others into that region. Let me take that burden, and just tell me what happened next.”

“I’m not completely sure,” Mitsuki admitted slowly. “I remember raising my sword, but it’s all patchy and all over the place. I was worried about Seri, and I couldn’t focus on the Hollow attacking me.”

She paused, her gaze flitting to the door as a familiar reiatsu pervaded her senses.

“Ukitake-taichou,” she whispered, and Madeki pursed his lips.

“There’s no harm in him hearing this,” he assured her. “Thirteenth have already volunteered full cooperation with the investigation, so far as they’re able.”

There was a light knock at the door, preventing Mitsuki from answering, then the divide slid cautiously back, revealing the white-haired Captain, his *haori* conspicuously absent for once from about his shoulders. With a jolt, Mitsuki realised it was for her benefit, and faint colour rose in her cheeks.

At the sight of Madeki, Juushirou paused, lowering his head apologetically towards the Third Seated officer. Though Juushirou was the higher ranked shinigami now, Mitsuki too remembered the days when Madeki had been their school senpai, and, in Juushirou’s case, part of a rescue party that had come and retrieved both him and Shunsui as first years from a mountain cave. As a result, Juushirou held the officer in high esteem, and there was warmth to the grave smile he gave the visitor.

“Madeki-dono, I’m sorry to interrupt,” he said politely.

“No, it’s all right,” Madeki shook his head. “You want to hear Edogawa’s account too, don’t you? This way she’ll only have to repeat it once — probably that’s better for her as well as for us.”

“Do you mind, Mi... Edogawa-san?” Juushirou asked quizzically, and the colour in Mitsuki’s cheeks deepened at the more formal use of her name. She shook her head.

“Not at all,” she assured him. “Truthfully, once is more times than I’d like to relate it, so if its no more than that...”

“Understood,” Juushirou sat down on the end of the bed. “Thirteenth are mobilising to act whenever they’re called upon, and we will get to the bottom of this.”

“Edogawa was telling me about the Hollow’s attack on her and her companions,” Madeki quickly brought Juushirou up to speed, and Mitsuki watched the plethora of emotions that flickered across her old friend’s thin features. At the mention of the Hollow’s attack, his brow

creased, and he glanced at Mitsuki quizzically.

“The Hollow attacked a village full of pure Pluses?” he asked softly. “Is that normal, in Rukongai?”

“No, it isn’t,” Mitsuki shook her head, running fingers through her fine dark hair. “There have been Hollows, lately... but all the settlements they’ve attacked have had some kind of... well... pollution, I suppose is the right word. The souls have reiatsu, so it makes them targets. We think that the Hollows are turned from people who’ve somehow become contaminated, whether in Rukongai or in the Real World when being soul buried — but none of us really know for sure.”

“Normally, in the Real World, the spiritual pressure of the surroundings is so feeble a Hollow will target a pure Plus soul because it is the only source of condensed spirit matter for a wide radius,” Madeki supplemented. “In Rukongai, though, even in the so-called Spiritless Zone, much of the atmosphere and the general surroundings are comprised of stable spirit energy. Though they don’t give off much in the way of emissions, it’s generally enough to mute the presence of most Plus souls where Hollows are concerned.”

“Meaning that Hollow should not have attacked the settlement, but did anyway?”

“Yes,” Mitsuki confirmed, and Juushirou’s gaze darkened.

“I see,” he murmured. “I’m sorry. Please go on.”

“I thought it odd, too,” Madeki admitted. “Edogawa, do you remember anything else about the Hollow that attacked you all?”

“Yes... one thing, though I’m not sure if it was my panic that made me see it that way,” Mitsuki twisted her fingers together. “It didn’t seem interested in consuming spirit power. It didn’t attack any of the villagers, just roughed some of the buildings and when it had killed Haseyo and Kazuki, it just... left them there, as though they no longer were important. Seri, too — when she went down, the Hollow lost interest in her and came after me. It was as though it wanted to kill... not feed.”

“It attacked you directly?” Juushirou kept his tones level, but there was no suppressing the anxiety that briefly flooded his hazel eyes at this, and, seeing it, Mitsuki felt slightly comforted. She nodded.

“What happened next is still a blur,” she admitted. “I should be dead, but I... I’m not.”

“Did you slay the Hollow?” Madeki asked, and Mitsuki shook her head.

“I can’t. I never was very good at that,” she admitted miserably. “I’m a healer, Buchou, I’m not a reaper. I want to mend souls, and Hollows are beyond my mending powers. When it came at me, it flung me completely off balance. Everything just overloaded inside of me — Kazuki’s death, Haseyo’s death, Seri’s injury... and then the creature’s reiatsu on top of that. I couldn’t even remember how to fire a spell... all I could think of was that it was going to kill me and then... then it might hurt the village, and...”

“But it didn’t,” Madeki interjected quietly, breaking off what was fast becoming a hysterical speech. “You’re still here. Alive. In one piece. So what happened to the Hollow?”

“He killed it,” Mitsuki whispered, tears trickling down her cheeks, and Juushirou twitched, casting Madeki a sidelong glance as though realising that in the presence of his friend’s superior officer, it would not be a good idea to follow his first instincts and gather her up in a close, comforting hug.

“He?” Madeki echoed, apparently oblivious to the Captain’s inner emotional turmoil. “What he are we talking about now?”

“If I knew that, I’d tell you, but I don’t,” Mitsuki buried her head in her hands, fragmented pictures of her rescuer flooding her thoughts. “I never saw him before, and he didn’t tell me his name. He appeared just as the Hollow was going to cut me down — and he used some kind of condensed spirit power to destroy it.”

“Kidou?” Juushirou asked sharply, but Mitsuki shook her head.

“No, it wasn’t Kidou,” she replied. “He said he didn’t really know what it was — just spirit power he sometimes could use when the need arose.”

“Someone in the Spiritless Zone who could use spirit power at will?” Madeki’s eyes became slits. “Someone who wasn’t a shinigami?”

“If he was, I didn’t know him, but I don’t think so,” Mitsuki replied wearily. “I thought he looked vaguely familiar, but I couldn’t be sure why or how. He wasn’t particularly distinctive to look at. Friendly features. Dark blue eyes. Dark hair. Rough clothing. I thought he came from Seireitei. He said he didn’t, but I thought he did. He seemed like he did, and his spirit power wasn’t like any of the contaminated souls we encountered in Hokutan. I thought maybe he’d got into some trouble over here and that’s why he didn’t want me to know who he

was.”

“How on earth would someone like that get into Rukongai?” Juushirou asked. “That shouldn’t be possible, should it?”

“It shouldn’t, but with the pollution of souls and the Hollows, I’m wondering if there is a leak somewhere that we haven’t found,” Madeki grimaced. “Some parts of the Sekkiseki wall between us and the abandoned areas of Rukongai aren’t as solid as they should be. If you were determined, maybe you’d get through them. Thing is, there’s nothing on the other side of that barrier. A wasteland, certainly no food and very little water. Anyone who found himself there would quickly starve. The walls between the wasteland Rukon Valley and the Spiritless Zone aren’t as thick as the ones between Seireitei and Rukongai, though they should be secure. Still, it’s possible we missed something... I’d like to say it’s impossible, but I suppose we can’t completely rule it out.”

“If random souls are running riot around the Spiritless Zone, no wonder the Pluses are becoming contaminated,” Juushirou said acerbically, and Madeki nodded.

“We’ll have to investigate that,” he agreed tiredly. “Kai-dono’s Onmitsukidou haven’t found any souls with particularly significant reiatsu over there, but that doesn’t rule out their existence.”

“This man existed,” Mitsuki said flatly. “He existed, and he saved my life. He waited to make sure I was all right, and then he helped me bring Seri back to camp. I couldn’t carry her, so he did. Only, when we got there, and everyone was killed... he disappeared. I guess he didn’t want to be caught up in it... since if he was already a fugitive, it would look bad.”

“On the contrary, though, it’s a long walk from Junrin’an to Hokutan,” Madeki pursed his lips. “His being with you would automatically count him out of the attack on us... besides, I saw our assailant. It was a young woman, not a man at all. A woman with a blade — a Plus soul.”

“A... Plus... soul?” Mitsuki was stunned, and Madeki nodded.

“I’m as foxed as you are,” he agreed, “but Kai-dono’s men and the autopsies of our comrades agree with me. The killer left no reiatsu on any of her victims... and she attacked them with mundane, physical methods — a sword or, in my case, our own supplies of soporific medicine. No spells, nothing like that — just a slashing blade and quick reactions.”

“Is it normal for Plus souls to carry weapons in the Spiritless Zone?” Juushirou asked quizzically, and Madeki shrugged.

“Some arrive with them,” he admitted. “They’ve used them all their Real World lives, and so they manifest them over the divide. They’re feeble implements — not even *asauchi*... we generally refer to them as ‘dead blades’ because they have no spiritual presence at all. It’s never really been a problem till now. I suppose we assumed that any trouble we could quickly overpower with our own force — though that may have been an overestimation. In all the time I — and Edogawa — spent in Rukongai, though, we weren’t ever attacked by a pure Plus soul wielding a dead sword.”

“Kai called her weapon a dead blade at the Captain’s meeting,” Juushirou rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “I thought it sounded odd then, but now I understand what he meant. A sword that isn’t in any way connected with the kind of swords we use, correct?”

“Yes,” Madeki inclined his head. “They’re just tools... far inferior to what we have and for the most part, the Plus souls keep them for show and comfort. They don’t often remember how to use them, not when their memories are wiped or blurred — but some subconscious need inside of them makes them feel more comfortable and safe with the weapon as part of their death attire. It’s not an uncommon phenomenon, and one that hasn’t created problems before in our time in Rukongai.”

“Buchou is right,” Mitsuki agreed. “They don’t want to harm us. They want and need our help.”

“Not this one, clearly,” Juushirou sighed, “and so far, it doesn’t sound like Kai’s found any trace of her, either. Not to mention the young man who saved Edogawa-san’s life.”

“Maybe we should be trawling the records of the Lower Seireitei eyre courts, even the Clan courts, and see if we can find anyone who fits Edogawa’s description,” Madeki reflected. “It might be like looking for a needle in a haystack, but if you could give a clear and detailed description, Edogawa, we might find someone good with a brush to sketch a likeness. At the very least, absconded prisoners can’t be that common. If we find a record that looks like a match, then maybe we can track down the man who helped you.”

“If he’s escaped Seireitei justice, he doesn’t want to be found,” Juushirou pointed out, and Madeki shrugged.

“He still risked his life and his freedom to rescue Edogawa,” he said simply. “I think in those circumstances a deal could be made. If he

turned witness and helped with our enquiries, the Council might put pressure on whichever District he came from to drop the charges against him.”

“Even if those charges included murder?” Juushirou asked, and Madeki nodded.

“We need all the evidence we can get,” he admitted.

“I don’t think he’s that kind of person, anyway,” Mitsuki murmured. “I know I only met him briefly, but... when he helped me, I passed out. He had plenty of chance to hurt me, but he didn’t. He didn’t touch me. He sat and waited for me to wake up, and then he helped me get Seri back to camp, even though it meant putting himself at risk if Buchou saw him. If he has outstanding charges, I don’t think they’re likely to be major ones like rape or murder. Maybe petty theft — something like that.”

“Well, if I take a description, I can have Ketsui and a couple of others go check through records,” Juushirou did not seem overly convinced, but he nodded his head. “Ketsui needs a distraction, anyway.”

“Naoko told me one of your members was missing,” Mitsuki remembered, and Juushirou shook his head.

“Former member,” he corrected. “Tenichi transferred to Seventh a while ago — but he still seems like one of mine, and I’m worried about him. We all are — especially Ketsui. This will be a good chance for him to put that out of his head. S... Kyouraku-taichou intends to help investigate things as well, so maybe I’ll send Ketsui with a message to the Eighth barracks, asking for assistance in digging through files.”

“I’ll go back to Retsu-sama and relay what you’ve told me to her,” Madeki got to his feet, smoothing down his crumpled *hakama* and shooting Mitsuki a smile. “I’ll take Aomori a message, too, if you have one. Retsu-sama doesn’t want you anywhere near Fourth just yet, so you can’t come visit with her at the moment, but if there’s anything you’d like her to know, I’ll try and slip in when there’s a moment and speak to her.”

“I guess... just to get well soon, and to keep fighting,” Mitsuki pursed her lips. “I like Seri. She’s someone I care about, and I want her to get better as quickly as possible. She was so badly hurt... but if you say she’ll live, then that’s a weight off my mind.”

“I’ll do that,” Madeki grinned at her. “Her first concern was for you,

not herself, so I think she's starting to come back to her wits now. Try not to worry. Everyone's been working round the clock to build on what you did in the Spiritless Zone, and now those efforts are paying off."

He bowed his head towards Juushirou, then withdrew from the room, shutting the door once more behind him and leaving the two old friends alone.

"Aomori Seri is a kinswoman of Naoko's, isn't she?" It was Juushirou who broke the silence, and Mitsuki nodded.

"Second cousin," she agreed.

"Maybe Unohana-taichou would let me send Naoko to see her, then," Juushirou rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Claims of kinship are strong things, and she might. Fourth Division are too busy to run back and forth with status reports, but I'm sure, if it was Naoko, she'd be able to find out anything Madeki-dono wasn't aware of."

"If you're sure it's not a bother," Mitsuki looked surprised, and Juushirou sent her a warm grin.

"Aomori's your friend, and the cousin of my Third Seat. Thirteenth therefore have an interest in her recovery," he said pragmatically. "Meantime, you look better this afternoon than you have done. I'm sure talking about it was horrible — but you seem as though it's lifted a weight from your mind."

"I suppose... I was afraid of being blamed for what happened to Haseyo and Kazuki. Seri, too," Mitsuki toyed with her sheets, dropping her gaze. "I was put in charge, Juushirou. I feel responsible... but Madeki-dono made it seem... like it wasn't so much my fault."

"The Hollow behaved very oddly," Juushirou looked troubled. "There have been like incidents of that over this side of the divide, too. Hollows attacking only shinigami, or destroying villages yet not hurting a single citizen despite the fact some have reasonable levels of spirit power."

"Do you think someone is controlling them?" Mitsuki's eyes widened with alarm, and Juushirou shrugged.

"With Fourth and the abductions, there's no longer any time to investigate that," he admitted. "It might just be the way the Hollows are evolving — the Real World is a violent place at the moment, wars being fought all over, and that might have made the creatures more bloodthirsty when they turn. Seireitei's never been peaceful, either... and I'm not an expert on Hollow-Shinigami scientific principle. What

is and isn't possible is a grey area to me."

"It would be hard, manipulating a creature like that," Mitsuki said thoughtfully. "They're so full of hate and rage and despair. There was something odd about the one that attacked us, definitely... but... I couldn't say that something was controlling it. It just seemed extra-specially violent, and more interested in spilling blood than feeding. Perhaps it had been sated, and maybe, in life, it was a particularly aggressive warrior or something, reverting to type. I don't know... honestly, I don't even know if the man who saved me purified it or simply killed it."

"This man..." Juushirou frowned, then, "did he say why he helped you?"

"Because I helped the villagers, and he felt we shared values," Mitsuki frowned. "He said that he grew up in a village not unlike the one that was attacked, and so, because I wanted to save it, he decided to save me. He wouldn't tell me his name, though. He said it was somewhere in the forest — but he might have been joking. He was trying to distract me from the deaths of the others as we walked. I didn't know what was happening at the main camp, or I'd probably have tried to shunpo — but I was pretty exhausted after the battle, and, well, I didn't want to leave him with Seri, since he obviously didn't know anything about healing."

"You trusted him?"

"I only met him briefly," Mitsuki objected. "Trust is a strong word. I wasn't afraid of him, though. I didn't find him threatening. He could've hurt me and Seri both, and didn't. Maybe he did escape from some District court system somewhere, but whatever his crime was, I'm sure it wasn't severe."

"Hrm," Juushirou's lips thinned, and Mitsuki could read the obvious displeasure in her companion's eyes.

"It's not like you to be so suspicious," she chided softly, and Juushirou started, staring at her sheepishly.

"I don't know. I'm plenty suspicious of a lot of things, these days," he admitted ruefully, tucking a stray wisp of white hair behind his ear. "Maybe I've spent too long in Shunsui's company. Just, a lot of very odd things are happening at the moment. On their own they're troubling enough, but they're occurring at the same time. That bothers me more than it should."

"Coincidences are possible, albeit highly unusual," Mitsuki pointed

out. “What happened in Rukongai is proof of that. Buchou was attacked by a Plus soul and we were attacked by a Hollow. There’s no way a pure Plus could manipulate a Hollow — even a tainted one with spirit power would have trouble not getting eaten by it — so the two events happened coincidentally. We were unlucky — or maybe, the assassin took advantage of our split camp to launch her attack — but although they happened at the same time, the two matters are so different finding a connection between them is the more unlikely scenario.”

“Perhaps...” Juushirou sighed, “but I don’t really like it. Strange men turning up to save you just in the nick of time... it seems... funny to me.”

“Juushirou, are you jealous of this guy?” Mitsuki’s eyes widened, and Juushirou’s cheeks reddened, a faint, guilty smile touching his pale lips.

“Horribly,” he owned. “Is that terrible? I’m glad he was there, and that he saved you, but...”

“Because he did, I’m here now,” Mitsuki reached over to grasp his fingers loosely in hers, offering him a brave smile. “I’m sorry, Juushirou. It’s been a long time, hasn’t it?”

“Too long,” Juushirou agreed, “and in these circumstances, too.”

“I know,” Mitsuki squeezed his hands, then loosed her hold, meeting his gaze with a sad one of her own. “They were my friends — almost like my family. When you’re around the same people so much and rely on them for your survival, you form bonds like that. Seri was probably my closest friend in Rukongai, but Haseyo and I were close, too. Keiko, too — and others. I’m back in Seireitei now and surrounded by old friends, but I’m all too aware that I’ve come back almost alone. I don’t even know how my feelings are at the moment — and that means I can’t say anything to reassure you, either.”

“I told you I’d wait for you to be ready and I will,” Juushirou said matter-of-factly, though she could see the pain in his eyes. “I’m in the same place I always was. My feelings haven’t changed.”

He fingered the pendant at his throat, pulling it from beneath the folds of dark fabric so that it glinted faintly in the light.

“I’ve kept it safe ever since you left,” he said, by way of explanation, as Mitsuki’s eyes opened wide with surprise and recognition. “You said I could give it back to you when we were reunited — I suppose that would be now, wouldn’t it?”

“No... for now, you keep it,” Mitsuki shook her head, reaching up to push his hand gently away from the pendant’s clasp. “It’s a Kuchiki pendant, and I don’t know that I’m ready to be a Kuchiki *hime* again just yet. Maybe I never will be ready — I don’t know, it’ll take time after all I’ve seen and done. Besides... I like that you have it.”

She grinned, though there was a bittersweet expression in her soft grey eyes.

“You kept it safe all these years, and so I know you never forgot about me,” she murmured. “That means a lot to me at the moment, knowing I was always in your thoughts.”

“Idiot, of course you were,” Juushirou snorted, allowing the pendant to fall back beneath the black *hakamashita*. “I hope you weren’t doubting me.”

“No...” Mitsuki faltered, and Juushirou arched an eyebrow.

“But?” he pressed.

“I don’t know Seireitei any more,” the healer murmured. “The names, the faces, even the fact that there’s a brand new Division and that all of the Gotei now have formal barracks here in Inner Seireitei, rather than operating out of manor land. You’re a Captain, Sora’s a Vice Captain, Naoko’s a Third Seat... its as though I’ve stopped moving, but everyone around me’s kept on going. I don’t know where I fit in with all of you, yet. Even less do I know where I fit in with my family. Father is still alive, Naoko told me that, but would he see me? I’ve had messages from Shirogane-senpai and Ryuu in Sixth, wishing me well and asking me to come see them when I’m able — but I feel like a stranger in a world everyone else knows. It’s disorientating and... lonely.”

She sighed, sinking back against her pillows.

“Everyone is busy. You’re busy. Naoko and Sora, too,” she added. “I have nothing much to do here except sleep and think about what happened. I don’t have a job or a position or, really, a specific rank. I don’t know all of the members of my own division, let alone the members of any other. It’s unsettling, Juushirou. You say that your feelings haven’t changed... but... everything else has.”

“I’m sorry,” Juushirou looked stricken. “I didn’t want to smother you or harass you when you weren’t up to it, but I didn’t realise you were feeling like that.”

“It’s not your fault,” Mitsuki reflected. “It’s something you accept when you go somewhere with closed borders for a long period of time.

I expected it to be strange when I came back, but I didn't really think it would be like this. I thought we'd all come back and it would be easier to integrate back into normal Gotei life."

She let out a feeble laugh.

"When you come to think on it, I've never been a part of normal Gotei life," she realised. "I've been in Rukongai from the start, so no wonder I'm so disorientated."

"That doesn't mean you can't become a part of it," Juushirou's voice softened. "I am sorry, though. Shunsui ripped holes in me yesterday about falling into the same traps as I did when we were younger, assuming I knew how you felt and acting on my assumptions. I shouldn't do it, and you hate when I do, but right now I want to protect you as much as I can. I know it hurt you, talking about what happened, and if I didn't know you had to talk about it, I would've asked Madeki-dono to leave. My duties and my feelings are conflicting a little at the moment. My responsibilities to my division have to be foremost, but I'm spending most of my time worrying about you."

"I will be fine," Mitsuki's grey eyes held the faintest glimmer of a smile. 'Maybe at the moment it's all right, if you want to protect me a little. Just a little,' as Juushirou's eyebrows arched, "while I'm figuring things out. Retsu-sama was right to send me here — I think she knew that of everyone, you'd probably be the person I wanted most to see."

She reached out to brush the dark sleeve of his *hakamashita*.

"The *haori* threw me, but today you're not wearing it, and I find it looks wrong," she added. "You are a Captain and you don't have to pretend otherwise just to placate me. Your Division should come first. That's how we agreed it, isn't it? We'd follow our own paths and achieve the things we wanted to. I... I don't regret going to Rukongai, even though I'm hurting now. And you..."

"I don't regret it, either," Juushirou admitted. "I missed you, and I'm glad to see you, but staying here was the right choice for me. Now, though, with Rukongai how it is... you don't need to think about going back. There may never be a chance to go back — and you need... to try and belong here as well. We need to find justice for your friends, and then, for their sakes, Fourth Division needs to regroup."

"I agree," Mitsuki nodded with a sigh. "It's easier to say than do, but you're right. Madeki-dono told me that we wouldn't be going back to Rukongai for a while, and I'm not sure yet if I will go, even when things are more stable. I need to work through this, and the best way

of doing that is solving the mystery and getting whoever is behind it.”

“Starting with your mysterious hero, since he’s obviously a witness,” Juushirou remarked.

“You really don’t like him, do you?” Mitsuki was amused despite herself. “He saved my life, Juushirou. You can’t look on him negatively, when without him I’d not even be here.”

“I’m grateful to him for that, but no more than that,” Juushirou leaned across, kissing her very gently on the forehead before getting to his feet. “If he’s an escaped felon, I’d like to know what he did before I decide whether we can trust him or otherwise. He was in a place he shouldn’t have been, and that was to your advantage, but it doesn’t forgive his being there. Remember, something was contaminating those souls. Your hero might not be a shinigami killer, but he’s a wildcard spirit with no formal training in an area he shouldn’t be. You said he didn’t know how he used his power, and it was just condensed energy, not kidou at all. If he’s been using that kind of *reiryoku* heedlessly, he might have done more damage than you think.”

“That’s not impossible, but I think you’re just determined to dislike him,” Mitsuki reflected. “If you want me to help give a more detailed description to someone who can draw, that I’ll do with pleasure. I know you’ll treat him fairly, even if you don’t want to, so I’m not worried about you hurting him if you brought him into custody. Better you than Shihouin-kun’s people — I don’t know much about the Second Division’s Onmitsukidou, but I don’t imagine they’re too cuddly.”

“And I am?” Juushirou arched an eyebrow.

“Sometimes,” Mitsuki returned neatly, then she smiled, eyes lighting up properly for the first time since they had begun their conversation. “Ah, but I’ve missed all the sides of you. Even the grumpy, moony one and the half-dead with fever reckless and impulsive one. I wanted to see you, Juushirou. I’m really happy... that I got to do that. When you think you’re going to lose your life... things like that become all the more important.”

“No kidding,” Juushirou’s expression clouded. “I have to go, I have orders to give out and inspections to cover, and I need to report what you told me down the chain to my high seats as well as to Shunsui and Sora, so they can act on it, too. Will you be all right on your own? I’ll need Naoko for a bit, and so...”

“I’ll be fine. I feel a little better than I did,” Mitsuki assured him.

“Less alone, too, now that we’ve talked a little and blown out the cobwebs. We’ll talk more when things are less crazy, but for now, I’ll be all right. You go back, Juushirou. I mean it. You never asked me to sacrifice my dreams for you — I won’t ask you to sacrifice yours for me.”

Juushirou’s eyes softened, and he nodded.

“I know,” he agreed, “that’s why we get along so well.”

With that he was gone, and Mitsuki lay down, closing her eyes and listening to the retreating sound of his sandalled steps against the wooden floor.

Whatever she had faced in Rukongai, she was no longer alone in protecting those she cared about. She wasn’t simply a refugee, but a member of the Gotei, and, like Madeki had said, she had a job and a duty to those who had died as much as those who had lived.

From tomorrow, I’ll try and be more useful. I’ll help as much as I can, even if I can’t use my healing abilities just yet. I’m not going to be just sheltered and looked after, but I’m going to help get to the truth. Juushirou’s preoccupation with his Division isn’t him neglecting me, but him supporting them. I have my own division and I need to stand up for them, too. I can’t just hide here, fret and cry. I’m a shinigami, whether in Seireitei or Rukongai, that hasn’t changed.

The internal pep-talk, coupled with the good news about Seri helped settle her heart a little and she soon slipped into a comfortable, dreamless sleep, her nightmares for once abated by the reassuring presence of Juushirou’s aura so close to her body.

“But *why* don’t you want me to go?”

Souja paced across his father’s office, turning to send the Seventh Division Captain a look of frustration that, for him, bordered on insubordination. “Otosama, please, stop and be rational about this! Joumei sent the Hell Butterfly to me, so he expects me to do something about it. More, one of us has to go — and right now, Seventh would miss you a lot more than they would me. Joumei wouldn’t send me a message like this if he wasn’t sure he had Tenichi, and given the circumstances...”

“I thought we had an agreement about the Kitsune, Souja-kun,” Hirata put in, looking up from his desk, and interrupting his eldest child’s tirade mid-flow and fixing him with a calm, even glance. “Us going there, on any premise could bring them into harm’s way.”

The discussion had been looping around in the same circle for the best part of an hour, yet despite his best attempts, Souja was making few inroads into his father's firm decision. Although he had related Joumei's message word for word, Hirata had apparently been unmoved, and had reiterated his insistence that his son stay close to Seventh's barracks until further notice. It was not common for Souja to raise his voice against his Captain, nor was it at all usual for him to lose his temper but, at that moment, his blue eyes blazed with the closest thing to anger he could muster. He was still on duty, and so up till now he had managed to bite his lip and remain polite, but his aura was prickling with uncharacteristic tension, pushing him closer and closer to the limits of acceptable behaviour.

"I know that," he objected now. "I know, and I don't want bad things to happen to them either, but if Tenichi is there..."

"He's safe enough with them," Hirata interjected softly, "as you well know."

"He is, yes. He's fine, because they know he's ours," Souja muttered. "Joumei's message was pretty short, but he gave the impression that he'd rather we removed the man sooner rather than later, though. Their secret won't be kept long if he discovers who they are and what their relation is to us. It doesn't benefit anyone, letting one of our lower ranked officers run wild in Kitsune territory. Sending me to go get him is far less of a risk. All the Kitsune know me, and I'll be careful and discreet."

"Probably you will," Hirata acknowledged, "but so has whoever's been after shinigami been so far."

"You think I'd become their next target?" Souja looked incredulous. "With respect, Otousama, that's ridiculous. I'm not going to be taken hostage by anyone, not under any circumstances."

"You might be able to defend yourself, my boy, but what of the Kitsune, if they were to be caught up in your battle?"

"Joumei wouldn't let that happen. He's smart and resourceful and they aren't without skills of their own," Souja banged his hands down on the desk, fixing his father with a beseeching glance. "*Please*, Otousama. Everyone here is on edge still, and bringing Tenichi back unharmed would be a boost for them, as well as kickstarting the investigations into what happened to him. The whole of the Gotei is in disarray with one thing or another... even if there was someone else who could be trusted with their secret, there isn't anyone else to be spared."

Hirata let out a heavy sigh, removing his spectacles from their perch atop his nose and setting them down on his desk. He rubbed his brow as if trying to rid it of a tension headache, and for a moment he did not speak. Then, at length, he rested his hands on the desk before him, meeting Souja's urgent gaze with a sad one of his own.

"The Kitsune are people I swore to protect," he said quietly. "I swore it to Joumei's father, and I swore it to Joumei. My father did the same, and, when you inherit from me, so will you. It is a bond and a burden that belongs to the Endou Clan leader, and one of the few I prize, since it's founded in honour and distinction, not blood and war. I want to bring Kotetsu Tenichi back here safely, of course, but not at the cost of that promise or those lives. You understand as well as me how young some of the newest generation of the Kitsune are."

"Yes," Souja groaned, sinking down onto the floor before the desk with a grimace. "I know, I've seen them. Played with them. Watched some of them take their first steps — I know. Joumei's very proud of how peaceful their lives have become — more and more of the group are spreading outside of the Sekkiseki caverns, and establishing new lives for themselves on the outside without being persecuted. In the long run, it's what he wants for all of them — and if I'm reckless, I could jeopardise all of that. I understand the risks, Otousama, but I'm not the Head of the Endou yet. I'm the Vice Captain of the Seventh Division, and I took charge of this matter from Kikyue when she reported it to me. Retrieving Tenichi is my division duty, and not to do so would be in contempt of my appointment as Seventh Division's adjutant."

"Why did I have to have a son who thinks things through so logically?" Hirata looked pained. "No wonder you always topped your classes in Sakusen and pleased Genryuusai-sensei so roundly at the Academy. He used to say that he saw elements of me in you, but I can't imagine what elements those are — I'm sure I'm not half as stubborn or tenacious as you when you have an idea in your mind. You've always been that way — if you fail from one angle, you find another and attack with all you have. As your Captain, I could give you an order to stay here, but I don't think you'd obey me, would you? You'd face my discipline and go anyhow — because retrieving Tenichi is the right thing to do and that's that as far as you're concerned. We can keep having this conversation over and over, but you've already decided what you're going to 're just hoping I'll cede to your line of thought, so you can go with your Captain's blessing."

"Maybe... that's a little bit true," Souja acknowledged slowly. "I don't want to go in contradiction of my orders. A Vice Captain owes

absolute obedience to his Captain and a son owes filial loyalty to his Father. You're both of those things — so yes, I would much rather go with your permission than without."

"But if I don't give it, you'll go anyway, regardless of how much that would undermine my authority in front of the rest of the squad?" Hirata asked archly.

"I... suppose I would," Souja reddened slightly. "I wouldn't mean it that way... but... I don't understand why you're so insistent on me staying put. We know where Tenichi is, and where he is is logistically problematic. It's up to us to resolve that — isn't it?"

"Yes, yes it is," Hirata conceded wearily. "Our responsibilities towards the Kitsune include making sure their secrets aren't exposed to the outside world."

He buried his head in his hands.

"This is what I get for letting Juushirou spend so much time with you and Kikyue when you were small," he muttered. "I should have known his idealism would've rubbed off on at least one of you."

"This isn't about Juushirou-dono," despite himself, Souja grinned at his father's wry remarks. "It's my will, Otousama. I take responsibility. I'll use cloaking Kidou and I'll move swiftly. I'll go under cover of darkness, if you prefer, since it'll draw less attention to my movements and even the Seventh won't have to know I've gone, then. I'll bring back Tenichi safely and hear Joumei's report for myself. We need those things to happen — if we've retrieved Tenichi without paying the ransom, it means that he must've escaped on his own, and probably can tell us something about who took him."

"Or they let him go, in the hope that it would lure the Kitsune out," Hirata raised his head suddenly, and Souja frowned, biting his lip.

"You think that's possible?"

"Of course I do," Hirata nodded. "If I was planning a strategy and I wanted to find someone, that's how I'd do it, too. If keeping him hostage doesn't get them the information, perhaps letting him free in Seventh land will."

"In that case, then, whoever it is might already know where the Kitsune are," Souja's eyes narrowed. "That makes it even more imperative that I go, Otousama. I need to warn Joumei and a Hell Butterfly could be intercepted. My reiatsu senses are good, and I'll pay careful attention to make sure I'm not followed by anyone, if that's your worry. Whatever you say, it won't change my mind. Please,

Taichou, give me authorisation to go into Seventh to get our Eighth Seat and bring him back here!”

Hirata’s expression was unreadable for a moment, then he lowered his head in a reluctant nod.

“Kikyue is the one with the temper, but arguing with you is always much harder,” he remarked bleakly. ‘All right. Under cover of darkness. Be careful,’ he added, an admonishing note in his usually even tones. “I’m not happy about it, but your arguments make sense and I can’t ignore them. We do need Tenichi’s testimony if we have a chance of finding out what’s going on with these kidnappings and whether there is a connection of any kind to the incident in the Spiritless Zone.”

“Do you think there is one?” Souja looked surprised, and Hirata’s pale blue eyes darkened.

“The only thing I’m sure of is that there’s an inside link,” he said blackly. “Tenichi’s abduction was almost certainly aided and abetted by someone inside Inner Seireitei — though I don’t know yet who or why. What happened in Rukongai may well have been the same thing. It’s hard to say at the moment what happened — but if the rumour is true and a Hollow went rogue there, just like Juushirou’s mentioned happening in Lower Seireitei... that’s enough for me to make it a connection. For that reason, I want you extra-specially on your guard when you leave. I know you said you would be, but it must be perfect and you mustn’t let anyone track you, no matter how innocent their interest might seem. Whoever has taken these shinigami has known far too much about Divisions, their manoeuvres and where particular people will be at any given time. Until we find out who the leak is, everything has to be done with express care.”

“I didn’t know you’d been discussing those rumours with Juushirou-dono?” Souja looked surprised, and Hirata shrugged.

“Not yet, not in detail, but the pieces go infuriatingly well together, and I’m sure he’s seen the links, too,” he responded. “All right. You’re dismissed. Make sure you finish all the paperwork you’ve got outstanding before nightfall, so I can go over the bits I need to. I want you to report to me before you leave for Seventh, and make sure you hand your duties over to Kikyue before you do. She doesn’t need to know where you’re going — on an errand for me, that’s enough, understand?”

“I’ve kept the Kitsune a secret from her for this long, Father. I can certainly keep her off the scent a while longer,” Souja assured his

Captain, relief in his blue eyes. "Thank you, sir. I won't let you down, I promise."

"See you don't," Hirata warned, but there was no real severity in his tones, and Souja shot him a grin, saluting sharply before withdrawing from the office and shutting the door carefully behind him. He had not expected his father to be so reluctant, but, as he reflected on the conversations, he realised that he understood the Captain's deeper concerns.

The Kitsune are ours to protect, and have been since Grandfather first shielded them. It's a matter of pride and honour that must be upheld.

He quickened his pace, covering the short distance between the Captain's office and his own in a matter of minutes, and unlocking the door, gazing at the pile of unfinished papers with undisguised dislike. *He didn't forget about giving me all of those, though. If I didn't know better, I'd think he was sending me at night to make sure I didn't wriggle out of finishing that first. Oh well. I guess I did get my way, albeit with a slight compromise, so the least I can do is catch up with Seventh's papers.*

"Oniisama?"

He had not sensed Kikyue's approach, so her greeting made him jump, almost dropping the black writing brush he had just retrieved in surprise. At his reaction she snorted, stepping into the chamber with a derisive shake of her head.

"You shouldn't be startled by me, Fukutaichou," she said reproachfully. "I'm a subordinate officer. Just because I happen to be your sister..."

"You came in and addressed me as Oniisama, so quite clearly right now you consider us to be off duty," Souja said evenly. "What's the matter, Kiki-chan? I have to finish these by nightfall, since Father's sending me on another errand for him then."

"So that's what all the shouting was about?" Kikyue looked thoughtfully, coming to stand beside the desk and scooping up the top sheet of the pile. "You're still going through these? I thought you handled them already... wasn't this what you were authorising when I was with you earlier?"

"Yes, but I have other duties besides signing documents," Souja set the brush aside with a sigh. "What shouting?"

"You tell me," Kikyue retorted. "I don't eavesdrop on people's conversations, but you definitely raised your voice at least twice. Father must've been in a better mood, else he'd have savaged you. Is

the job he's sent you on so bad that you begged out of it and lost the argument?"

"Something like that," Souja agreed, glad that his sister had not heard any of the specifics. "Captain's orders, though, so I'll go. I'm to hand over all of my other duties to you for the evening, by the way. That's also his orders."

"Including those?" Kikyue eyed the paperwork dubiously, and Souja shook his head.

"Fortunately for you, no," he admitted with a regretful sigh. "I'll go when I've done them — so I don't really have time to hang around and chat."

"I could always come with you on this night-time mission," Kikyue suggested speculatively.

"Are you bored?" Souja arched an eyebrow, and Kikyue groaned, sinking down onto the floor with an emphatic nod.

"Horribly so," she agreed darkly. "Father's not trusted me with a single task of responsibility since he came back from the manor, and though he hasn't said it, it's almost as though he holds me responsible for Tenichi's disappearance. I have done my best to find him, and it wasn't as though he was in Seventh when it happened, but..."

"I don't think Father feels that way," Souja reassured her. "He likes piling tasks on me because I'm his second and his heir. One day I'll have to do all that he does, and there's no room for hesitation or weakness when dealing with this squad or this Clan. It's no slight against you, Kiki-chan. Father has a lot of faith in you, and so do I. Don't look so downcast... it doesn't suit you."

"So I could come with you..?" Kikyue asked hopefully, and Souja sighed, shaking his head.

"Not this time," he said regretfully. "This time, Father said specifically that he wanted you here to take charge of everything in my absence. I got the feeling he might not spend the whole evening in Seventh — he didn't say as much, but he did mention Juushirou-dono, so I wondered if he might set out for Thirteenth to compare notes there. If that's the case, you're needed here. It wouldn't be fair on anyone for us all to leave and for there to be nobody in command."

"I suppose that's true," Kikyue acknowledged pensively. "If Father said that, I guess he does trust me, still. All right, Oniisama. I'll do my best. I don't deal with my subordinates in the same way you do, so I hope they can handle that for one night."

“They’d better, because if any of them play you up, I’ll find them in pieces when I get back,” Souja said, amused. “It will be fine, and if you’re okay with it, it means I can go and complete my task with a lighter heart.”

“You’re not going to tell me what this task is, though, are you?” Kikyue’s eyes became slits. “This is one of those Father-Son things that him don’t get to play a part in.”

“Afraid so,” Souja reached across to ruffle her hair as though she were still a small child, and she yelped, shuffling back and glaring at him in indignation.

“Don’t treat me like a kid!” she protested. “I’m not that much younger than you, and I’m plenty capable of taking your sword in a fight!”

“I’m sorry,” Souja laughed, his heart somewhat lightened by the familiar banter with his closest sister. “It’s easy to forget, when you sit there and look at me like that. You’re not always so demure and receptive to what I have to say, unless I’m giving a formal squad order — so it’s quite nice, for once, to just talk like this.”

“Oniisama, are you going on a dangerous mission tonight?” Kikyue was nothing if not sharp-witted, and Souja looked rueful.

“I trust not,” he murmured, “but you never know. A lot is going on in Lower Seireitei at the moment. I don’t foresee any complications — but I’ll be going on my guard, just in case.”

“Good,” Kikyue’s eyes darkened, “because it’s bad enough one of our shinigami got taken out of the blue like he did. If anyone dared mess with our Vice Captain, I’d slash them down with my blade myself, without a moment’s hesitation.”

“You imply I can’t defend myself,” Souja said lightly, and Kikyue shrugged.

“I fight better than you, you strategise better than me,” she said philosophically. “That’s just how it works. I didn’t waste however many years it was studying how Hollows attack from all angles and psychoanalysing why they get the way they are. I spent time with my sword, perfecting my skills and learning the best ways to slash them open without anyone else getting hurt.”

“True enough,” Souja grinned. “I’m not anticipating going into a fight this evening, though, so you can put your mind at rest. Now, can you give me some space? I have papers to finish, and unless you want to be helping all over again, I suggest you make yourself scarce.”

“I’ll go,” Kikyue agreed with a shudder, getting to her feet and grimacing at the substantial wad of documents. “That’s one Father-Son thing that you can keep. I’m going to go take my lower seats through a basic kenjutsu drill, and see how many of them can keep their footing this time. Last time one of them wound up crying, so I figured there’s more work to be done.”

“Don’t kill anyone,” Souja warned, and Kikyue dimpled, shrugging her shoulders.

“Not in the gameplan, but that’s really up to them,” she responded carelessly. “You can’t learn to fight with a sword if you’re afraid of getting hit by one. Later, Oniisama. Don’t work too hard — and don’t worry, I’ll take over your duties later for you, no problem.”

With that she was gone, and Souja pursed his lips, getting up to close the door she had left ajar.

Maybe I’ll bring Tenichi back with me, and then you’ll have a full set of subordinates to drill.

He sighed, resting his hand against the wood for a moment, before returning reluctantly to his desk.

Maybe then you won’t drill the others so hard. I know you’re trying to make sure none of them get taken, but I’m not sure they understand it from that perspective.

He picked up his brush, reaching for the next document.

Oh well. I daresay it will balance out in the long run. For now, I can’t spend too long worrying about it, anyway. I have to get through these so that I can go this evening and answer Joumei’s summons.

Author’s Note: This chapter makes me sad...

17. Black Earth

Chapter Sixteen: Black Earth

The town of Haruna-chou on the border that ran between District Two and Three was a busy checkpoint town, bustling with trades and well known as much for its wide array of wares as its diversity of population. The land nearby was fertile, fed by the flood plains of the river that wound itself between several of the villages nearby, and, though some of the area's older properties bore the faint scarring of the long ago war between the Urahara and the Shihouin, these days the two Clans were, if not formal allies, on friendly enough terms to have dropped most sanctions and allowed each other's people priveleged access to trade. Haruna was unique among its neighbours, for the border cut directly through the middle of the settlement. It had been carved up that way by ancient Clansfolk settling a tricky land dispute and had been one of the most hotly contested regions in wartime, but these days neither Midori of the Shihouin nor Nagesu of the Urahara favoured spilling the inhabitants' civilian blood. Consequently it was a magnet for people from all over both Districts and, though some communities could be insular and exclusive, anyone and everyone was welcomed into Haruna's busy streets with open arms.

It was the perfect place for a traveller to take a break out of his journey, and also, the perfect place for someone who should not be anywhere to blend in.

Masaya had been to this area many times before — in fact, another lifetime ago he had grown up here, and therefore knew the hills and valleys that flanked the river like the back of his hand. He was familiar with what traders sold where on which market days, and was on good terms with several of the local inhabitants, but although he had come here many times for Keitarou in the previous eighteen months, none who had seen his face had recognised him as a local boy.

Well, it was hardly surprising, was it?

Masaya allowed his thin lips to twist into a rueful, empty smile, reaching a gloved hand up to touch the smooth skin of his face. It wasn't his original skin, of course, nor were the deposits that replaced the bones in his jaw and cheekbones native to his body, their hard,

slightly uneven shape giving him a uniquely nondescript expression that made him appear far more sinister than he ever had before. Beneath the dark robes he wore hid more evidence of his change of identity, though some scars had been impossible to hide. As he viewed his reflection in the gentle ripples of the river, he mused to himself that, had she still been alive, his own mother would not have known him.

Of course, his mother was no longer alive.

His eyes darkened at the memory, before closing off to the emotion as though shutters had been brought down across a window, blocking out all of the light from outside. It had been a difficult and unhappy time, and he preferred not to think of it. That life was behind him, now — that identity belonging to a dead man, and he was here, with a new drive and purpose — to change Seireitei once and for all.

That was the reason he had come here, though visiting a place with such deep connections to his past gave him little pleasure. Keitarou had sent him to meet with someone, and Keitarou was not a man who was easy to disobey. Ten years ago, Masaya's life had been saved by this enigmatic, genius scientist, his body literally put back together piece by piece and his native spiritual abilities enhanced and harnessed with some chemical formula Keitarou's late father had created. Rukongai was not always the most pleasant of hunting grounds, but it was at least free, and Masaya relished this most of all — after so long locked in a close, dark cell, with only death before him, he had been given a second chance to taste life.

He would not throw it away foolishly by betraying Keitarou's trust.

He ducked beneath the low-hanging welcome sign that had been slung over the entrance arch to Haruna's main market square, its writing faded and peeling but its message of "Everybody welcome!" still as comforting to him now as it had been when he had been just a boy. Though several sellers tried to get his attention touting their wares, he paid the majority of them no heed, making a bee-line instead for a weaver's stall that stood a little to one side. A young woman was here, dressed in simple pale pink robes and with her dark hair pulled back in a simple, unadorned gathering behind her head. She was deep in conversation with a customer as he approached but, at the sight of him, she quickly completed the sale, giving the unsuspecting patron a wide smile and eliciting a promise from him to call back again. Masaya allowed himself another droll smile. She was almost as good an actor as he was.

"Well?"

As he approached, the smile disappeared from her lips, her brow twitching together warily.

"I've warned you about coming here too often. Someone will recognise you. You need to be more careful, or else..."

"I'm fine. Nobody ever has — they only see what they choose to see, and they don't choose to see the dead," Masaya dismissed her warning with a flick of his hand. "More importantly, I didn't come here to listen to you fuss or fluster. I came from Keitarou-sama — and you know what that means."

"He wants us to act again on his behalf?" the young woman looked pained. "Does he think it's easy, taking heedless shinigami hostage and keeping them doped up with poppy juice and strong soporifics until the ransoms get paid? It's a lot of risk, and if we were to be caught..."

"Keitarou-sama lets you keep ten percent of the ransom, and that's not an ungenerous settlement," Masaya reminded her unsympathetically.

"You only ever take his side these days," the woman pursed her lips, the faintest flicker of regret in her gentian-blue eyes. "I wonder, sometimes, if you really remember me, Naoto, or whether I'm just another fleeting ghost of a memory, lingering in fragments behind Keitarou-sama's wall of rhetoric."

"Naoto is dead," Masaya snapped, grabbing her by the arm and pulling her away from her stall, his eyes glittering with annoyance. "I've told you enough times, that isn't my name now. Naoto was put to death. He's gone. Dead. Finished. If you say that name around here too often... that's when people will start to remember. You try to warn me about my safety, woman, and then you say things like that!"

"I'm your wife," the woman pulled her hand back from him coldly, glaring at him in defiance. "If I can't call you by the name your Ma gave you, who can?"

"Nobody, not even you," Masaya said blackly. "You're Naoto's widow, Minami, not my wife. How many times have we been through this?"

"Not enough, evidently," Minami looked suddenly weary, sinking back against the wall of a nearby building as if the fight had run out of her. "I know. I'm sorry. I see you so little, now, that's all. You've changed so much, but every time you come here, I hope that a little bit more of you has come back. I hope for it, but goodness only knows

why. You're not the man I married, but I can't help it. He's the only person I've ever loved, and even if you're not quite him any more... I can't let you go."

She pressed her lips together for a moment, getting a hold of her emotions, then,

"Well? What does Keitarou-sama want from me this time?" she asked acidly. "I hope he's considerably further on in his scheme to destroy the Shinigami heartland from the inside out? I want to see them burn, and I'm getting mighty impatient with waiting. They took from me the most valuable things I had — my husband, my home, my self-respect — and it can't be too soon for them to feel exactly what that's like. Tell me that he's got something better in the works than simply grabbing small fry and messing them up a bit?"

"There aren't to be any more abductions. At least, not here, and not for now," Masaya shook his head. "Keitarou-sama thinks it's too risky, since some of the shinigami have begun investigating leads and we don't want to lead them back to you and your companions hereabouts. It would be bad if word got out — we wouldn't be able to protect you."

"Would you still protect me?" Minami asked bitterly. "Naoto would have, with his life, but I'm not sure about Kurotsuchi Masaya."

"Then don't ask the question," Masaya returned bluntly. "It's immaterial, anyway. Keitarou-sama says you're to be protected, and so we will. He's taking action. A few days ago, he sent agents into the Shinigami-run section of Rukongai, and slaughtered all the members of the squad stationed there."

"All of them?" Minami looked curious. "How did he manage that?"

"If I told you things you didn't need to know, you'd know too much and that would be dangerous for you," Masaya responded. "I've come here to tell you not to abduct any more shinigami, but to be ready and to make sure all those who act with you know it, too."

"Hrm. All right. If that's what Keitarou-sama says, I can't pretend I'm sorry to stop taking the risks," Minami rubbed her hands absently against the sleeves of her kimono. "As it happens, I have some news to bring to you, too."

She gestured her hand in the direction of the man she had just served, who was now having a heated debate with the trader at the sake stall about the cost of bottles.

"He's a travelling musician, been coming this way from the Eighth,"

she continued. “On his travels, he’s heard a bunch of rumours. When he broke the Second border, over from First, he overheard a couple of Shihouin guardsmen talking about that underground group of theirs — the Onmitsukidou. Apparently they’d been mobilised — I thought you’d like to know.”

“Onmitsukidou?” Masaya’s eyes became like slits, and Minami nodded.

“I thought that would get your interest,” she said dryly. “It sure got mine. If I hate shinigami, I despise the special ops. Anyway, he didn’t know his spies from his spices, but what he did say was that he thought they’d been sent in somewhere remote — something to do with a distress call and an emergency. If what you told me just about Keitarou-sama and Rukongai is the truth...”

“It’s probable they went there,” Masaya’s lips twitched downwards in displeasure. “I see. That was very fast of them. Even if your customer only just arrived here today, that would still mean he’d crossed the border not long after Keitarou-sama sent his people into Rukongai. If they’d all been killed outright, it should’ve been longer before the crime was discovered... if a distress was sent up, it implies...”

“Someone botched their job? Left a witness or two choking in their own blood?” Minami nodded. “Perhaps you ought to look into that, rather than worrying about round here. We’re fine. We know what to do, and we keep our heads down. The resentment against the shinigami has grown since the Hollow attacks increased, so probably there’ll be a sizeable number of disaffected District people to call on if and when Keitarou-sama ever gets around to taking real action. In the meantime, since he relies on you to find information and cover his dirty work, I’d head off and see what you can find out from your old friends. If the Onmitsukidou are investigating, you know they won’t waste any time in giving their verdict, no matter how accurate it happens to be.”

“Indeed,” Masaya agreed grimly. “That’ll mean slipping into Inner Seireitei again, won’t it? Damn. I hate being there, and I’d hoped I wouldn’t need to go back. It’s always too risky — nobody here would recognise me, but someone there... they might. Still, you’re right, and I’m glad you told me. I ought to get to the bottom of this. If there are survivors, Keitarou-sama will need to make sure his people can’t be placed at the scene or identified — more to the point, he’ll need to know that someone messed up, and, probably, get them to fix it.”

“I’ve given you plenty to do, then, by the sounds,” Minami

stretched her arms over her head, stifling a yawn. "If you don't mind, though, I'm going back to my stall. I've things to sell and a roof to keep over my own head, since my husband's no longer around to do it for me."

There was bitterness in her words again, but Masaya paid her no mind. His thoughts were fixed on what she had told him, his quick mind racing through the possible explanations for the Onmitsukidou's quick deployment.

They suspect something is up, and so reacted that way from the start. This could be problematic... I'll have to find out more.

"Hadou no sanjuu ni — Oukasen!"

The flare of golden light burst out across the Thirteenth Division's training arena, illuminating it briefly in its dazzling glare. The ball of compact energy cannoned into the target, immolating three quarters of it on impact and, as ashes and shards of fragmented Kidou drifted up from the aftermath of the explosion, the shinigami lowered his hands, a grim look of determination in his pale eyes.

"Your aim is improving," from the other side of the arena, a diminutive shinigami who, at first glance might have appeared to be both younger in age and inferior in rank to his companion shifted nimbly across the arena, pausing to examine the target with a careful, critical eye before nodding his head. "You were maybe a few inches too much to the left still, when you launched. I think it's a matter of stance more than the shape of your hands, though. You have a habit of shifting your weight forward slightly as you call the spell, and it sends your Hadou a little wide."

"Is that what it is?" The one who had fired the spell glanced at his charred fingers thoughtfully. "I keep trying and trying to get that spell right, Tsukabishi-san, but I never seem to manage to get it as precise as *Shakkahou* or *Soukatsui*. I thought it was something to do with my focus, but if you think it's not..."

"Fire it again, Ketsui-kun, and let me watch you a second time," Tsukabishi Tsunemori, Thirteenth Division's Ninth seat instructed, taking a step back and indicating with a slim, narrow hand towards a second target. "Fukutaichou just received a bunch more of those from supplies, and he told me we could use as many as we needed, so don't hold back. Taichou has a special arrangement with one of the carpenters in District Six, so getting more is never a problem."

"Taichou has a lot of connections with a lot of people," Ketsui

murmured, nonetheless obediently readying his stance once more, blowing the residual ash from his fingers before pushing his palms together ready to summon the spell again. "I'm always amazed by that — even though he came from the Districts, he seems to be able to call on anyone for anything."

"I suppose it's because everyone knows if they need to call on help, Taichou will be the first to answer that call," Tsunemori replied with a slight smile. "You give what you get... something like that. You reap what you sow — and all this Kidou practice will help you improve against Hollows and such like, Ketsui-kun. You really are improving — if you carry on like that, you'll be outranking me."

"Some hope of that," Ketsui snorted, shifting his feet slightly against the worn dirt, for despite his diminutive size and unimposing appearance, Tsunemori was well known across the Gotei for his fondness for and expert ability in shinigami magic. He was someone who, in the midst of a crowd, might be easily overlooked, but his memory for spells and incantations — even obscure ones — was second in the Thirteenth Division only to the Captain himself. Born to a nomadic mother who had been killed by a Hollow, Tsunemori had entered the Academy as a weeping, illiterate youngster who had spent most of his time hiding, but, although he was never one to take the lead and speak his mind, these days he rarely backed away from a challenge and, as Ketsui and many of the lower ranking Thirteenth Division members knew only too well, if you wanted a Kidou trainer, there were none better to have than Tsukabishi Tsunemori. Patient, understanding and clear in his explanations, his ability and confidence to mentor those younger than him had blossomed since his promotion to the top ten ranks, and it was rumoured that even some of the Clan-led divisions would have liked to have stolen him away for their own squads had Juushirou's claim on his loyalty not been so strong.

"Your Kidou is on a level of its own," Ketsui continued now. "Kirio-neesan reckons that, if ranking was done on Kidou alone, you'd be threatening her seat. You're really a very good teacher, too. Thank you for spending this morning going over this with me. I'm sure you have a lot of other things to do, but you explain everything so clearly that I feel like I understand so much better."

"I had nothing important on my schedule, and I like training with other officers like this," Tsunemori's smile widened, but there was a faint flicker of sympathy in his often sad eyes. "Especially you, right at the moment. You're thinking of your brother, and you're frustrated that you can't do anything to help him."

“Is it that obvious?” Ketsui looked stricken, and Tsunemori nodded, shrugging his shoulders.

“Kira-san and I were discussing it this morning, when you were at the baths,” he agreed. “I don’t know that everyone else notices quite so quickly, but Kira-san and I share quarters with you, and, well, it’s harder to hide things like that from those you live with most closely. Besides, we’ve all felt like that, at one point or another. We’ve all had someone we’ve felt too weak to save. But we don’t know Tenichi-kun is dead, yet. He’s strong and he can fight his corner. I have faith that he’ll come back to Seireitei alive — and so should you.”

“I do. I do believe it,” Ketsui’s brow creased in concentration, and he closed his eyes, muttering the words to the incantation once more. A second, slightly curved blast of golden light flared forth from his hands. It barrelled through the spiritually charged air towards the second target, hitting it almost dead on and splintering through the wood with its force and density.

“Not bad,” Tsunemori observed approvingly. “You didn’t shift your aim so much that time. It was much more accurate.”

Ketsui let out a sigh of satisfaction.

“Good,” he said, relieved. “I know it’s stupid, but even though I believe my brother is okay, I’m still frustrated that I can’t do anything about helping him. He’s always raced ahead of me — he’s always had that much more confidence than I have. If I knew where he was being held, I think I’d hesitate before going after him, and I hate that part of myself. I want to find him — but I might waste time worrying about how best to go about it, and...”

“Strategising isn’t a bad trait to have,” Tsunemori assured him. “Besides, I don’t think you would hesitate. You’d go after him, whether Taichou wanted you to or not. Me training with you this session means he knows where you are — and if I improve your Kidou proficiency, if you did hare off to the rescue, you’d be more likely to come back alive. Your sword skills are good, but you need more confidence in your spells. Kidou’s a matter of self-belief — and that’s really all.”

“Fukutaichou would beg to differ,” Ketsui rubbed his blackened fingers against his *hakamashita* with a rueful smile. “Not everyone is as instinctively good at it as you or Taichou are.”

“We all have our strengths and our weaknesses,” Tsunemori said sensibly. “I think you’ve managed the best you’re going to do for today, though, with *Oukasen*. How about taking a few moments break

and then we'll talk about *Haien*? You need to settle your *reiryoku* a bit before we start on anything else, and *Haien* isn't the kind of spell you play with carelessly."

"No kidding," Ketsu pursed his lips, his gaze flitting to the fencing that surrounded the training ground. Most of it had been there for years but two or three panels had been replaced within the last ten years and, if you looked at them carefully, you could see faint marks of charring in the surviving sections that flanked the new ones on either side. The damage had been done by Tenichi when he had been in the lower ranks of the Thirteenth and he had never been allowed to live it down, after firing a *Haien* spell that had flared badly out of control. Though the grass had now grown back around it, Ketsui recalled how black and barren the area had been for several months afterwards, and several jokes had been made about it being "Heaven's Fireplace."

He sighed, rubbing his temples to clear the memory.

"I wish Ten-nii had never left the Thirteenth," he murmured, more than half to himself. "He had friends here, and if he'd been here, he wouldn't have been going anywhere the night he came to see Kirio-neesan. He would've been staying here, so he'd have been safe. Plus, if this was an attack on Seventh, well, Ten-nii belongs here, not there. I wish he'd never gone there. I wish he'd never asked to transfer."

"You can't change what's already happened, unfortunately," Tsunemori said matter-of-factly, moving to pluck the folorn remains of the targets out of the ground. "Tenichi-kun decided to go to Seventh for a new challenge, and, probably, for your sake, too."

"Shizuka-chan said that," Ketsui grimaced. "Nii-chan never told me himself, but she said that he probably went because if he and I were in the same division, I would always look to him to help me and he'd always want to be there to do that. We needed to be apart, he said — but I still don't like it."

"You have improved a lot since he moved, though," Tsunemori remarked. "You've applied yourself far more to your Kidou, you've been promoted to Tenth seat — I think he did the right thing, Ketsui-kun. More, I think he's alive and well and will find a way to get word to Endou-taichou if he needs help to get back here. He's not someone who's easy to kill, your brother, and a lot of people care about finding him."

"Yes, true," Ketsui acknowledged. "It's different for everyone else than for me, though. Ten-nii is my brother. He's my only immediate

family... he's all I have left."

"Yes.." Tsunemori's expression became pensive, faint sadness in his gaze once more. "Yes, I know, but Thirteenth Division is also your family. Taichou told me that when I first enlisted here, and I've always had complete faith in his ability to make that true. A lot of us have no family to speak of at all — but that doesn't mean any of us are really alone."

"Good words, Tsunemori,"

Juushirou's voice from the entrance of the training arena made both shinigami turn, Tsunemori looking sheepish as he realised his Captain had overheard his remarks. "I do my best, and I'm glad you feel that way."

He glanced at the burnt targets Tsunemori held in his hands. "I see you've been busy. I thought I sensed someone firing *Oukasen* down here."

"Tsukabishi-san was helping me improve my accuracy and my concentration," Ketsui bowed his head hurriedly towards his Captain. "I was having some trouble with it, but he's helped me a lot."

"I'm sure," Juushirou grinned, moving across the training ground and resting a hand on the shoulders of each young man. "I want you now, though, Ketsui — Tsunemori, I'd like you to go to Houjou's office. Atsudane and Kira should already be there. We've had a Hell Butterfly to say that there's some Hollow activity not far from the Inner Seireitei boundary, and its fallen to us to deal with it. From the reports, it sounds like the kind of creature who'd benefit from some Kidou subjugation. I'm sure I can rely on you?"

"Yes, sir," Tsunemori replied immediately, bowing his head and scurrying from the training ground as though he were still the first year student Juushirou had once rescued from both spiritual monsters and school bullies. Ketsui had not been at the Academy during those years, but he had heard the stories many times — and he understood that, in Tsunemori's mind, Juushirou and Enishi were both people he looked up to with absolute faith and confidence.

"What about me, sir?" Ketsui turned his gaze on his Captain now, questions in his eyes.

"I want you to do some research for me," Juushirou eyed him gravely. "I know how you're feeling, Ketsui, and I can't do anything about it except give you work to do. I don't know whether this has any correlation to your brother's disappearance — it probably doesn't,

but I think you'll need to trust that to the hands of Endou-taichou and I, since we don't know what kind of forces we're dealing with. In the meantime, I want you to do something else very important. You've been firing spells for some time, and so a paper-based job for a few hours won't hurt... are you game?"

"If it's an order, sir, then of course I am," Ketsui was surprised, and Juushirou let out a chuckle at his response.

"It's not an order, it's a request, but one that I hope you'll follow up anyhow," he said, amusement twinkling in his eyes. "It's a matter that, for now, I hope you'll keep somewhat quiet — although I don't want you to investigate alone. This is a joint matter between the Eighth and Thirteenth, following up something that Edogawa-san told us when making her report. You're to go to the central archive and investigate records of recent judicial proceedings in Lower Seireitei — perhaps over the last couple of years."

"Judicial..." Ketsui's eyes widened with confusion. "I can do that, sir, but... why?"

"I'm not sure, yet," Juushirou was apologetic. "We're trying to piece together all the leads we have relating to Rukongai, and that means following the things that don't seem to connect to the murders as much as those who do. We have to eliminate all possibilities. What I want to know is whether any petty criminals escaped justice in the not so distant past. Young men, approximately your age, perhaps younger — with dark hair and dark blue eyes. We want a name... even better, a location and a history, perhaps a place of origin. It might not be easy to find — but you have good attention to detail and so I thought I'd send you."

"And to distract me from thinking about Ten-nii?" Ketsui asked quietly. Juushirou nodded.

"That, too," he agreed. "This is something Kyouraku-taichou and I are both investigating, and I can't spare anyone else from Thirteenth now that the Hollow alert has come in, so I want you to go there and find yourself a study buddy. You spend enough time visiting there that I'm sure you can manage that — am I right?"

"Yes, sir," Ketsui nodded his head, his expression still mystified. "I'll ask if Shizuka-chan is free to help me, and I'll go right away."

"Good lad," Juushirou seemed pleased, clapping him gently on the back. "I look forward to hearing your report — be as detailed as possible, all right?"

“I understand,” Ketsui did not fully understand, but he knew better than to question his leader when the man looked at him like that, so he bowed his head again, hurrying back towards the barracks’ main building to retrieve his *zanpakutou* from his room — since Tenichi’s abduction, no shinigami had left their home barracks without the reassuring backup of their sword, although Ketsui was sure that his brother had probably had his with him the night he had disappeared and it had been to no avail.

Thirteenth Division’s dorm system was a haphazard affair, partly on account of the fact most of the barracks had been constructed on an as-and-when basis. The division that had first come to Inner Seireitei had been some amount smaller than the one it currently housed, and, consequently, most of the dorm quarters were grouped into much smaller chambers than most divisions, with rooms of two, three and four shinigami rather than wider spaces that could house six, eight or even ten. A brand new block had been constructed across the yard from the main hall a mere fifteen years earlier, but the oldest chambers belonging to the top ten seated officers were housed here, in what was the original Thirteenth Division barracks building.

On the main hallway that led towards the koi pond and Juushirou’s own Ugendou were the private chambers of the Vice Captain, as well as the rooms allocated for those ranked in third to fifth place, each of whom were the envy of all other divisions on account of having private space, however small and poky that space might actually be. Between the doorway to Atsudane Makoto’s room and the currently vacant one reserved for the fourth seat was a narrow corridor that forked at the far end, leading to two distinct chambers. One was a twin room, the province of sixth seated Kirio and her roommate, the Eighth seated officer Konoe Mae. The other, slightly larger room held provision for three officers and it was here that Ketsui, along with Tsunemori and Kira slept.

He was fortunate, he reflected, as he pulled the dark blue sheath of his weapon from its perch beside his bunk, pausing to check it before slipping it through his *obi*. His roommates were both unimposing, but kindhearted and intelligent fellows, people with whom he could talk without being intimidated and from whom he had already learned a good deal. What Tsunemori had said was true, he knew — he had progressed and grown as a shinigami since Tenichi’s departure.

It doesn’t mean I like that he chose to go, though. Perhaps it was for both of our benefit, but right now it really doesn’t seem like it to me.

He sighed, stepping out of the chamber and closing the door firmly

behind him. Private quarters within Thirteenth were rarely locked — the code of honour and trust among its members meant that they very seldom needed to be.

Part of him was frustrated that he was being sent on such a mundane task — though he had always been a keen reader and a good academic, his current restlessness made him want to be out there in the heart of the action, looking for clues and hunting down those responsible for causing so much distress. Yet, underneath his annoyance was a level of grudging understanding. Juushirou had assigned him to a desk task to make sure he did not stray into danger searching for his brother — and he realised that his Captain understood his thoughts and motives extremely well. Though he was not as impulsive or confident a character as Tenichi, he had not been named ‘Ketsui’ for nothing, and, once he had formed a particular resolve, he rarely, if ever, backed away from it.

Taichou won't let me do that, though. Whenever my mind strays that way, he pushes duty and responsibility under my nose and I remember how much I owe Thirteenth Division. I can't let him or them down — they've all been good to me and Tsukabishi-san is right. I am part of a family, here. I just preferred it when my brother was also part of my division family — it meant a lot less in the way of conflicting loyalties.

He took a short cut through the back of the barracks, aware of the sounds of the recruits at sword drill in the main yard as he slipped out of the rear entrance, tracking around the side of the building towards the path that led to Eighth Division. The grass was worn down in places now from the number of times he and other members of the Thirteenth had taken the quickest route to reach what made up the most central part of Inner Seireitei's Gotei land, and Ketsui felt certain that Juushirou had taken the path himself on occasion, for it was no secret that he was great friends with both the Eighth Division's Captain and Vice Captain.

Academy friends, huh...

Ketsui pressed his lips together thoughtfully, a faint wistfulness in his pale eyes.

He had never been as forward as his older brother, who had commanded a wide circle of friends during his time at the Academy. The older Kotetsu boy had secured the rank of Anideshi in his final year, and Ketsui could remember with nostalgic fondness how all of his own classmates had revered Tenichi as though he were already a squad shinigami in his own right. He had not been the best at everything, but his charisma and natural leadership skills had always

drawn people in. It would've been easy to have resented a brother like that, Ketsui reflected, but he never had. Tenichi had always looked out for him, protected him and stood up for him whenever it had been needed, and so, just as much as his comrades, Ketsui had admired and adored his brother for everything he did.

His own progression through the Academy had been slower, dogged by a lack of confidence and, at the end of the second year, the fallout from what had been a nasty training incident involving a dummy Hollow. He had missed enough of the syllabus to be held back a year when his classmates had progressed, and he had found it a difficult blow from which to recover. Never as effortlessly gregarious as his brother had been, Ketsui had struggled to make new friends in a class of students who treated him kindly but who had already found their own friendships and who had little interest in adding one more. As his isolation had grown, so his grades had slipped, and by the time he had scraped through the end of his Third year, Tenichi had been certain he would never reach the top class, let alone graduate.

Then, in the first class of his Fourth year he had encountered Shizuka, and after that, everything had changed.

Magaki Shizuka was District-born, the daughter of a prostitute who had died young, leaving her the ward of an old childhood friend. She had come from ignominious roots, yet her foster mother had an illegitimate link to the Kyouraku Clan and for that reason, nobody had ever ridiculed her for her origins or her background. A sunny, friendly young woman, Shizuka's spirit power and ability to learn had proven so potent and rapid that she had swiftly been moved up from the Second year to the Fourth, a petite, startling pretty young woman who could turn into a ruthlessly intelligent warrior the moment a sword was placed in her hands. From the start, Ketsui reflected, Shizuka could have befriended every and any member of the class she wanted, but of everyone, she had chosen him. And, though most of their male classmates had paid her attention at one point or another, she had generally laughed and dismissed them with a flick of her hand, apparently unconcerned by the concept of popularity.

Thanks to Shizuka, Ketsui had found the confidence and the motivation to finish his training and join the Gotei. Even Tenichi had never known how close his heart had come to wavering, but with Shizuka's help and support, he had revived his determination, and had finally graduated third in his year. Although they had joined different divisions after leaving school, their friendship had remained as strong and solid as Tenichi's had with Kirio and, although Ketsui had never looked at Shizuka in romantic terms, he was well used to the members

of Eighth — the Captain included — teasing him about his frequent visits.

It was for this reason that, when Juushirou sent Ketsui to Eighth to find a helper, it was almost an automatically understood fact that the helper would be Shizuka.

Eighth Division was bustling with life as he entered the main courtyard, recruits scurrying this way and that as they tried to complete a long list of chores before being summoned for evening drill. Some of them knew Ketsui by sight and bowed to acknowledge him as he passed, but he did not stop, casting them brief smiles as he hurried through the archway to the cobbled area beyond.

“Well, well, come a-courting again, have we?”

Shunsui’s lazy voice came from up above, and Ketsui faltered, gazing around him in confusion as he tried to pinpoint where the Eighth Division Captain was. At first he could not see the man anywhere, but then he caught the faintest flicker of movement from the chamber that overlooked the yard, and, as he turned towards it, Shunsui’s tousled head appeared at the window, a tail of muzzy brown hair falling unheeded over his shoulder.

“I expected you,” he remarked, offering a casual smile. “You always come here with such eagerness, Ketsui-kun — it warms my heart to see it.”

“Kyouraku-taichou, Ukitake-taichou sent me here on a particular errand,” Ketsui was well used to the teasing by now, and so he did not even flinch, meeting the Captain’s gaze with an earnest expression. “I’m to go do some research in the archive, and I wondered if I might have Shizuka... Magaki-juuseki to help me. Taichou seemed to think you’d know about it, so he thought it would be all right.”

“Spiriting her away from me now, I see?” Shunsui’s expression was amused. “Yes, by all means. I know what Juus... Ukitake’s landed you with, and I don’t envy you, but I’m sure you’ll do a good job and the company of a pretty girl always makes a tiresome task seem lighter, doesn’t it?”

“Kyouraku-taichou, Magaki-juuseki is my friend, not anything else!” Ketsui returned neatly, knowing he was repeating himself for the umpteenth time and also realising as he spoke the words that it would make no difference to Shunsui’s will to tease. Shizuka’s foster mother was Shunsui’s sister, albeit by illegitimate blood, and for that reason Shunsui had always paid particularly close attention to the young girl’s progress. If not for that, Ketsui mused, Shizuka would

probably have joined Thirteenth on graduation, since most District shinigami still took that path, but Shizuka's situation never had been clear cut, and Shunsui, despite his genial, easy-going nature, had proven himself many times as a difficult Captain to argue with.

He grinned now, an unrepentant, insolent grin that on any subordinate officer would probably have incited a flogging.

"You'll have to check the training ground," he said now, waving a languid hand in the direction of Eighth Division's expensive and purpose built training arena. "I sent her there to work off some steam after she returned from a little errand of my own. You're welcome to her, Ketsui-kun — just be a good boy and bring her back to me in one piece, all right?"

"Kyouraku-taichou!" Now Ketsui's cheeks did burn, but Shunsui merely laughed, disappearing from the window before anything else could be said.

Realising he had lost the battle, Ketsui turned reluctantly on his heel, following the direction the enigmatic Captain had indicated. He could sense Shizuka's reiatsu as he drew closer, along with that of the Eighth Vice Captain and a couple of lower officers he didn't know, and he quickened his pace, pushing back the wood-slatted door and stepping inside.

A scene of some chaos greeted him, for Sora was haranguing two forlorn looking shinigami, an irritated look in her eyes, whilst, a safe distance away, Shizuka was on her hands and knees, examining what were unmistakably the splintered remains of an expensive and well polished *bokken*. At his entrance she glanced up, a rueful smile touching her lips and she got to her feet, dusting her *hakama* down with deft hands and reaching for the broom that stood propped against the wall.

Even with her *shihakushou* blotched grey in places with dust and the broom in her hand, it was difficult to see Shizuka as anything other than a *hime*. She had never been extremely tall, though she matched Sora more or less exactly for height, with long, curly brown hair that she tied back with a loose ribbon just beneath the nape of her neck. Her eyes were also brown, a dark, chocolate colour that sparkled when she was happy, but appeared almost black when she headed into battle, dark with focus and determination for the mission ahead. A light dusting of freckles covered her nose, sprinkling faintly across rose-touched cheeks, and when she smiled, she dimpled, making her appear all the more youthful and innocent. Ketsui had met Shizuka's adoptive mother only once, but had been struck by the

strong resemblance between them. He had commented on it, but Shizuka had simply laughed and shaken her head, as if she had heard the same thing many times before. She did not talk much about such things, either in public or in private, but Ketsui felt sure that some genetic connection must exist between the two women, or an amazing coincidence had taken place. Shizuka's brother Inori bore very little resemblance to his sibling, nor did he have the potent spirit power that hinted at much grander blood connections, but it was a subject on which Shizuka preferred not to linger, and, as her friend, Ketsui respected her right to privacy. After all, as he knew to his own cost, there were many in the Districts with complicated Clan connections lurking like skeletons in their closets.

"We had a small accident," she said unnecessarily now, gesturing to the scattered fragments of wood. "I don't suppose you came to help me clean up?"

"No, I came with an errand from my Captain — and he wanted me to ask for your help," Ketsui shook his head, stepping into the chamber proper. "What on earth happened? Those are *bokken*, right?"

"They were. Now they're firewood," Shizuka said pragmatically, sweeping them up into a pile with a swish that emphasised her point. "A couple of the recruits thought they'd do some private sparring without proper permission and without checking their equipment over first. As you can see, it didn't go all that well. It's a pain, because I wanted to use this area for some training of my own — but I wound up on clean-up duty instead, thanks to Fukutaichou."

"I heard that," Sora broke off mid-rant, turning to shoot Shizuka a warning look. "Oh, hello, Ketsui-kun. What brings you here?"

"Taichou's orders," Ketsui explained, bowing his head very properly towards the Vice Captain of the Eighth Division. "I'm sorry to interrupt — I didn't realise that erm, you were quite so..."

"Annoyed?" Sora's expression became rueful. 'It's all right. Shizuka's not really involved in all of this, so take her by all means. Someone else,' she paused, eying one of the quailing recruits meaningfully, "will finish up the sweeping, since it's better they learn right away that they clean up their own mess."

"Thank you, Fukutaichou," Shizuka's expressive face took on a look of relief. "I'll not be back late, I'm sure. We're only going to the central archive, so if you or the Captain need me for anything..."

"I'm sure we can spare you for a little while, but I'll keep it in mind," Sora assured her, waving her hands towards the door. "Go on,

shoo, the pair of you, before I find you both chores to do. I've other things on my agenda for the day and I have someone I want to go visit before dark falls, so I don't have any time to waste fussing over you."

"We're going, we're going," Shizuka dimpled, grabbing Ketsui by the arm and pulling him back out into the courtyard. Once outside she sighed, flinging her arms around him and hugging him tightly, taking him off guard.

"Hey, what was that for?" he demanded, amusement in his eyes as he disentangled himself from her impulsive grasp. "We're going to the archive, remember? It's not going to be all that exciting."

"I know, but Sora-dono was very cross, and when she gets cross, she gives out the oddest and most annoying chores to the most random people she finds," Shizuka sighed, rolling her eyes. "I don't mind coming with you, since it'll be a break from everything here. This morning, Taichou had me checking out things in local villages but we didn't come back with anything — then, of course, Sora-dono is extra stressed since the Fourth Division officer you guys have convalescing at Thirteenth at the moment happens to be an old school friend of hers... so yeah, she's a bit rattled one way or another."

She dimpled.

"When she gets like that, she buzzes all over the place," she added pensively. "I can really believe her sword spirit is a firefly, when she's in one of these moods."

She paused, eying her companion quizzically.

"Are you all right? Shunsui-dono didn't say anything odd to you again when you came here, did he? I keep asking him to stop teasing you like you're my illicit lover, or something, but he finds it funny and then there's no reasoning with him."

"He did, but it doesn't bother me," Ketsui offered her a grin, inwardly sure that Shizuka was one of the few people who dared speak her mind to her Captain without being worried about repercussions. Shizuka had known Shunsui since she had been four or five, and had always considered him like proper family, a bond that had been reciprocated when her spirit power had begun to flare. After a couple of near misses with Hollows, she had gone to him for help, and Shunsui, true to his word, had brought the then eleven year old Shizuka more into his world, helping her to control her *reiryoku* and then, when she had reached fifteen, encouraging her to enrol at the Academy. Shizuka had been unsure at first whether or not to go, but Shunsui had convinced her and, glancing at her now, Ketsui knew he

was eternally grateful to the Eighth Captain for that perseverance.

“He knows there’s nothing like that between us,” he added frankly, shrugging his shoulders. “He just likes to tease.”

“Mm,” Shizuka nodded, looking weary. “I know he does. I’m sure that, if he thought you or anyone was seriously after my attention, he’d be a lot less flippant about it. He likes to protect me from harm as much as he can, and sometimes it’s a good thing, but other times it’s downright annoying. I love him to death, of course — he’s the closest thing I’ve ever had to a father figure, and he did a lot for Inori-nii and I growing up — but sometimes having someone like that as your Captain is hard work.”

She shrugged, dismissing it with a flick of her hand.

“Well? Then it’s Tenichi-san that’s on your mind, then? Still no news?”

“Nothing,” Ketsui grimaced. “Everyone’s keeping me busy and telling me not to worry, but it’s impossible not to let my mind wander to worst case scenarios. I believe he’s all right, Shizuka, but...”

“I know. It’s like that, when you’ve no real proof of anything,” Shizuka agreed sympathetically. “So this is an errand to keep your brain busy, is it? I see. I’ll do my best to distract, then — though I’m not sure how successful I’ll be.”

“Taichou wants us to find out information about criminals in Lower Seireitei,” Ketsui reflected, as they left the Eighth barracks, crossing the short distance between it and the entrance of the Seireitei Central Archive. They paused to identify themselves to the guards on duty, before heading up the flight of steps and through the doors into the big, airy entranceway. “I don’t fully understand why, but I think it was something Edogawa-san said. You know, the lady from Fourth? Taichou seems to think it’s important, so probably it is.”

“It seems a bit of a stab in the dark to me, but I’ll run with it,” Shizuka’s expression became thoughtful. “Juushirou-dono has some far out ideas sometimes, but they usually pan out.”

“Yes,” Ketsui agreed, “though even he said that this might not have anything to do with anything important.”

“One way to find out,” Shizuka shrugged her shoulders, offering her companion a playful smile. “We’d better go dig through some books. Let’s see what the down-and-outs in District Seireitei have been up to, shall we?”

The Inner Conclave of Seireitei's Gotei Forces was surprisingly peaceful that afternoon, and, as the sun began its drop in the sky towards evening, Masaya paused to examine his route of entry a second time, ensuring that it was truly safe to cross and not a trap set for unsuspecting infiltrators. His suspicious and wary nature had been deeply ingrained into him by his years of service within the white-stone walls, but, although that life and that identity were long since considered dust, some shreds of self-preservation still lingered like instinct, automatically halting him before each obstacle.

They would not be able to see him. Camouflage had always been his greatest gift, and, since falling into Keitarou's hands, his skill had increased tenfold, to the point that now he could hide himself in plain sight and not be seen. A dark, humourless smile touched his thin lips at this thought.

If he'd had such skills when he'd been properly alive, he would never have been struck down in the first place.

Carefully he put gloved hands against the white wall that flanked Inner Seireitei's official main exit. Guards stood on duty on the inside, protecting the gateway from those who should not be there, but Masaya was knowledgeable enough about both them and their routines not to see them as a threat to his plans. Spreading his hands across the wall, he watched as, very gradually, his fingers began to turn to white to match the stone, slowly at first but then with growing speed as he pressed his entire form against the solid divide. At length all that remained was his eyes, two goldish orbs in a chalk-pale face. These were always the hardest thing to turn, he mused grimly, redoubling his efforts and focusing all his energy on bringing his rebellious features to heel. They were the last remnants in many ways of the old him, and, like that man, they lacked the flexibility of his new existence. It was as though they were stubbornly hanging on to their native colour, clinging to their pride despite the fact they were more a nuisance than a source of honour.

At length they relented, the irises paling as though someone had poured milk into them, blotting the true gemstone colour from view. Once done, he took a deep breath into his lungs, then, very slowly, he inched his chameleonic body across the divide, step by step, shuffle by shuffle until he was clearly in the guardsmen's line of sight.

They did not blink, intent on some card game that told Masaya more than anything how quiet the day had been. They did not notice the slight warping and shuffling of light against the high marble walls, nor did they see the shadow that peeled itself away from them as he

reached the end, darting under cover of a nearby building and adjusting his appearance so that, in the shadow, he appeared as just another stretch of dark.

He could see the towers of the Second Division compound from here, its gold-gilt roof tiles announcing to the world that this was the pride of the Shihouin. If he squinted hard enough, he could make out the curve of the crescent moon that adorned the family's badge, and he pressed his lips together derisively, reminding himself that, despite their boasting and grandeur, there was nothing particularly exceptional about the family at all.

I am more stealthy than all of them, now, thanks to Keitarou-sama. I am the one who can slip in and out undetected and discover what I want to know at will, because of him. You don't know anything at all, Shihouin-ke, and you will pay for that ignorance. If Minami is right about the rumours she heard, I hope you'll pay quite dearly. If so, I wonder if Keitarou-sama will let me be in the vanguard. I have some things to settle with men of that Clan.

His golden eyes narrowed.

No, I must not become distracted. Those concerns are not Masaya's concerns — they, and any sense of vengeance belong to a dead man.

Revenge drove other people, warping and distorting their perceptions of the world until they made fatal mistakes. Masaya had learned from those things, and now, steered well clear of them. He would listen, watch, follow orders, but nothing more than that. He would play a part in Keitarou's revenge, kill, invade, spy, kidnap and much much more if it fitted Keitarou's plans, but he had no drive to begin a battle of his own. His only interests were in maintaining this free existence now he had found it, and in repaying Keitarou for giving it to him in the first place. As Minami had correctly said, these days his interests and his ambitions revolved around the exiled scientist, with all other concerns left to fall by the wayside.

I have higher orders now — and things I must find out. There's no time for nostalgia... I need to know whether Minami's words are true.

Pulling back the square wooden cover that concealed the underground sewage system from view, he slid his body deftly between the cracks, twisting and cracking his bones into a more fluid shape so as to slide down without removing the cover completely. They were alarmed, he knew, for the network connected to waterways beyond the white walls and, when the system had first been put in place, paranoid Council officers had seen it as a means for folk to slip into Inner Seireitei unannounced. The moment a cover was pulled

completely from its resting place, a bell would sound, but Masaya only needed a gap of a few centimetres to slide his willing body into the inky blackness.

Despite being regularly cleaned by members of the Fourth Division, the dim tunnels smelled strongly of waste and dead animals, and Masaya wrinkled up his nose at the odour. Above ground, he reflected acidly, the Shinigami were fastidious about keeping things clean and polished but here, in this enclosed space, they went to the other extreme. The tunnel was divided into two slender walkways that flanked a greenish trickle of grimy water, which, for a reason he could not fathom, always smelled strongly of rotting fish. At intervals, ladders woven from rusting wire and wood hung, indicating a return path to the surface, though all the turns looked the same and there were no signs to tell someone down there which exit they had managed to choose. As he picked his way carefully along the narrow path, Masaya discovered the corpses of rats lying alongside discarded apple cores and other things he preferred not to spend time identifying. Glancing around him, he mused to himself how much more pleasant the abandoned Rukon valley was, if just for the fact it was less full of such toxic fumes.

Still, he was used to these tunnels by now, and for a short time at least, he could bear their pollution. Though they held no distinguishing features nor maps or guidelines, he knew that thirty paces north on the first tunnel would take him beneath the central concourse of Inner Seireitei and, if he took the first right there, a further ten and a half paces would lead him to the ladder that emerged in the most seclusion — behind the wooden barracks of what had once been the Council's assembly hall. Fifteen years ago, in keeping with all the changes that had seen Inner Seireitei become more and more the Gotei's central base, the powers that be had decided to waste money on building a new and sumptuous chamber for Council meetings and, as a result, the old one had been turned over to storage, the first floor being entirely re-partitioned to form what had quickly become the Gotei Library. Now, instead of documents being filed away within the core of each Clan, a copy of each important writ, report or genealogy was by law required to be held in this central location and, as a result, it had grown quickly, forming what was without doubt the biggest library and archive anywhere in Soul Society.

Because it was not a military barracks, nor the province of one particular Clan, it had less guards assigned to it, and these tended to stay at the front, monitoring the entrance as a token gesture of security. The rear of the building, where once Clan servants had

lingered awaiting their masters from the meeting hall had now become overgrown and ignored, the sewer entrance all but hidden in the grass. This opening had not been fitted with an alarm, and it was this loophole in Seireitei's security system that Masaya's keen brain and sharp eyes had quickly picked out when he had first begun making these trips.

Entering Inner Seireitei was not without risks, and for that reason, Keitarou had only ever entrusted such missions to him, a fact he clung to with stubborn, singleminded pride. Masaya knew that Keitarou had at least one ally on this side of the wall, an informant who was better placed to give detailed Gotei information on a regular basis, but, try as he might, he had not worked out who this person was. Though he understood Keitarou's need to keep tabs on multiple things at once, Masaya was jealously resentful of the existence of this other who could walk even more freely than he among Soul Society's bigwigs. He would dearly like to confront them, even frame them in order to get them out of the way, but he had restrained himself, not wanting to alienate the one man who had believed in him and given him hope.

Keitarou did not need anyone other than him to do jobs like this, though, and he clenched his fists unconsciously, vowing to himself that, if this double agent ever put a foot wrong or looked like betraying Keitarou's enterprise, he, Masaya, would take a weapon and strike them down himself, regardless of consequences.

For now, though, he had other matters to attend to.

Emerging into the daylight, he hesitated for a moment, listening all around him for any sign that his infiltration had been detected. He could hear nothing, however, and, satisfied, he got to his feet, blurring his body once more against the wall of the old building and inching his way carefully around from the back to the front until the main courtyard was in view.

The archive was not just a place of study for the shinigami, but, Masaya had quickly learned, it was a place of gossip, too. Whilst slipping in and out of individual divisions was possible, he had soon realised it had higher risk and less profit than if he were to lurk around the public areas, eavesdropping on conversations between shinigami from different divisions, and putting together tidbits of information to report back to his master in Rukongai. This time, he reflected to himself, the slaughters in the Spiritless Zone would doubtless have sent shockwaves through every division, and, if he listened hard enough, he was sure that he would find out what he wanted to know. This was not a direct order from Keitarou, so it

would not do to get caught — therefore the archive was the best place to begin his observations.

Two shinigami were approaching the complex now, he noted, both dressed in identical black and white, though the girl's shihakushou was peppered with dust as though she had attempted to clean it but not quite succeeded in making herself fully presentable. Her companion, pale eyed and fair haired struck him for a moment, so familiar was his appearance, and it took another couple of heartbeats before he understood that this young man, despite his appearance, was not an active member of the Urahara Clan. They were talking among themselves, unaware of his beady eyes watching them from the safety of his camouflage, and, as they mounted the steps, Masaya heard snippets of their conversation drifting across towards him on the wind.

Criminals from lower Seireitei, huh?

The golden eyes narrowed briefly for a moment, digesting this tidbit of random information, then, the next minute he heard a name.
Edogawa?

Masaya pressed his lips together, hardly able to conceal his triumph.

So someone *had* survived the rout, and more, it was someone Keitarou had not only known by name but deliberately planned to target.

Edogawa, huh? How ironic. To think that, most of all the healers, Keitarou-sama wanted her dead, and yet here are these young ones, talking among themselves about her in a way that indicates she among her companions must have survived. Someone was careless... doubtless someone will get punished when I report back.

He made to leave, then hesitated, sliding his eyeballs back in the direction of the retreating shinigami.

No, not yet. I know who lived, but I don't know what the shinigami are looking for or why, not yet. I ought to discover that before I go, else Keitarou-sama will just send me back to dig it up. Besides, if I can get one or both of those children of his into trouble, so much to the good. They may be his blood descendants, but they are by no means superior to me in any regard. If they made foolish errors, as children do, it will be my pleasure to report that fact in full to Keitarou-sama and allow him to deal with it as he sees fit.

A faint, humourless smile touched his cold features as he prepared himself to follow the fair haired shinigami and his brown haired companion into the archive.

Well, let's see what these young ones have to offer. Minami's lead is proving to be very interesting... I won't lose this chance to make Keitarou-sama see how much more reliable an agent I am than any other.

Author's Note: Magaki Shizuka

I wonder if anyone remembers her from Meifu? If not, let me refresh memories. Shizuka was the little mite being raised by Shunsui's half-sister Riri in the village in Eighth District. She was the daughter of one of Riri's close prostitute friends, and she and her brother had lived with Riri for most of their lives. Now, however, she's an adult and, as was hinted at in Fourth Maki, she has spirit power that far surpasses that of her brother or her foster mother. Consequently, although Riri is her mother figure, Shunsui has taken on a lot more of her mentorship since she hit puberty and the two have a very close bond.

Now where did all that mysterious spirit power come from, I wonder? ;)

Some readers might think that Shizuka's appearance is just a bit of random continuity from the Maki story, but actually her creation has a far deeper and more significant meaning. I'm not sure whether I'll get to cover it or not in this story — I guess we'll see — but let's just leave it at the fact she's significant to the future of Bleach canon in a rather emphatic way...

18. The Shadow In The Library

Chapter Seventeen: The Shadow in the Library

“Your Captain wasn’t kidding, was he, when he talked about it being a possible wild goose chase?”

Shizuka let out a heavy sigh, shutting the heavy volume of court records with a grimace and reaching up to rub her neck and shoulders ruefully. “I haven’t found anything of any use in District Four’s most recent records — seems like a pretty quiet region for crime, and certainly nothing like what you told me we were looking up.”

Across the table, Ketsui’s nose was buried in an equally thick, dusty tome, his brow creased in concentration as he read through passage after passage from District Six’s eyre court roll.

“Most of these records relate to petty thievery, or mundane crimes,” he said now, not even looking up from the book. “District Six’s legislation is making my eyes go a bit funny, to be honest — or maybe it’s my brain. The Kuchiki have so many hereditary land-holdings and traditional or customary regulations that it must be really easy to be in breach of one without knowing one even exists. I know Taichou grew up there, and he seems fond of the place, but honestly, reading this is making my head spin.”

“Let me see?” Shizuka leaned across the table, peering at the report. “Yeesh. The script is bad enough to begin with. The scribe must be verrrry highly educated, to insist on using all that fuddy-duddy kanji instead of kana like the rest of us normal people.”

“Well, I can about read it, but it isn’t helping,” Ketsui agreed, meeting her gaze with a pensive one of his own. “I guess there’s something to be said for Clan education over District — Mother did her best, and Father, before he died, and Ten-nii, and all the reading I did at the Academy increased my capacity, but there are still plenty of other characters I’ve never studied.”

“Most folk call those surplus to requirement,” Shizuka dimpled, shrugging her shoulders. “Shunsui-dono taught me to read and write, since Riri-nee was still learning herself when I was growing up, and he always intended for me to go to the Academy when I was old enough, even if I wasn’t sure about it back then. He taught me everything he thought I’d need to have, and he said at the time that he’d been forced

to study at least half as many characters again, just for the sake of sating Clan pride.”

“Kyouraku-taichou isn’t a conventional Clansman, though,” despite himself, Ketsui grinned. “Anyhow, this isn’t getting us through the records, is it? Nothing I can see for Sixth, not for the last six months, at the very least. Taichou was very clear that the person we were looking to find was young or youngish, dark haired and male. Several of these records involve young women, and this one is a middle-aged alcoholic, so I don’t think we’re looking for him.”

“At least we can discard those records at a glance.” Shizuka agreed. “What exactly did Juushirou-dono say he’d done? Or is that the point?”

“I think that’s what we’re trying to find out, though don’t quote me on it,” Ketsui ran his finger down the edge of a yellowed page, skimming the contents before turning it over with a shrug. “Nope, definitely nothing in this one. He said that this felon — whoever he was, if he exists — escaped his bonds somehow and ended up in Rukongai.”

“How does that happen?” Shizuka pressed her lips together in consternation. “I thought you couldn’t get into Rukongai, let alone the Spiritless Zone, without special clearance.”

“I’m not sure that the security’s so tight on the bits they haven’t cleared for the Spiritless Zone project yet, but Taichou said it was information Edogawa-san gave him,” Ketsui shrugged. “I don’t know much about her, or whether she’s the kind of person that easily imagines stuff or gets them confused under stress, but he seemed to think it was worth checking out anyway.”

“Shunsui-dono told me about Edogawa-san,” Shizuka said thoughtfully. “He went to the Academy with her — they were classmates, like you and I, so he knows her quite well. Or, maybe, knew her — she’s been away a long time, so it’s hard to know which tense to use. I got the impression they were close friends, though, and he’s a pretty good judge of character. Probably there’s something to it.”

“Close? How close?” Ketsui pushed the Sixth District book aside, reaching for the next in the pile, and Shizuka laughed, tapping him playfully on the head before resuming her seat across the table and selecting her own book to read.

“You’re such a secret gossip, under that reserved, quiet exterior,” she teased him, amusement dancing in her dark brown eyes. “Not that

kind of close. In fact, I got the impression that it was Juushirou-dono who was particularly close to Edogawa-san when they were at school. All unsubstantiated rumour, of course, and Shunsui-dono would never tell me anything like that about another Captain, not even unofficially.”

“Taichou has seemed very concerned about her,” Ketsui looked surprised. “I thought he was just being attentive, because what happened in Fourth was horrible. Is that why she ended up at Thirteenth, then? I thought it was because of Naoko-san being our Third Seat, but...”

“I wouldn’t like to speculate,” Shizuka said frankly. “The romantic intertangles of your and my superior officers are best left off-limits, to be honest. But I will say one thing — and that’s that our Vice Captain was ranting and railing about not getting in to see Edogawa-san right away. Shunsui-dono said that Sora-dono was Edogawa-san’s best friend at school... so if she wasn’t allowed access... but Juushirou-dono was...”

She trailed off meaningfully, and Ketsui pursed his lips.

“I guess sometimes it’s easy to see your Captain’s world as being everything in the Division,” he mused. “Ukitake-taichou is so focused on all of us and on making the Division like a family, I never thought he might have anything like that outside it. If that’s the case, though, of course he’ll trust her word. That means we need to try our best to find something — even if it’s just a confirmation that no such record exists.”

“Agreed,” Shizuka nodded, brown curls bobbing. “I’ll take Second District. You take Third.”

“Got it,” Ketsui assented.

“You never think of that as home, by the way?” As their reading progressed, Shizuka broke the silence once more, curiosity in her dark eyes.

“See what as home?” Ketsui put his finger against a line of characters to keep his place, shooting her a confused look.

“Third,” Shizuka responded. “Your Pa was from there, right? Don’t you ever feel a genetic tie to the Urahara and District Three?”

“Shizuka, I barely feel a connection to District Seven, and I was born there,” Ketsui said grimly, shaking his head. “I have no ties to the Urahara and it’s far better that way, considering there aren’t many among that Clan who’d want to acknowledge us anyway. Father was

only a baby when his mother took him and left, and so even he didn't remember anything about what life was like there. Most of my life was spent in District Eight — and that's a fair distance away, not to mention completely different in terms of culture."

"I suppose that's true," Shizuka rested her chin in her hands, digesting this carefully. "It's interesting, though, how different people travel and spread their cultures and ideas across new areas. Nii-chan was all gungho about finding out who fathered him a few years back. Riri-nee wasn't all that keen on him doing it, and she told him there wasn't much chance of him getting a result, since she didn't know herself who Nii-chan's Pa was, but Nii-chan said he wanted to know. He'd had some conversation with traders when he was working at the market and it had made him wonder."

"Did he find anything out?" Ketsui asked, and Shizuka shrugged, shaking her head.

"Not really," she admitted. "He did find someone who'd lived in Teika-chou a long while... they remembered a young man passing through when Mother was working, and it would've been about the time Inori-nii was conceived. Didn't know much about him — thought he was involved in the fabric trade, though. No name, nothing like that... but it seemed to make Nii-chan feel better, to think that his Pa was a good upstanding citizen who just happened to spend a night with a courtesan when visiting the town."

She grinned.

"Good thing for Nii-chan that the guy did, else he wouldn't be around," she added matter-of-factly.

"You don't bother about things like that, do you?" Ketsui observed, and Shizuka's expression became sheepish.

"I know where I came from," she said simply. "I don't need to know more than that. I don't need to go chasing off around the country trying to fill in blanks. My roots are in Eighth, and everything I care about is from there. You are, too, in a way — you said yourself that you grew up more in Eighth than anywhere else."

"That's one of the things I like about spending time with you," Ketsui reflected. "I spent a lot of time as a small kid with a complex about the way I looked. People called me Urahara, and that was something bad when we were refugees — Kaa-chan used to get me to cover my head, so they wouldn't see and attack me. I never understood why having fair hair like Father was bad, not till I was a lot older. Maybe that's the strongest reason why I don't feel any part

of me connects with District Three. As a kid, I was made to feel as though my appearance was a bad thing. Growing up in Eighth was hard but in many ways it was a relief — nobody there ever looked at me and considered me anything other than what I was.”

“Well, Eighth District is the best District, that’s why,” Shizuka said flippantly. “I may be a bit biased, but I can’t help it. I identify with there.”

“I guess I do too, though I remember living in Seventh,” Ketsui responded.

“It’s a different place now,” Shizuka reflected. “I expected it to have the biggest volume of criminal reports, but actually, it’s one of the smallest.”

“That’s because Endou-taichou’s *zanpakutou* is meant to be scary,” Ketsui said dryly. “I’m not really interested in finding out whether the rumours are true, and I’m sure the people of District Seven feel much the same way.”

“They do say prevention is better than cure,” Shizuka said primly, then she laughed, flicking pages over in her book. “I find it interesting how certain crimes crop up again and again in particular areas. This whole first section is about traders committing import infractions and not paying the proper dues to the Shihouin authorities.”

“That’s interesting?” Ketsui looked doubtful. “I’m reading about pick-pockets in the North of District Three... and it doesn’t really excite me.”

“Okay, so maybe interesting was the wrong word,” Shizuka conceded, “but who would’ve thought Second had such issues with illicit smuggling and underground trade? I wouldn’t have thought that Shihouin-taichou or Kai-dono would stand for anything like that.”

“People are always looking to be opportunists, though,” Ketsui said sensibly. “I guess they exist in every District — not just in Second.”

“True enough,” Shizuka agreed, idly turning back towards the very beginning of her volume. “I’m not finding anything in recent history that matches what Juushirou-dono wants, though. It would help to have more to go on. Even a name would help, but I guess Edogawa-san didn’t give that?”

“Nope, not as far as I know,” Ketsui chewed on his lip.

“Well, then how about this?” Shizuka frowned. “It’s a bit older than what your Captain said, and it doesn’t have a lot of details, but it does

talk about a prisoner who escaped custody and disappeared.”

“Aging is subjective, depending on a lot of factors,” Ketsui cocked his head on one side thoughtfully. “How old is it, Shizuka-chan?”

“Ten years, give or take — do you think that’s too far back?” Shizuka looked doubtful. Ketsui sighed, shrugging.

“Dunno,” he admitted. “Give me the details, and I’ll see whether or not any of it rings true with what the Captain said.”

“All right,” Shizuka smoothed the sheet beneath her fingers. “If it is this one, though, probably we ought to just hand it over to Juushirou-dono and Shunsui-dono and stay out of it. It connects to the Onmitsukidou — and by connects, I mean it looks a lot like... an internal affair.”

“Someone dared betray the Onmitsukidou?” Ketsui looked stunned, and Shizuka nodded.

“And then some,” she agreed grimly. “Yeesh, and they believe in dry lists of kanji here, too. Listen to this. ‘Shihouin Central Court of Justice, Summer Convening. Presiding officer: Shihouin Kai, *Onmitsukidou Soushireikan, oyobi Keigun Gudanchou*. What the heck does all of that mean?’”

“Something to do with his rank, I imagine,” Ketsui said sensibly. “*Soushireikan* is the Shihouin’s own title for the head of the Onmitsukidou, I think — and I guess the other is the section he’s most directly involved in. What about the case?”

“Well, to summarise the long lists of people’s ranks, names, and goodness knows what else, one of the members of the Onmitsukidou — and not just any member, but an, erm... what was that word again? Oh yes, a *Gudanchou*, was arrested on suspicion of being involved in illegal trade rackets and other unspecified crimes in the region of Haruna-chou and the Third Division border,” Shizuka squinted, running her gaze up and down the page. “He was arrested, and tried for the crime... they found him guilty, and he was sentenced to death. He escaped custody, and was pursued. In the chase he was injured, but they never did manage to retrieve his body. Apparently Kai-dono was tied up with Clan stuff at the time, so this hearing was to fill him in on everything that happened in his absence. The report was given by someone called Kounou — I’m guessing that he was Kai-dono’s second in command, or something, judging by the ranks given here.”

“So a member of the Onmitsukidou tried to turn a quick profit, got caught, and managed to slip justice?” Ketsui looked thoughtful.

“There’s no description?”

“No real detail at all. Not even a name, just the officer’s rank — ‘*Riteitei Gudanchou*’, whatever that means. Like I said, this is just a hearing. It’s not from the Onmitsukidou’s own judicial court, but from the official Shihouin-run one in the heart of Second District,” Shizuka shook her head. “It looks like Kai-dono summoned Kounou and some of his fellows to explain what happened, and, being that it was the *Shihouin* court, it had to be recorded in the public records — but in as few words as possible. There are probably more detailed records somewhere — but we’d almost certainly have our eyes poked out if we went looking for them. The Onmitsukidou is a scary organisation with way too many secrets to keep count.”

“Well, we can take it to Taichou and see what he says,” Ketsui pressed his lips together pensively. “It’s all we’ve found, after hours of going through records, so it might be worth digging into. To get into Rukongai, and to keep yourself hidden, you’d need to have pretty good reiatsu control, and that is something members of the Onmitsukidou tend to have — but I’m not sure. It doesn’t totally sound right to me.”

“It’s the best we got,” Shizuka said matter-of-factly. “Here, give me some of that spare parchment and I’ll copy out the salient points. My writing is neater than yours, and I want to make sure we report accurately.”

“Sure,” Ketsui pushed the pile of parchment across the desk. “I’ll put the other books back, while you’re doing that. It’s going to get dark soon, and, in light of everything, I’d prefer us both to be back at base barracks before the sun sets.”

“I know Tenichi-san is still missing, but it doesn’t mean we should hide. Quite the opposite, in fact,” Shizuka scolded. “I’ll walk back with you, though, if it’ll put your mind at rest. I’m not sure who’ll be protecting whom, but there’s safety in numbers.”

“Mmhm,” Ketsui pressed his lips together, but made no comment, instead turning his attention to filing the books back in their proper neat order on the shelves.

“I mean it, Ketsui-kun,” Shizuka glanced up from her writing, shooting him a reassuring grin. “Nobody’s getting kidnapped tonight, and we’ll nail the people who took Tenichi-san. I’m certain he’ll come back safely, so keep faith. All right?”

“I am,” Ketsui said shortly, ramming the rest of the volumes in place and dusting off his hands. “Look, just write it up and let’s get

going, huh? I want to report to Taichou what we have or haven't found, so he can talk to Edogawa-san again, and I don't want to be seen to be wasting time. If all I can do at the moment is my duty, I'm going to do it right."

"Men," Shizuka sighed, but obediently bent her head to the parchment once more, scribing the characters briskly and neatly in her characteristic curved hand. "Almost done... there. Finished. All right, Mr Impatient — let's go deliver this to the powers that be and discharge that duty properly!"

Well, that had been informative.

Masaya pressed his body against the wall of the library, keeping entirely still as he watched the two young shinigami leave. They had not detected his presence, not even a little bit, and he had felt a flickering of contempt for their lack of observation skills. If he had wanted to, he could've tackled either of both of them, probably taking their lives before they had realised that he was even there, but Keitarou had not given him any orders to kill in Seireitei, and he had no mind to be drawing unwelcome attention to himself while he tried to get to the bottom of the rumours circulating in District Two.

The fair haired boy's distinctive appearance had continued to tweak at his mind, and he had rummaged around in his memory for a match, he had eventually dredged forth where he had heard the name Ketsui before.

Kotetsu Ketsui. The Tenichi boy's brother. The other one — the one Keitarou-sama chose not to bring to Rukongai.

Masaya's eyes twitched slightly, processing this.

He seems a shadow of his brother, and not like someone who would easily put up a fight. I risked injury bringing Tenichi-dono to Rukongai, but I'm sure I could have brought the other one with little risk. Still, Keitarou-sama's reasons are his own and I won't question them. Probably the fact the older one has spirit is the very reason he was chosen.

He slipped his gaze carefully from right to left, making sure that there was nobody within view, then letting out his breath, allowing his body to peel itself away from the wall and back into the chamber proper. Keeping his senses on the alert, he moved to the shelves, touching the books the young shinigami had been reading with gloved fingers.

The Shihouin Court, huh.

Fleeting memories, broken and piecemeal flooded his senses, but

none of them sparked anything like the depth of feeling he had seen in Minami's eyes when she had spoken of the Onmitsukidou. If he thought very hard, perhaps he could remember Kai, but the faces of the others were slashed and broken into unrecognisable pieces, each one the same as the last.

His hand dropped back to his side.

I am not here for this. The Onmitsukidou and I have no connection, and I have no reason to go there. Coming here was a better idea. I've found out all I needed to know just from listening — people always talk more freely in a place they consider quiet and relaxed, and I've often learned useful tidbits about everyday life here without putting myself or my mission in any danger. It is still the best place to come for answers, without alerting any particular suspicions from those who come in and out. Keitarou-sama will be pleased — at least, with me.

A faint smile touched his worn lips.

My instincts were right about the name Edogawa. As I thought, she's the healer that Eiraki-sama once knew, and a person of interest Keitarou-sama has mentioned more than once. If the girl's gossip is true, I can understand why he wanted her dead so badly. She has a connection to Ukitake Juushirou, the Captain with such a reputation for meddling, and the man who's been investigating most strongly the behaviour of the Hollows. The attack in Rukongai has almost certainly distracted him, but not necessarily in the right direction. More, it sounds very much as though she saw her attacker. Given the kind of person those kids were looking for, it seems fairly evident to me where the blame belongs.

He slipped into shunpo, allowing his body to slide effortlessly through the channels of spiritual energy towards the Sekkiseki divide. He had no fear of being detected, for he had long since perfected the art of moving freely between locations without leaving the faintest trace of his presence. It was one of the more positive things he had taken from his past life, but, thanks to Keitarou's help, he was able to conceal himself entirely from prying eyes, ears and spiritual senses. *I only bring Keitarou-sama the information he needs, and that which he asks for. If someone else gets into trouble because of my report, that's no concern of mine.*

He spread his hands, watching as a narrow slit of shadow opened up between the fingers of his gloves. It was starting to get dark, and soon, he knew, the moon would rise in the sky over Inner Seireitei, casting the illustrious surrounds in its eerie silver glow. Masaya would not be here to see it, though. He had other things to do, in a place where sun and moon rarely deigned to show their faces at all.

If you can't carry out a task correctly, Katsura-sama, you should bow your

head and offer your apologies to your father properly. There's no room in Keitarou-sama's plans for failure, and I am not going to protect you.

"I wondered how long it would be before you came."

As he slipped out of shunpo on the edge of the forgotten forest, Souja saw Joumei was waiting for him, his long silvery hair pulled back from his face in a loose braid from which wisps had been teased free by the evening breeze. Despite the fact they were in open territory, Joumei had taken no precaution to cover his face, and as the two men met gazes, Joumei smiled, a rueful expression on his pale face.

"Sometimes being a hooded nonentity makes you more obvious than if you just look like everyone else," he explained, reading Souja's question before it was asked. "I went to the local town for some supplies earlier, and decided to settle here and wait for you on my way back. You didn't send any word, but I thought you'd probably come after nightfall. There are less people abroad at this time — and I've scoured the perimeters. We're quite alone, I'm sure."

"You don't exactly look like everyone else, even dressed in ordinary peasant attire, but I guess it doesn't matter," Souja grinned, moving to clasp his friend's cool fingers in his. "I'm glad to see you, though. I was worried, ever since Father took that note."

"Mm," Joumei's brow twitched slightly, then he nodded his head. "First things first. Let's go below, shall we? We can talk more freely there. There's nobody abroad at the moment, but that doesn't mean nobody will cross through this way. Innocent or guilty, there's no reason for them to take note of your being here. You're obviously an Endou lord, even if you've removed all of your squad and Clan insignias, and a Clansman holding discourse with a peasant is likely to raise eyebrows in this region."

"You never do tame your tongue when talking to me, do you?" Amused, Souja obediently followed his companion into the dense woodland, allowing the more experienced Kitsune to lead the way deeper and deeper into the trees until it was difficult to see anything but wood and vine all around them. At the last minute, when Souja was sure they were about to become hemmed in by the greenery, Joumei grabbed him by the arm, pulling him down into the hidden tunnel entrance that led to the heartland of Kitsune territory.

"I never had to," he answered now, in response to Souja's teasing. "You're not my lord and master yet, in any case. Hirata-sama is that."

You're my ally, and, I hope, my friend — and I prefer not to stand on ceremony with my friends. As far as I'm concerned, we're of equal birth. I'm as pureblooded a Clansman as you are — only my Clan is a little different from yours, and took a few detours to survive."

"Your logic is, as ever, perverse yet flawless," Souja chuckled. "All right, I yield. I don't have a lot of time to spend chatting, as Father is uneasy about me coming here already. I'm to retrieve Tenichi and return as quickly as I can — unnoticed, if at all possible. He's worried I'll bring harm on you by being here."

"It's quite possible that Tenichi's being in this area is a trap," Joumei agreed evenly, calmly placing his hands against the first of several smooth rock divides that had been cut at jagged intervals into the rock path. When moved out of their proper alignment, they opened up further tunnels, several of which led to dead ends, and only those who lived among them knew with absolute certainty which paths were and which were not true. Even Souja did not know more than a few of the hidden trails, and so he kept close behind, moving only where Joumei did and keeping the silver-haired man's slim form keenly in his line of sight.

"You think so, too?" He asked now, ducking his head so as not to brain himself on a low hanging piece of stone, and Joumei nodded.

"I think it's probable, actually," he agreed pensively. "It's another reason I came out into the open bareheaded this evening. I hoped that, if anyone was around, I could lead them off my scent... but there was no sign of anyone at all."

"Not now, but there has been..?"

"Mm... perhaps," Joumei sighed, pushing against the final door and leading the way into a long, narrow chamber. "When Tenichi was found, Izumi thought someone was here, watching everything from behind a shield of Kidou. Tenichi has cuffs on — they're not Seireitei quality, but they're definitely operational, which suggests some kind of technical knowhow in the field of Sekkiseki among other metals."

"Father suggested that Tenichi was released because keeping him captive hadn't elicited the response the kidnapper hoped for," Souja's eyes narrowed. "Do you think so, too?"

"Yes," Joumei admitted. "I think that Tenichi's entire abduction may well have been to do with us, and for that I'm sorry. We've caused the Gotei unnecessary trouble — so in reparation, we'll do our best to find out who and why."

“No... Father doesn’t want you putting yourself in harm’s way,” Souja shook his head, and Joumei shot him a wry smile.

“We are Kitsune. We live underground. People already want us dead,” he said matter-of-factly. “Nagesu-sama doesn’t hunt us, but he hasn’t repealed the death sentence Rikaya-sama placed over the heads of our ancestors and any born of their blood, making us fair game to any Urahara who happens to stumble across us. On top of that, there are other, more sinister enemies from which we must keep concealed. Hirata-sama knows as well as I do that every day we live unmolested is no guarantee the next will be the same. There is always danger here. The difference is how much, and whether anything can be done about it. I plan on evacuating the bulk of the people here to a safer place in the not so distant future, but Izumi and I are more distinctive than most. We will stay here to cover their tracks, and, I hope, discover the artisan of this particular mischief at the same time.”

He ran his finger against the stone wall.

“You can feel it, can’t you? The Sekkiseki,” he added. “We’re going to go down deeper, so you might find it hard going. If you feel dizzy, tell me, and we’ll slow down — but I’ve had Tenichi held as deep below the surface as I’ve been able to, because I don’t want him and the Kitsune crossing paths if possible. They don’t know he’s here — only Izumi, Hiko and a couple of others I trust to be discreet. He’s only seen Izumi and I, and he has no idea where he’s being kept. I’d like to keep it that way.”

“I’ll manage. It won’t be for long, and I’ve been up against Sekkiseki before,” Souja assured his companion. “Tenichi isn’t affected by it?”

“The cuffs have suppressed his *reiryoku*, so he doesn’t feel the full effects at present,” Joumei explained. “Izumi’s been keeping him asleep a lot of the time, too. It’s easier that way — you have less questions to field and you create less meaningful memories. She’s with him now, waiting for us.”

“We’d better move more quickly, then,” Souja said pragmatically. ‘I’ll be all right,’ as Joumei eyed him doubtfully. “Really, if I can’t deal with a little rock rejection, I’m not much of a Vice Captain, am I?”

“Well, if you say so,” Joumei sighed, but nodded, taking a key from around his throat and pushing it into a small square gap in the wall. There was a shudder, and then the stone split, revealing what were clearly winding steps going down deeper into the bedrock. “Though to be honest, your being a Vice Captain might go against you, rather

than in favour. Izumi and I are used to lurking down here. We've been here since we were little kids — but you're not quite the same as us."

"I might not be your lord yet, but I still have authority over retrieving one of my men," Souja said acerbically. "I'm coming, Joumei. Let's go."

Joumei shrugged, but made no further remark, instead stepping into the darkness and onto the first step. There was the sound of tinder scraping the wall, then a dim glow flared up around them, feeble but enough for them to see where they were putting their feet. Belatedly Souja remembered that Kidou lamps did not work down here, and so the Kitsune had evolved their own methods of keeping the place light.

Not that this part of their home was particularly light.

He followed Souja onto the winding stairwell, resting his hand against the wall to get his footing on the narrow steps. The feel of the stone burned against his fingers, prickling and pushing at him to remove his touch and he grimaced, forcing himself to bear the discomfort a little longer. Joumei was already some ten steps ahead of him, and as Souja cautiously followed, putting his feet on the widest section of the step he could, he felt the first dull hum of a headache begin to wash over him, the thrumming of lethargy making his limbs seem heavier and unwieldy. His brain buzzed and twisted slightly, causing him to pause to bring the path back into focus, and ahead of him the glow of Joumei's makeshift torch swung and darted all over the place like a giddy firefly, the only beacon in what was an oppressive, claustrophobic shaft down. His entire body was screaming at him to withdraw, sweat beading his brow as the effort to keep going began to take its toll on his air intake and his ability to regulate his own body temperature, and by the time he joined his companion at the foot of the stairwell he was breathing heavily, skin grey and pale and stomach twisting with nausea.

Joumei eyed him impassively for a moment, then he grimaced.

"I warned you," was all he said, however. "You can sit down inside, if you like — the cell isn't quite as bad as the tunnel, though there's no natural light or air, so it's a bit musty. It's where we usually lay our dead before we bury them — but since there are no corpses at the moment, it seemed the best place to keep Tenichi. Only Izumi and I have access to this chamber, so it was the safest place all around."

"Those... steps... are cut directly into... the Sekkiseki seam... aren't they?" Souja managed, swallowing hard against the bile that rose in

his throat, and Joumei nodded.

“The mine was abandoned during the civil strife within your Clan a few generations back, then forgotten about,” he agreed. “It was never completely exhausted. Well, our safety relies on that fact, if I’m honest. Down here is as bad as it gets, though. We leave the dead here because they decay more slowly surrounded by Sekkiseki and it gives us time to prepare them properly for an Urahara burial.”

“I don’t... know... how you can... stand it... so easily,” Souja muttered, and Joumei grinned.

“We don’t, not really,” he responded. “We evolve to overcome it, but it kills us in the end. Like a cancer, the radiation eats away at us, and that’s not compatible with long-term life. We’re all tainted by it — probably far more than even we realise we are, if I’m honest.”

“There needs... to be a way... to change that.”

“Well, there does, but it isn’t obvious right now,” Joumei reached to open the door, then paused, resting a hand on Souja’s trembling arm.

“Souja-dono, I don’t want to alarm you, but we’re taking very seriously Tenichi-dono’s appearance here,” he said quietly. “A foe we thought had lost our trail may well have picked it up again, and used him as a means by which to do it.”

“A foe?” Souja forced himself to pay attention, gritting his teeth against the swirling, dizzy sensation. “Someone who’s... hunting the Kitsune?”

“Among other things, yes,” Joumei’s eyes became unreadable silver pools of light, then he nodded. “I don’t want you to report this to Hirata-sama yet, though. I think... it would be... insensitive if I were to be proven wrong, and paranoia is a trait I’m apparently blessed with. Living like this, I need to be.”

“All right,” Souja resisted the urge to sink back against the wall, inclining his head in a nod. “So you don’t want me to report that much to Father — is that the gist?”

“Mm,” Joumei rested his hand against the stone door of the funeral chamber. “You know the name Aizen, don’t you?”

“Aizen Keitarou?” Souja’s eyes were slits, the discomfort momentarily forgotten as he absorbed his friend’s words. “Of course I do. He abducted my aunt and he brought dishonour on the whole Endou-ke with his exploits, not to mention the fact he slew my Great

Grandfather and threatened the lives of many, many more people during his time in District Seven. The stories about him are endless — and none of them good. He disappeared, though, and many seem to think him dead... you don't think so?"

"I think he's the one who took Tenichi, and who brought him here," Joumei admitted, and Souja's jaw dropped open with dismay. Joumei nodded.

"Izumi thinks so too. The Kidou she sensed left faint fragments of reiatsu in the atmosphere and she's been analysing them, trying to pinpoint their source," he continued grimly. "They're not identifiable to one individual, but they *are* compatible with Urahara reiatsu — something which we're intimately familiar with. More, for him to bring Tenichi to this area suggests some knowledge of the region and what goes on here. Aizen Keitarou had his base not far from here in the time he was working with Seimaru-dono and, maybe, beyond. And, finally, the quality of spirit cuffs that Tenichi is wearing made both Izumi and I suspicious. They're crudely made, true enough, but it's not the skill of the creator that's lacking. It's the quality of the materials. I realise I might be well off course — but the only person I can imagine who is still interested in hunting the Kitsune and who would go to those lengths to find us... is Aizen Keitarou."

"If you're that sure, I should tell Father," Souja protested, but Joumei shook his head, reaching up to put a finger on Souja's lips.

"No. Not yet. You mustn't," he murmured. "I've heard Hirata-sama talk about Aizen Keitarou with my father, and it's easy to tell it's not a subject on which the Wind Hawk can be rational. I'm sure that he wouldn't be able to hold back if he thought Aizen was at large, and right now we haven't proven my theory either way. Izumi took samples from Tenichi's clothing and she's testing them to see if she can figure out where he was held. In the meantime, I wanted you to know so you can keep your eyes and ears peeled for any more clues that might be decisive. When we have the results of Izumi's tests, I'll make sure you're the first to know — but for now, you must say nothing."

"You mean lie to my father?" Souja looked stricken.

"Perhaps it is lying," Joumei admitted, "but for the sake of the peace of District Seven, for now it needs to be. I don't think for one moment that Aizen Keitarou — if it is him we're dealing with — is hiding out here. However, if this is the only clue Hirata-sama has..."

"No, I know. You're right, I know," Souja rubbed his temples, the

ache returning to his head as he digested all of this. “All right, for now, I’ll say nothing. When you have Izumi’s results, perhaps then the situation will change — and I’ll do what I can to see if I can find out anything more. What about Tenichi? What has he said?”

“He says he doesn’t remember anything about anything,” Joumei said sardonically. “It’s very convenient for him, but neither Izumi and I have found a loophole in his story.”

“The other abductees didn’t remember anything, either,” Souja sighed, “and Tenichi is an honest man. I don’t believe he’d lie, not about something like this.”

“Perhaps he wouldn’t. I don’t know him well enough to be sure,” Joumei conceded. “I do know one thing, though, and that’s that Kotetsu Tenichi is also an Urahara by blood. Like Izumi and I, he’s the descendant of one displaced by Keitsune-dono’s experiments — but *unlike* Izumi and I, his father was Keitarou’s ally. I don’t know yet whether that means something or whether it doesn’t — but when we found Tenichi, he was at his father’s grave. The father that, according to popular fame, Keitarou buried.”

“You think Tenichi would turn against Soul Society?” Souja paled, and Joumei pressed his teeth together in a tight smile.

“I don’t know anything, and thinking can be dangerous when you don’t know,” he said at length. “It may be that he really does know nothing at all. He might never have met Keitarou, and Keitarou might not be involved. Tenichi said that he knew where Daisuke-sama’s grave was because a classmate of his told him where to find it, and as far as I’m aware, his story rings true. I have no evidence by which I can suspect him of anything except being a victim of circumstance. Just, if Keitarou is involved in this, it’s always worthwhile being on full alert. It won’t hurt to keep tabs on Tenichi — even if he’s innocent, it’s better to keep him safe. He might be targeted again, and the outcome might be worse.”

“I suppose that’s true,” Souja acknowledged. “I haven’t worked with him as much as my sister, so I don’t know him as well as others do, but he came to us with the recommendation of Ukitake Juushirou-dono, and that to me is a seal of the man’s honour as a shinigami and a member of the Gotei. Still, it’s possible he’s been used as a puppet without his active knowledge, and may know things he doesn’t realise he knows.”

“Exactly,” Joumei looked relieved. “I’m glad you understand.”

He smiled ruefully.

“I haven’t told him who we are, not even our names, so it’s quite impossible for me to explain to him why he should be our ally, not our foe,” he reflected pensively. “I wonder if he knows anything at all about his father, and all the things he did whilst he was still alive.”

He paused, then,

“One other question, by the way, before we go in.”

“Go ahead,” Souja nodded, his brow creasing in confusion. “What’s up?”

“Tenichi mentioned someone called ‘Kirio’. Do you know who that might be?”

“Kirio?” Souja blinked, then grinned. “Maybe you’re letting your paranoia get the better of you too often, Joumei-kun. Kirio is Hikifune Kirio-san, an old school friend of Tenichi’s and an officer in Ukitake-taichou’s Thirteenth Division. There’s nothing sinister in that connection. I think she and Tenichi may have known each other from when they were small — but I only know the things I’ve heard from other people.”

“That wasn’t why I asked,” Joumei’s expression became thoughtful. “Tell me, about how old is she, this Kirio? The same age as Tenichi..?”

“More or less,” now Souja was bemused. “I don’t understand, though. What has Kirio-san to do with anything?”

“It doesn’t matter. Just curiosity — tying off leads,” Joumei offered a smile, but it was a faintly guarded one, leaving Souja unconvinced that the question had been quite such an innocent one. “We’re wasting time, anyway. You want to take your officer back, and it would be better done before dawn.”

He turned to the lock of the door, unfastening it carefully before hauling it back and ushering Souja into the chamber beyond. The Vice Captain took tentative steps, the world around him hazing and shuddering slightly, but, as he stepped under the domed ceiling he felt the most oppressive level of Sekkiseki aura ease a little and he let out his breath in a rush, relief touching his expression.

From the corner, a small, cloaked figure got to her feet, bowing her head respectfully towards him, and Souja managed a smile, reaching out to take Izumi’s gloved hands gently in his dusty ones.

“Izumi-chan. You look well — I trust you are?”

Izumi’s expression became ironic, and she nodded, fluttering her hands together in brief, brisk syllables. Though Souja did not speak

the sign-language his friend's younger sister used to communicate with any fluency, he knew enough signals to make sense of her words, and he laughed, inclining his head ruefully.

"Yes, I suppose right now I look worse for wear than you do. I'm not as hardy to Sekkiseki as I'd like to be."

Izumi patted him reassuringly on the arm, then slid her fingers through his, leading him the short distance across the chamber to the white marble funerary bier. A figure lay sprawled across it, his body covered with a worn blanket, but as soon as Souja reached the man's side he recognised the grimy features as that of his subordinate officer, and he let out a heavy sigh of relief.

"I told you we had him," Joumei's voice at his right shoulder made him jump, and he turned, nodding his head.

"I know, and I trust you, but it's my duty to retrieve him, and I'm glad to see him for myself, safe and well."

"His sword is upstairs," Joumei explained, as Izumi removed the blanket, revealing the dust-covered *shihakushou* and the threadbare, torn *obi* at the shinigami's waist. "We thought it best it didn't come down here with him — partly because he might have tried to use it on us, but mostly because bringing an active *zanpakutou* down here would probably do it serious harm. It's Tenichi himself who is sealed, not the sword — so we played it safe."

"He's sleeping very soundly," Souja's fingers ran along the grey cuffs that encircled Tenichi's wrists. "These are the cuffs you mentioned?"

"They are," Joumei nodded. "We've examined them all we could, so you can take them with him and see what you discover from them. I don't recommend removing them until you leave here, though. If he had a rush of spirit power back through him at this depth, the heavy aura would probably make him quite ill."

"Can we wake him up?" Souja wondered, glancing at Izumi, who nodded her head. She moved to the end of the bier where Tenichi's head lolled against the white stone, resting her hand gently across his brow. For a moment nothing happened, then the sleeping shinigami let out a murmur, his lashes twitching as he emerged slowly from his heavy slumber.

"He'll probably be a bit drunk and disorderly for a while," Joumei warned. "I'll help you get him to the surface, since you're in no fit state to do it on your own, but once you're there, it'll be up to you to

manage getting him back to Seireitei. It won't do him any permanent harm, but he'll be a bit groggy for a couple of hours as it wears off."

"He's alive, so that's forgiven," Souja assured him. "Well, Kotetsu-hasseki? Are you ready to go report back to your Captain about your recent activity?"

"Fu..ku... taichou?" Tenichi's words were blurry and indistinct, and he rubbed his eyes as if unsure what he was seeing. Souja laughed, as Joumei hauled the dozy shinigami into a sitting position.

"I've been sent to take you back," he said simply. "Can you stand? We'll go at once... this isn't a good place for you or I to linger."

"Where... are we?" Tenichi glanced around him, and Souja patted him lightly on the shoulder.

"Somewhere you need never come again," he promised. "Get up. We'll find your sword and then we're due back at Seventh. Kikyue is worried about you and Father will want to speak to you at some length, I expect. Getting yourself abducted is not a smart thing for someone of your rank — so you better ready yourself for whatever he has in store for you — understand?"

"I... don't care," Tenichi wetted his lips, reaching out to grab Souja's arm tightly as he pulled his unsteady body to his feet. "I... want to go... back home."

"Good, because so do I," Souja said categorically. He cast Joumei a glance.

"Could you have someone retrieve Tenichi's sword?" he asked quietly. "I can get him up stairs on my own, but we can't leave without that."

"Whatever you say," Joumei bowed his head mock-respectfully, then exchanged looks with his sister, who let out a heavy sigh but obediently left the room. "I'm going to help you up, though, if only because I don't want to answer to Hirata-sama if you have broken bones at the end of this trip."

"You... the man who spoke to me... before?" Tenichi blinked at Joumei, who sent him a wry glance.

"You'd do better to forget you ever saw me, friend," he said frankly. "It's considered bad luck... those who meet us often find their lives cursed."

"Cursed?" Tenichi blanched, and Souja sighed, shooting Joumei a dark look.

“They’re Father’s allies, and that’s all you need to know,” he said firmly. “No more questions, Tenichi. We have a steep climb and then a long trip back to where we belong — better you focus on that than on things that don’t matter.”

“Hrm,” Tenichi did not make any further attempt to speak, his attention occupied with the effort of moving forwards. As Joumei had said, he was unsteady on his feet, wobbling and stumbling from side to side before he managed to reach the doorway of the chamber. Joumei was ready for him, though, and grasped him by the arm, pulling him unceremoniously through the gap and then waiting for Souja to follow suit. The Vice Captain did so, taking a deep breath to ready himself for the onslaught of Sekkiseki radiation, but going back up he found was not so difficult as coming down had been. Knowing that fresh air and moonlight awaited them gave him added strength to complete his task and, by the time Izumi rejoined them, sword in hand, they were at the cavern’s main entrance. Izumi handed the weapon over without a word, bowing her head solemnly towards both Souja and Tenichi, then disappearing once more into the blackness. Joumei hesitated for a moment, touching Souja on the arm, as if to remind him of the conversation they had had in the bowels of the Sekkiseki mine, and Souja nodded his head, unspoken confirmation of the promise he had made. Then he too was gone, leaving Souja and his dazed officer alone in the black woodland.

“Fuku..taichou?”

It was Tenichi who broke the silence, rubbing his temples furiously as though trying to process his thoughts more clearly. “Who were those people? Why... how..?”

“Father’s allies. Our allies,” Souja said briskly, gesturing for his companion to sheathe his weapon. “If you ask any more questions, you’ll get us both into trouble with the Captain, so I suggest you just count your blessings that they found you and were able to alert us to that fact. What matters more right now is getting back to Seireitei, and then, probably tomorrow, you’ll be called to report before him to explain what you can of what you remember. You’ve been missing several days — and a lot of people have been worried about you.”

“Ketsui!” this sparked life in the pale gaze, and Souja nodded, glad to see this sign of his companion’s clarity already returning. The night was fresh and clear, helping to eradicate the lingering effects of the Sekkiseki from his own system, and for a moment he just relished the gentle breeze that teased past them on its journey through the trees.

“Him especially,” he agreed, “but not just him. As I said, getting

abducted isn't a wise act for an officer of your rank."

"I know," Tenichi's eyes became clouded, and he lowered his head in a meek nod. "I'm sorry, Fukutaichou. I guess I've caused people a lot of trouble, haven't I?"

"Yes," Souja said frankly, "but we'll repair some of that by making good time back to Seireitei. I don't want to try removing those cuffs — I think it should be done by an expert — and I'm a little tired myself, so that rules out shunpo. We'll have to take the back roads and hope we're at base before dawn. I told the Captain I'd return as quickly as possible, and I don't want to let Kikyue run my drills as well, not if I can help it."

"Is... Kikyue-dono... very angry?" Tenichi asked hesitantly, as the two men fell into step, picking their way through the dense undergrowth towards a clearer track that led in the direction of one of the local villages. At the apprehension in the Eighth seat's voice, Souja grinned, clapping his companion on the back as though it were he, not Tenichi who were the elder and more experienced officer.

"She's not happy," he agreed, "but she'll get over it. The most important thing is that you're alive and in one piece."

He sent the other man a sidelong glance, then,

"It would please everyone most of all, of course, if you can give us any clues as to what happened. You must've been grabbed within Inner Seireitei — which causes concern for everyone, security wise. If there's anything you can tell us — or tell me, now, whilst we're travelling, and I'll broach it with Father when he's calmer — I advise you do it. It may prove important — other lives might be at risk. Yours isn't the first abduction, but we want it to be the last."

"I agree," Tenichi's lips thinned, and for a moment Souja could not tell what the young man was thinking. Then, after a few moments, the Eighth seat sighed.

"I remember very little," he admitted, a note of defeat in his tones. "What I do remember is blurred and doesn't make a lot of sense. Someone grabbed me... I was on my way back from Thirteenth to report in with Kikyue-dono, and someone took me off guard in the dark. I didn't see their face, and they had cuffs on me before I could draw my sword or fire any kind of Kidou. Then..."

He shrugged helplessly.

"Can you remember where exactly that happened? If you walked it again with Kikyue or I, would you be able to pinpoint the place?"

Souja quelled his disappointment, focusing his attention on what his subordinate had said. Tenichi pursed his lips, then nodded.

“I think so,” he agreed. “I think I was just around Twelfth. I hadn’t gone far. I certainly hadn’t reached the central compound and I was nowhere near Seventh when it happened.”

“And you don’t remember how you were taken? You were knocked out at that point?”

“It sounds crazy,” Tenichi let out a deep sigh. “I thought that it was a *Senkaimon*, but that’s not possible, is it? District rebels — if that’s what they were — can’t operate *Senkaimon*, and certainly not without Seireitei knowing about it. If that had happened, you’d have been able to trace me more quickly, so I’m sure I’m wrong.”

I’m not so sure.

Souja bit his lip, a thoughtful expression touching his clever gaze. He said no more, however, nodding his head to indicate he accepted Tenichi’s statement. All the time, though, he watched his companion’s reactions like a hawk. Was that the faintest sign of relief in the man’s eyes? Had the tension left Tenichi’s body a little then, as though he had unburdened himself of something important?

“Kotetsu Tenichi is also an Urahara by blood. Like Izumi and I, he’s the descendant of one displaced by Keitsune-dono’s experiments — but unlike Izumi and I, his father was Keitarou’s ally.”

Joumei’s words echoed through his thoughts once more, and he frowned, narrowing his eyes.

I don’t think Tenichi is the kind of officer to be swayed by sweet words, and especially not the kind to turn traitor. He’s always had those roots, and it’s never been an issue before. I don’t think he’s a traitor... but as Joumei says, it won’t hurt to keep my eye on him a little more — as much as I’m able without generating anyone else’s suspicions.

Out loud he said,

“You don’t remember where you were held?”

“I woke up alone in District Seven,” Tenichi said simply. “I was in that forest... near where Father is buried. I was at his grave when... whoever those people were... they came and... did something to me. I’m still not sure what exactly that was, but...” he rubbed his brow again, “I feel as though I’ve slept for a week and all my thoughts are in backwards order. If you say I’ve been missing some days, that might explain it.”

“That’s probably the effect of wearing those cuffs long-term,” Souja lied, inwardly resolving not to give Tenichi any more information about the Kitsune or their Sekkiseki home. “We’ll get someone from Fourth to look at you and make sure it’s all right to remove them both at once.”

“Fukutaichou, that man... the silver haired man, he said that people in Fourth had been killed,” now Tenichi’s dismay was clearly genuine, and Souja felt his doubts and hesitations settle at the obvious anxiety in the other’s eyes. “Is that true? Were people really...?”

“Eight officers in the Spiritless Zone,” The Vice Captain nodded his head grimly. “Three more survived, though two suffered some injury and the third exhausted herself keeping her comrades alive. What exactly happened isn’t entirely clear — I’m sure the Captains know more than I do, but it’s a delicate subject and probably not one I should be discussing with someone of lower rank in too much detail.”

“No, I suppose not,” Tenichi conceded. “I’m sorry. I just... I maybe hoped it wasn’t true. I thought perhaps he’d made it up to scare me, but...”

“Men like that don’t need to use lies to frighten folk,” Souja said dryly. “Think no more on it, Tenichi. You had no responsibility or involvement in what happened in the Spiritless Zone, and even if you had been on duty, there’s nothing you or any of us could have done to prevent it.”

“I know, but the slaughter of shinigami is...”

“Distressing. I know,” Souja nodded. “That’s why I’m relieved to be bringing you back in one piece. You might not have been a member of Seventh since you recruited, and you might not be Endou, but you’ve made your mark among your colleagues and the division has been incomplete without you. The best thing you can do, if its possible, is put this behind you and look forward to what you can do to help. A lot of the younger ones are jumpy because of what’s happened, and if they see you’re fine and back to yourself, they’ll calm down.”

“It’s what I want to do too, sir,” Tenichi assured him fervently, nodding his head. “I want to forget this past week ever happened. I wish I could tell you more about what did — but at the very least, I want to get back into the swing of the division and catch up with what duties I’ve missed.”

“Good man,” Souja grinned, warmth lighting up his gaze. “If that’s the case, Kikyue will probably not rip you to ribbons. As for the Captain, tell him whatever you can remember. I don’t suppose he’ll be

surprised if there are gaps in your knowledge, but even the little you told me just then about where you were abducted might prove useful in some small way. When you've debriefed, though, I'm serious about putting it behind you. It's over, and you can consider it the responsibility of those of us ranking higher to handle any investigation."

"Yes, sir," Tenichi bowed his head, and for a while they walked in silence, the occasional hoot of a distant hunting owl acting as the only accompaniment to the sound of their feet rustling through the long grass.

"You know, you've never mentioned your father's burial place before," they were approaching the borders of Inner Seireitei and the sun was beginning to set up a hazy red glow across the horizon as Souja ventured a new topic of conversation, casting Tenichi a curious glance. "I didn't know he'd died in Seventh."

"Mm," Tenichi's expression became momentarily hunted, then he sighed, shaking his head. "Ketsui and I were born there. We left when... well, we left, and moved to Eighth, but Father... never did. He died in Seventh when I was about eight or nine."

"I see," Souja pursed his lips. "Is that why you agreed to come to Seventh Division? Because you're from Seventh District originally?"

"Maybe," Tenichi grimaced. "Is that a bad reason? I wanted to find Father's burial place, and I thought, if I was with Seventh, I'd end up in the right kind of areas to find it."

"It sounds as though you managed to do so, by coincidence," Souja remarked lightly, and Tenichi flinched, then nodded.

"It was only because I knew where Father was buried on the maps that I realised I was in Seventh District at all," he said slowly, but Souja could see the consternation in his companion's eyes, and once more his own doubts began to raise their heads, buoyed by Joumei's words. "I recognised the stretch of forest. An old friend of mine was there, when he was put in the earth, and so she... and I was able to... to work it out. I... I'm sorry, I never said anything about it before."

He lowered his gaze, like a penitent child expecting rebuke, then,

"I *like* Seventh," he added softly. "Everything has been exactly as I've wanted it to be, leaving Thirteenth. I didn't know if that would happen, but it has. I might have come to Seventh looking for Father's burial place, but... but I'm glad I transferred and I... I am loyal... to the Captain... all the same."

“You were very young when you lost him,” Souja decided to play dumb, focusing instead on his companion’s earlier words. “I can’t imagine what it must be like to lose your father so young — and never have him know all the things you’ve achieved in your life.”

“Yes,” Tenichi seemed relieved by the turn of the conversation, nodding his head again. “I’m old enough that I remember him clearly, but you’re right, sir. He never saw me become a shinigami, and when I graduated the Academy, he wasn’t there. Not even knowing where he was buried left a gap inside of me, and I wanted to fill it. You don’t think that’s a bad thing?”

“All sons owe loyalty to their fathers,” Souja said with a wry grin. “Even if those fathers are no longer of this world. I’m sorry you’ve been through all you have, Tenichi — but I’m glad that, if it had one benefit, it allowed you to locate your father’s final resting place.”

“Yes. Yes, me too,” Tenichi agreed fervently.

“That said, I’m going to have to ask you not to return there any time soon,” Souja added, and Tenichi stared at him in surprise.

“Fukutaichou?”

“That area of Seventh is high risk, and I would rather not lose you again,” Souja pressed his lips together, ignoring the dismay that had flared in his subordinate’s eyes. “I’m sorry, since it’s obviously a place of pilgrimage for you, but as your Vice Captain, I have no choice. You must not go back there — and you certainly must not try to tell your brother or take him there. It would be seriously frowned on if you were to disobey that instruction — and if I’m more lenient in my judgements, the Captain would not be. Do you follow?”

“Yes sir,” Tenichi’s eyes darkened with something that might have been frustration, but he bowed his head in acceptance, and Souja sighed.

“I’m sorry that it means taking your father from you again when you’ve just found him,” he said softly, “but I must give priority to the living, and not the dead.”

And I want to keep you away from the Kitsune, no matter what.

As they reached the Inner Seireitei border, Souja saluted the guards on duty, who returned the salute, allowing both men to pass into the inner conclave and onto the narrow, white-stone pathway that led to the central concourse of Shinigami administration.

If you were to go trying to find out about them, it would cause everyone problems. More, if you were to be seen frequenting the grave of someone

executed by the Endou for treason, it might create ripples that would be hard to suppress. Whatever did or didn't happen to you over the last week, Tenichi, I hope you'll follow my advice. If Keitarou was the one who took you, and if he was the one who led you to Daisuke's grave, have the sense to let it go now. For your sake, and for Father's, I hope it was not — but if that man is involved, Joumei's words about being cursed might just come to fruition. As Vice Captain of the Seventh, my duty is to keep my squad safe and to protect my men as much as I can. That means keeping you away from dangerous people and threats you might not have perceived... no matter what the cost.

19. Secrets

Chapter Eighteen: Secrets

“You know, if you keep pulling all-nighters, you’re going to end up with another fever.”

Shunsui settled himself more comfortably beside Ugendou’s open window, leaning back against the wood and closing his eyes slightly as a gentle, warm breeze fluttered between the slats, filling the chamber with the pleasant scent of evening blossoms. “Come to think of it, I might wind up with a fever too, considering I’m here humouring you like this. What exactly is so critical that it has to wait till your division have trotted off to bed to discuss, Juu-kun? I’m used to your random whims, but this one is stranger than most.”

“You make it sound like I’ve sent my naughty school-children to bed.”

Juushirou padded across the tatami mat floor, removing his *haori* from his shoulders with a sigh and hanging it up on the hook beside the door. “I’m grateful for you coming to follow up this whim, by the way. It involves you too, as it happens — I assume Shizuka-chan did report to you on her findings in the archive?”

“She said that they’d not had a lot of luck, but that she’d written up a few notes and Ketsui had brought them here to you,” Shunsui watched his friend languidly from beneath hooded lids. “Stop pacing and come sit down at the very least. Whatever’s on your mind, let’s discuss it then put work aside for the evening, huh? I still owe you a *shougi* rematch from the last time, and sake always tastes better at midnight.”

“I don’t have any alcohol in here, so you’ll be disappointed if that’s your plan,” Juushirou grinned, obediently taking his familiar seat behind the desk and settling his *shihakushou* so that the folds of cloth did not dig into his skin. “I know it’s never wise to keep that kind of thing in here — especially not when you’re coming to visit me. You get easily distracted if there’s sake on offer, and I want to talk seriously about something that needs your full attention.”

“I knew you’d say that,” Shunsui sighed heavily, then slid the fingers of his left hand into the right sleeve of his *haori*, pulling out a small ceramic bottle and setting it down on the floor between them. “I

also planned ahead, and brought emergency rations with me. I'll share it with you, Juu-kun, so don't look at me like that — but if you want, we can talk shop first, and drink later."

"So much for a day of sobriety and abstinence," Juushirou remarked pointedly, and Shunsui shrugged.

"Midnight marks the beginning of a new day," he said unrepentantly. "Besides, everyone's under pressure. They deserve it — and there's not enough here to go mad with. Just a nice, friendly tipple to round the evening off — that's all."

"I should've known," Juushirou rolled his eyes, but there was amusement in his gaze and he nodded, pulling a folded sheet of parchment from his obi. "All right, I suppose that's fair. If it's Kyouraku sake, then I imagine it'll be good quality, and a few sips before bed won't hurt."

"That's the spirit," Shunsui said approvingly, nodding his head. "Well? Why did you call me here now? Why not wait till the morning? I know time is of the essence, but even so..."

"Because it's not something I want to talk to the whole division about," Juushirou admitted, smoothing the sheet of parchment and holding it out to his companion. "I've already told Ketsui not to discuss his findings with anyone, not even Enishi. It might be nothing, but as soon as I saw what kind of details Shizuka had taken down, I figured you ought to be aware of this too. Read her notes and see what you think."

"Let me see," Shunsui reached out a lazy hand for the parchment, taking it and squinting at the columns of characters that dotted the page. "Hrm. I see. So Ketsui and Shizu-chan stumbled on something relating to the Onmitsukidou, did they? That was a bit daring of them... though I didn't think that the Onmitsukidou recorded their private dealings in the Shihouin court."

"Ditto, which is why it struck me as something worth looking at," Juushirou admitted. "I don't know as it connects to what Mitsuki told me, though — there are just too many loose ends flapping around and I don't like it. I want to find some answers, but everywhere I look I see more questions."

"You're thinking of this Onmitsukidou person still being alive, then, I presume?" Shunsui arched an eyebrow, and Juushirou nodded.

"It occurred to me that someone like that would have a grudge against the Onmitsukidou, if he crossed them and they caught him,"

he agreed. “That led me to wondering whether or not he’s the missing link in the chain between Tenichi’s disappearance and the infiltration of Inner Seireitei in the first place. I don’t know anything about this case — but I do remember that, when Midori-sama’s daughter was born, Kai was called back to the Shihouin manor to take care of things there. That would’ve been around ten years ago, which is when Ketsui said this record was from. If something happened then, and Kai called it to the Shihouin court, it must’ve been a big deal. Otherwise he’d have let his subordinates handle it. That implies someone with some power and responsibility crossed lines they shouldn’t have — and that kind of person would be well equipped to slip into Inner Seireitei undetected and abduct a shinigami without leaving any evidence behind.”

“Not to mention opening a defunct *Senkaimon*,” Shunsui murmured, and Juushirou nodded.

“I’m working on that premise,” he agreed. “It seems convenient that this report comes from ten years ago, and the gate was sealed around that time, too. Besides, I can’t see any other means by which it was done. My only stumbling block was how someone would have unlocked the gate without alerting the Urahara — but if it was a member of the Onmitsukidou, albeit a disgraced one, he might have his ways.”

“It’s true that the Onmitsukidou have special clearance to use the gates without their spirit power being actively logged by the Urahara,” Shunsui nodded, setting the sheet of parchment down on the floor. “Kai told me that Midori-sama negotiated it with them back when she set the organisation up. It means that admission to the Onmitsukidou is strictly regulated, though. Only the most elite and loyal candidates are allowed to enrol, and they have tough training regimes in order to suppress their reiatsu and use it to move undetected around Seireitei. If any of them rebel or break even the most insignificant rule, the penalty could easily be death. It’s a harsh, strict set of regulations — but its necessary, given the freedom of movement they have.”

“This one broke some rule or other, and paid for it,” Juushirou said grimly. “If he was killed, they wouldn’t have bothered removing him from records, since there’d be no point. If he wasn’t dead, he would still be able to move freely — the trouble is, proving that he is — if he is the one we’re looking for at all.”

“Did you mention this to Hirata, yet?” Shunsui wondered. ‘He’s still convinced there’s an inside source, and although this is in some ways

still “inside”, it might put his paranoid little hunter’s mind a bit more at rest.”

“I’m waiting for him to appear,” Juushirou admitted. “I sent a message to him earlier on, and had one back to say he was coming, but so far, he hasn’t. I don’t know if something has occurred at Seventh, but...”

“More likely he’s making sure all his regulation shinigami are where they should be before he leaves for here,” Shunsui said wisely. “He’ll probably need more sake than the both of us, given his stress levels of late.”

“I heard that, Shunsui-kun,”

The voice of their comrade, calm yet pointed out of the darkness made both men jump, Shunsui swinging around hurriedly to face the window. Outside, framed by the black night and glittering in the moonlight stood the missing member of their group, amusement glittering in his pale blue eyes as he surveyed their surprise.

“I’m quite good at suppressing reiatsu, still,” he said, unnecessarily, pushing the window back further and climbing into the chamber. “My *kyokkou* is still quite effective, too. It’s comforting, if it can fool two Captains of your levels, though — or maybe you were just not paying attention?”

“What are you doing, trying to kill me?” Shunsui exclaimed, putting a hand to his chest. “Whatever happened to coming in through the door, Hirata-kun?”

“I decided not to take the front entrance, in case I was followed,” Hirata said calmly, settling himself on the tatami-mat floor and turning to face Juushirou, who was staring at his fellow Captain in undisguised astonishment. “Don’t look like that, Juushirou-kun. I might be a Captain, but I learned how to climb in and out of windows from the best, remember?”

He shot a sidelong glance in Shunsui’s direction, and the Eighth Division Captain let out a chuckle of acknowledgement.

“I suppose that’s true,” he agreed. “You’re letting your paranoia get worse, though, Hirata-chan, if you think coming here to Thirteenth is now potentially dangerous.”

“If what you were saying just then is true, it probably is,” Hirata was unmoved. “Close the window, Shunsui. If I could eavesdrop on you both, so could someone else — and Onmitsukidou can suppress their reiatsu just as well as I can.”

“He has a point,” Juushirou sighed, indicating for Shunsui to do as he was bidden, and the Eighth Division Captain obliged. “We had no idea you were there, and just because the bulk of the division are asleep, it doesn’t mean more nefarious folk aren’t abroad listening for tidbits of information.”

“It might be a longshot, anyway,” Shunsui added. “This was something Ketsui and Shizuka picked up in the archives — but it’s unconfirmed. Juu thinks it’s how Tenichi was abducted, but we’ve no proof.”

“We might find out, soon,” Hirata pursed his lips, lowering his voice. “Souja had a message earlier today from the head of the Kitsune in Seventh District. They’ve picked up someone matching Tenichi’s description — so my son has gone out there tonight, in the hopes of bringing the missing boy back home.”

“He’s hardly a boy, now,” Juushirou objected.

“He’s alive, and that’s the most important thing,” Shunsui held up his hands before his friends could dispute the point. “It seems a little easy, though, don’t you think? First whoever it is makes all these demands about the Kitsune, then suddenly Tenichi is found by that same group of people?”

“I think probably it’s a trap, designed to lure the Kitsune out,” Hirata admitted uneasily. “Souja sees that too, at least, he did when I explained it — but I let him go on the understanding he’d be very careful and keep hidden as much as possible. I have faith in Joumei to be cautious, too — but it does seem too easy.”

“Could they have just given up?” Juushirou suggested. “Perhaps they were bluffing. They didn’t hurt the other shinigami they took — maybe killing him was never in their plans.”

“If we’re talking about the same kidnappers,” Hirata interjected.

“You don’t think that’d be too coincidental?” Juushirou frowned. “Just because the ransom demands were different, they still met particular needs.”

“Let’s assume we’re dealing with the same group for now, else it’s going to make my head ache,” Shunsui implored his friend. “We have too many players to deal with as it is — I’d rather keep it simple for the time being.”

“None of this is simple,” Hirata grimaced, “but if we have Tenichi returned safe and sound, maybe he’ll be able to give us some information himself.”

“The others had no memory of what happened when they were taken,” Juushirou pointed out.

“Tenichi is a more powerful officer, though. Subduing him completely would take more skill,” Shunsui reflected. “Perhaps that’s why they let him go — because keeping him was too much trouble and there was a risk of them being found out. They could’ve cut their losses and moved on, since they must’ve realised from your silence that you had no intention of giving them the Kitsune.”

“You really think that’s likely?” Hirata demanded, and Shunsui shook his head.

“Not really, but it’s a nice, positive angle to explore,” he responded. “If Tenichi-kun can add anything to the equation, it’ll help — but if Juu’s theory is right...”

“I’d rather be dealing with a disgruntled ex-Onmitsukidou than a member of the current Gotei,” Juushirou said grimly. Hirata nodded.

“Agreed,” he said with a sigh. “I don’t like the idea of having someone on the inside leaking information out — but the Onmitsukidou agents have free movement and they allegedly put to death anyone who betrays their code of honour. Understandably, few do — but if this one did... why did they let him get away?”

“From Shizuka’s notes, it looks like the person was pursued and attacked, dealt mortal injuries but a corpse wasn’t found,” Shunsui scanned the sheet of paper once more before pushing it across towards the younger man.

“They let that go?” Hirata was startled.

“Kai wasn’t in charge at the time. He was with Midori-sama in central District Two, and his adjutant had control,” Juushirou explained. “I don’t think we’re going to get any further with this without talking to Kai directly, though. He might be reluctant — but the more we discuss Shizuka’s notes, the less I realise we know.”

“I vote you do it, then,” Shunsui suggested. “Hirata will have Tenichi to interrogate, and... if it’s all the same to you... I’d like to keep Shizu-chan out of this if I possibly can. Ketsui’s already involved because of Tenichi’s abduction, and you are because of your link to both of them. There’s no sense in involving more people than necessary.”

“Fair enough. I’ll go tomorrow, if I can,” Juushirou agreed. “In the meantime, though, I’m still not sure what to make of Mitsuki’s claims about this man in Rukongai. Ketsui was certain there was no record of

any escaped felon meeting what she told me.”

“Maybe he escaped before he was caught,” Shunsui suggested, and Juushirou groaned.

“Maybe, but I don’t know. It doesn’t make sense. If it wasn’t Mitsuki, I’d wonder if she’d imagined it — but it is Mitsuki, so I have to trust in her word.”

“You could be biased, though,” Hirata murmured. “We all trust Edogawa-san’s judgement, but she was pushed to extremes. It’s not impossible she got confused.”

“I don’t think that’s it,” Juushirou shook his head. “Perhaps I am biased — probably I can’t claim otherwise — but someone got her and Aomori across Rukongai to the base camp in Hokutan. Mitsuki could never have made that journey without help, not considering the severity of Aomori’s wounds. Someone helped her — and it wasn’t one of the Fourth Division. What does that leave us with?”

“Someone from Rukongai?” Shunsui looked doubtful.

“Mitsuki seemed to think he was from Seireitei, because of things he said,” Juushirou shook his head. “He seemed too well informed for a Plus soul, and too, well, spiritually gifted.”

“They are there, you know. Spiritually gifted folk in the Rukon,” Shunsui objected, and Juushirou nodded.

“So I’ve heard, but not like this.”

“We’re speculating again,” Hirata pointed out. “We can do that all night, but it won’t get us any further.”

“That sounds like a cue to move on to the *shougi* and the sake,” Shunsui looked hopeful. “I should’ve brought some rice crackers with me, and we could’ve made a proper midnight feast of it.”

“You’re never going to grow up entirely, are you?” Juushirou shot him an amused look, and Shunsui shook his head cheerfully.

“The day I do is the day I’ll be nailed in my box and confined to the Kyouraku crypt,” he agreed. “Well? Is class dismissed, sensei? If you tackle Kai about this in the morning, and Hirata takes on Tenichi, everything’s settled for now, right?”

“What are you going to do?” Hirata asked quizzically, and Shunsui lifted the sake with a grin.

“Pour, if Juu can find some *sakazuki* for me,” he replied casually.

“I meant in the investigation,” Hirata pulled a face, and Shunsui laughed.

“I’ll watch over you both, of course,” he said simply. “I’m a sounding board, and that’s my forte. Don’t worry. I’ve always got your back.”

“I can’t really argue with that,” Juushirou got to his feet mock-reluctantly, moving to pull some clean *sakazuki* from a box in the corner. “Here, you win.”

“You shouldn’t humour him so much,” Hirata rolled his eyes, and Juushirou shrugged.

“It’s too late in the day, and you said it yourself. We’ve exhausted all our avenues for now, and we need more information before we can keep going. For now, Hirata, it’s all right to take a break. You probably need it too — you’ve been under as much strain as anyone.”

“I’m worried about the note,” Hirata admitted, nonetheless accepting the *sakazuki* he was offered and allowing Shunsui to pour the fine clear liquid into it with a sigh. “I’m worried about why Tenichi was released and what the real implications are, since I can’t imagine it’s ended like this. It bothers me — that’s all.”

“It bothers all of us,” Shunsui said seriously, pausing in his pouring for a moment. “Right now, though, there’s no more we can do. We’ll keep on it, Hirata. I promise, even if I’m unreliable, I’ll help as much as I can and Juu will speak to Kai — if anyone can persuade him to divulge Onmitsukidou secrets, Juu can. He can also talk to Mitsuki again, and when you’ve interrogated Tenichi, we’ll talk again. We’re not going to let any more shinigami be hurt or abducted if we can help it. The Gotei are focused mostly on the Spiritless Zone case, and the Council has to look at that first and foremost — yourself included, perhaps. Juu and I have a little more freedom, though, so we’ll keep at it.”

“I’ll drink to that,” Juushirou nodded, raising his *sakazuki* in a symbolic toast before draining it of its contents. “Tomorrow, we’ll chase down as many clues as we can put together.”

“Right now, though, I have a shougi grudge to settle with the fishy fellow here,” Shunsui concluded, leaning across to pull Juushirou’s aged and fading shougi board from its cubby hole, “so lets forget politics for a while and play!”

“I see.”

Keitarou sat back against the wall of his makeshift study, displeasure glittering in his normally placid muddy eyes.

It was the next morning in Rukongai and, in the hazy dawn of another cloudy, overcast day, Masaya had made his return, immediately hurrying to the scientist's favoured chamber to impart his discoveries of the previous day. He was huddled now in the most stable corner of the ramshackle study, his back to the door yet his gaze flitting to the entrance every couple of minutes as if ready to take his leave the moment the situation became dangerous. Wrapped in a tattered black cloak he had stolen from an unsuspecting Seireitei villain on his way back, his nondescript, grey appearance seemed all the more sinister, his yellow eyes glittering faintly in the dim light of the room. If not for those eyes, Keitarou reflected, he might be a weasel skulking in the shadows, but the gaze, tarnished though it was with a mixed blood heritage could only be viewed as predatory, their flickering gaze cold as a reptile, yet quick and eager as a cat.

The more time passed, the less human he seemed.

Keitarou's lips tightened into a thin, straight line as he turned his mind away from his companion's unappealing appearance to focus on the more troublesome element of his visit — the news he had brought from the Shinigami court. An oppressive silence hung heavy over the whole room, and the dust and sandy earth that the wind usually scattered across the floor lay still, for there was no breeze. The stagnating air felt cloying and oppressive, and he could still pick up the faintest traces of his last experiment, the pungent odour of the roughly brewed chemicals sharp and acrid on every indrawn breath. Rukongai was not a pleasant place to be, but there were worse lives and worse places. Here they had freedom, but he was not so foolish to think it a commodity which could not be taken away. One false move could land them all in tremendous danger, and he knew only too well how high the stakes truly were.

"You are sure about this, Masaya?" the question came at length, spoken softly, but it was impossible to disguise the genuine anger in the scientist's tones. Across the room, the scrawny, black-clad shape of his chief spy prostrated himself hastily once more, then raised his head, nodding it eagerly.

"Yes, sir. I heard them myself, sir. There is no doubt — the Edogawa girl is still alive, and the Gotei are investigating her testimony regarding what happened in their Spiritless Zone. Keitarou-sama, I also saw the brother of Tenichi-sama, and clearly identified him as such. If Keitarou-sama wishes it, I believe bringing him here

would be...”

“Do not divert the subject, please,” Keitarou’s words were pleasant, but the look in his eyes made Masaya stop in his tracks, swallowing the rest of his statement unspoken. “If I wish to meet with Ketsui, I will ask for it — for now, that is the least of my concerns. By your testimony, a shinigami I thought dead is still alive — and more than that, this shinigami witnessed something of the events in the Spiritless Zone?”

“Yes, sir,” Masaya grovelled in the dust once more, and Keitarou could tell that his chameleonic servant was not sure whether he was about to receive the full force of his master’s anger. “I heard them talking about it clearly, sir — Ketsui-dono and another girl, in the Seireitei Archive.”

“Very well,” Keitarou’s lips thinned to the point they were barely visible, and he jerked his head forward in a slight nod. “Masaya, tell me, did you happen to discover where in Seireitei the Edogawa girl currently is? There was no mention of survivors in either Katsura or Sakaki’s reports, so I only have your word for it that the girl escaped.”

“I didn’t see her myself, sir,” Masaya seemed crestfallen at this admission, “so I’m unsure as to where she currently is. Nonetheless, the shinigami were quite clear. They were researching legal records and criminal cases for information on an escaped felon meeting a description given them by a shinigami called Edogawa Mitsuki. I heard the name clearly, and the description of the felon she saw. It was a young man, sir, with dark hair, and blue eyes.”

“Really.” Now there was no concealing Keitarou’s anger, and Masaya shuffled back hastily against the fabric door-flap of the chamber, as though poised to flee should his companion’s temper explode into physical rage. “I must speak to my son, and find out exactly what he knows about this. He is with Eiraki this morning, I believe — go there and tell him that I wish to see him. Immediately.”

“Yes, sir,” relief flooded Masaya’s features and he scrabbled for the door, making an unelegant departure in his haste to get away from Keitarou’s line of fire. Such behaviour made it difficult to believe that, in a former life, this mismatched experiment had once been an expert in stealth and subtlety, but, Keitarou knew, in Rukongai, you took what you had and worked with it as best you could.

Still, his report was disturbing.
Katsura has never lied to me before.

His eyes narrowed to near slits as he processed this.

Every other mission he's ever done, he's reported to me faithfully and accurately. He's told me what kind of damage the Hollow has rendered, and in what parts of Seireitei. He's been obedient and quick to act, and I've utilised that fact to my advantage. I didn't even think that, in sending him with Sakaki to the Spiritless Zone, there'd be any doubt about the result.

He frowned, replaying Masaya's words afresh.

Masaya doesn't like the attention I give other people, and he could lie to get them into trouble... but this time I don't think he is. I don't suppose he'd risk angering me by slandering my children, and the eagerness with which he came here to give his report makes me think that he thought he'd found out something valuable. No, I'll hear what Katsura has to say, but I'm inclined to believe Masaya's words, this time. It's a disappointment, but I suppose it's wrong for any parent to expect perfection from his son every time.

"Otousama?"

The cloth door twitched back at that moment, revealing an apprehensive looking Katsura, his hair tied back in a loose tail behind his head and his attire splashed with mud, indicating that he had been helping Eiraki with some of the more mundane chores. As he met his son's gaze, Keitarou was startled and perturbed to see the consternation in the dark blue eyes, and the speed with which Katsura chose to look away. He covered it well, making as though to straighten the door behind him, but Keitarou was not fooled. Katsura's demeanour indicated something was amiss, and a dark sense of unease began to swirl up through the scientist's gut.

If you want something doing properly, sometimes you can only rely on yourself to do it right.

Out loud he said,

"Come join me, Katsura. Sit down."

"Yes, sir," Katsura did as he was bidden, dropping awkwardly down on the threadbare rug that covered the innermost part of the chamber and eying his companion expectantly. "Kurotsuchi said you were looking for me and that it was urgent — is something amiss?"

"I don't know," Keitarou spoke evenly, meeting his son's gaze with a grave one of his own. "That depends on the direction of this conversation, and what you have to tell me."

"Sir?" Katsura's body tensed, dismay flitting briefly across his face, and Keitarou knew for certain that his oldest child was concealing something important from him. His unease grew.

"I want to talk to you," he said softly, "about the Spiritless Zone

and your movements there.”

“The... Spiritless Zone... sir?” Katsura swallowed hard, his face draining a little of colour, and Keitarou nodded.

“Yes, if you please.”

“I thought... Sakaki and I... we already... didn’t we already report...?”

“You did,” Keitarou cut across him, “but I want to give you a second chance to give me that report. It’s possible that, after a little time thinking it over, new information may have come to light and I would like to have an accurate overall picture of what happened over the divide.”

Now there was no concealing Katsura’s distress, and Keitarou sighed.

“I see,” he murmured, disappointment clear in his tones. “There’s something you don’t want to tell me... and I thought we had a mutually trusting father-son bond, Katsura-kun.”

“I... I...”

“Edogawa Mitsuki,” in a flash Keitarou’s demeanour changed from the slighted parent to the angry extremist, and two hands shot out to grab Katsura by the shoulders, his fingers digging deep into the flesh. “Last chance, Katsura. I want to know what happened to Edogawa Mitsuki.”

Katsura’s eyes widened, genuine fear flickering into the dark blue eyes, and Keitarou tightened his grasp.

“Tell me,” he ordered. “Tell me, or God help me, I’ll make sure you never tell anyone another story ever again.”

“Father, please, you’re hurting me!” Katsura exclaimed, struggling in vain against the scientist’s vice-like hold. “Please, let go of me! We can talk... but... please... don’t hurt me!”

“But *you’ve* hurt *me*,” Keitarou was unmoved. “I put my trust in you, and you’ve betrayed that trust. You were sent on a mission and you reported back to me that you had completed it. That was a lie, wasn’t it, Katsura-kun? You didn’t complete it. You failed, and you lied to me.”

“Father!” Now tears of pain glittered on Katsura’s lashes, his skin a greyish hue as he stared at the other man with a mixture of helplessness and terror. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean... it wasn’t... I wasn’t

betraying you, sir, I promise! Hollows are hard to... maybe she..."

"Be very careful," Keitarou said blackly. "If you tell me another lie now, I might lose my temper. I might accidentally rip through your skin to the bone and burn your limbs from your body with my kidou, if I really get angry. I forgive many sins, Katsura, but betrayal is not one of them. You have one final chance. I suggest you tell me the truth — or I shall be presenting your ashes to Eiraki to scatter as she sees fit."

Katsura's drew an unsteady breath into his body, sweat beading across his brow as he tried to gauge whether or not his companion's threat was a serious one. His body was trembling, Keitarou realised with detachment, and at length his lips parted, quivering for a moment before forming words.

"One of mine got away," he murmured, his words barely making a sound in the empty chamber. "The Hollow... didn't... kill... all of them."

"Why did you not tell me that the moment you returned here?" Keitarou demanded. "No, more to the point, why did you not finish it yourself? You were sent to do a job — surely you don't need me to tell you that if one method fails, you improvise and find another? Hollows are unpredictable beasts — but you are surely capable of overpowering one young woman and seeing to her death?"

Tears of fear rolled silently down Katsura's cheeks, but, though his lips brushed together briefly, no more words came out.

"I can't hear you," Keitarou did not relent for a moment. "Tell me. Why did Edogawa Mitsuki live? Why her, of all people?"

"It... was... an... accident," Katsura whispered. "Shinigami... have... swords... sir. I... didn't... and Sakaki... Sakaki was..."

"Doing her job properly, which is something you, as eldest, should be ashamed of," Keitarou snapped. "When your kid sister can do something more cleanly and efficiently than you, it's a sign you need to return to basic training and re-evaluate what exactly we're fighting for. I have never had to use this tone with you, Katsura. I have never had to scold you or chastise you for deceit or incompetence, despite your frequent flirtations with women in the Districts. Did you think that a shinigami would be the next challenge for your social skills, is that it? Did you save her life because you thought she was pretty, despite how much relied on you ending it?"

"No sir!" Katsura's denial this time was immediate, his gaze

beseeking the scientist to believe him. "I never... it wasn't like that. I wouldn't fall in love with a shinigami! I hate shinigami! They're the enemy, and I don't... I don't care for them at all! It was an accident, sir, that's all. I didn't mean for her to get away, but... but she did, and... and she alerted her people back home, so I had to flee. I couldn't have been caught there."

"So she did see you," Keitarou released his hold, displeasure prickling from his slender form. "Masaya's report was an accurate one. Do you realise how much trouble you've caused now, my boy? A shinigami survivor is now wandering around Seireitei telling all and sundry about a young dark haired, blue eyed man that she saw in Rukongai."

Katsura gulped, beyond words, and Keitarou rubbed his hands together, flickers of Kidou energy rippling against his skin.

"Otousama, please, no!" Katsura's sharp senses picked up on the shift in his father's spirit power immediately, and he shuffled back, almost tumbling over his own feet in his haste to put space between him and his companion. "I didn't mean to... please... I didn't betray you! I wouldn't... I never would! Please, believe me! I made a mistake and I'm sorry, but please..."

Keitarou's eyes narrowed, his gaze flitting to the cloth doorway as a second familiar reiatsu brushed across his senses, and he grimaced, lowering his hands to his lap. The next moment the divide was flung back, and Koku stepped into the chamber, pausing to bow his head in Keitarou's direction.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, sir," he said levelly, his voice calm and even, "but I felt the flare of spirit power from this location and I thought someone might be under attack."

"Koku..." Keitarou met the intruder's eyes for a moment, and Koku held the muddy gaze impassively.

"I was apparently mistaken," he continued, "but if you please, sir, Eiraki-san is eager for Katsura to return to help with the chores. She asked me to come and find him, so, if it's not too forward of me, might I ask for him to be released to attend her?"

Keitarou let out his breath in a rush, feeling the anger and frustration cooling into resignation and regret. Slowly he nodded.

"I believe that we have all but finished this conversation," he agreed, shifting his gaze to the trembling Katsura, who nodded his head fervently.

“Yes, sir. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean... I won’t do it again. Not ever. I promise,” he babbled, scrambling to his feet and bowing towards the other man.

“I’m sure you won’t,” Keitarou said acerbically. “You may not consider this matter closed, Katsura. You made a mistake, and I will expect you to rectify that mistake.”

“Rectify it... sir?” Katsura looked blank, and Keitarou nodded.

“If it was simply a case of you letting someone live, I might overlook it. Mistakes are made, and though I wanted Edogawa Mitsuki dead, I did not convey that exact instruction to you before you left,” he said quietly. “More, you probably didn’t know the girl by name before this errand... and could not imagine how significant a pawn she would have become if she had been sacrificed there and then. However, your own carelessness has created a second problem. If she truly did see you, there’s only a matter of time before she and companions come looking for you. As a shinigami, she will recognise your reiatsu. She might even realise that it’s your work manipulating the Hollows... and that could lead danger here. Too many lives are at stake in this place for me to hope for the best and let it go.”

“But... with respect, sir, what can I do about it?” Katsura was taken aback. “If this shinigami is now back in Seireitei...”

“You will have to go there, find her, and finish the job you began,” Keitarou said frankly, enjoying the look of absolute horror that flooded his son’s easy-going features. “Oh yes, you are old enough not to have other people repair your wrongs. You allowed your face to be seen, therefore you must ensure that something is done to prevent your being traced back here. She can identify you, so therefore she must be silenced one way or another. If you can’t do this, Katsura, then you will no longer be welcome in Rukongai. The safety of everyone here relies on our anonymity. To protect that, you have a choice. You can kill Edogawa Mitsuki and escape from Inner Seireitei unseen — or you can leave this place forever, and wait for the Gotei to track you down and kill you for your crimes against the shinigami in the Spiritless Zone.”

“Keitarou-sama,” Koku’s expression mirrored Katsura’s aghast one at this, but Keitarou held up his hands to indicate he was not finished talking.

“You may go help Eiraki, and think over all I’ve said,” he continued, addressing his bewildered son directly. “As you do so, remember that to lose you would make Eiraki cry. Think very

carefully about your actions from hereon in, Katsu-kun — you are my son and I care for you, but I cannot put your stupidity over the success of everything we have worked for. I hope to welcome you back here successful — but if you do not complete this task, you must be considered an enemy of Rukongai and I will be forced to remove you from the equation to protect everyone else.”

He smiled, a cold smile that did not reach his pale brown eyes.

“You may go.”

Katsura swallowed hard, exchanging looks of dismay with Koku, but his encounter with his father had clearly left him devoid of any spirit of his own, for he merely bowed once more, withdrawing silently from the chamber and disappearing into the greyish light beyond.

“Did you have to do that?” Koku had followed Katsura’s retreat from the study, but now he turned back to face Keitarou, a quizzical look on his young features. “Katsura is going to take that to heart, you know. You’ve upset him — no, I think it’s safer to say you’ve terrified him.”

“You came here to stop me from hurting him, didn’t you?” Keitarou reflected quietly, and Koku shrugged his shoulders.

“I like Katsura,” he said simply. “I don’t want anything bad to happen to him.”

“He was careless, Koku. Horrendously careless,” Keitarou sighed, and Koku grimaced, leaning up against the study wall.

“Sending him back to Seireitei is just as careless,” he said, censure clear in his tones. “He won’t be thinking straight, he might get caught... and most of all, he’ll really believe you when you say you wouldn’t take him back.”

“You think that was a lie?” Keitarou arched an eyebrow, and Koku’s lips stretched into a thin, humourless smile.

“I already know it was,” he said softly. “I know, and you know, but he does not.”

“Ah... you think you can judge me on my hatred of betrayal, so much so that you think I wouldn’t discard a child of mine for bringing us into danger?” Keitarou mused. “Perhaps you’re more softhearted than I thought, Koku-kun. I’m afraid that you might be proven wrong, though. True, this time, I don’t intend on discarding Katsura. I want Edogawa Mitsuki killed, both to silence her as a witness in Rukongai,

and to send Ukitake Juushirou into a tailspin, and telling Katsura I won't take him back is the quickest way to motivate him to do as he's bidden. He has no other choice, since he has nowhere else to go, and with the right incentive, I'm sure he can be persuaded to kill. I don't anticipate a long term problem... but its also true that I don't forgive mistakes that are repeated."

"Mm," Koku pressed his lips together thoughtfully.

"Has he spoken to you at all about what happened in Rukongai?"

"Why would he?" Koku looked surprised. "It was a mission you sent him on. It has nothing to do with me."

"Yes, you are a far better liar than he is," Keitarou sighed heavily. "Far better at concealing your true thoughts and feelings from me... it's a frightening state of affairs. Katsura wears his heart on his sleeve. I can read and manipulate him with ease. Sakaki is fine so long as I give her people to kill, and Masaya owes me his entire existence, therefore would never vex me — but you..."

"I vex you by existing?" Koku asked archly, and Keitarou laughed, shrugging his shoulders.

"No, you please me because you exist," he corrected, "as all good things in this world must be vexing at some point or another. If they were not, they would not be interesting — and that would be a shame."

"Are you really going to send Katsura to Inner Seireitei?"

"You heard my instructions to him."

"Even though it might damage him?"

"Yes, even so," Keitarou smiled. "There are a few key pieces in this puzzle, and I am slowly using what resources I have to pull those things together. You should know that better than me — there's very little you don't pick up on. Maybe I should have sent *you* to the Spiritless Zone instead."

"If you had, I would have defied you," Koku said calmly. "I don't kill people. That's not my job. Katsura might feel honour bound to obey you, but I'm not the same as them."

"No... true," Keitarou acknowledged. "In which case, I shall have to put my hopes in Katsura rectifying his little faux pas."

"Edogawa Mitsuki's death is that important to you?"

"You aren't going to pretend you don't know why?" Keitarou raised

an eyebrow, reaching for a file stuffed full with scraps of ratty parchment. He rummaged through it for a moment, finally locating a sorry fragment of paper and setting it down on the floor before him.

“Mourning robes from storm clouds hang heavy over the coastal tides, lamenting the fading light of the beautiful moon.”

He read the words slowly and reverently as though reciting a sermon, and Koku flinched, his expression becoming pained.

“I wish you’d stop reading your own motives and omens into those pieces of nonsense,” he muttered, and Keitarou chuckled in amusement.

“Nonsense? No, Koku. You know very well that they are not.”

“Words have many meanings,” Koku said bluntly. “Perhaps your way of reading them isn’t always the right one — and maybe Edogawa Mitsuki’s death has nothing to do with what you just read. The night Katsura went to Rukongai, there was no moon. It doesn’t mean that the beautiful moon is the Edogawa woman, and it doesn’t mean that the rest of what it says relates to Ukitake Juushirou. You want to believe that, so you pursue it — but most of the bits of paper in that file of yours are vague and nonspecific potential events. You’ve not been able to prove many of them to be correct, and if you rely on them to guide you, you’re the one who’ll become careless.”

“Was that an official warning?” Keitarou demanded, and Koku shrugged.

“Take it any way you like,” he said briskly. “I’m going back to my shelter to read. I think sending Katsura to Seireitei is a mistake, but I can see I won’t change your mind.”

“Wise boy,” Keitarou agreed. “Go, read your books and bury your head back in the sand. Whether you choose to agree with me or not, a war is coming — and I intend on using all the weapons at my disposal to come out the other side victorious.”

The Second Division barracks were almost as far away from the Thirteenth as it was possible to get and, as Juushirou made his way towards the entrance of the Shihouin’s proud Gotei domain, he reflected ruefully that the same could probably be said for the squad’s operations. Ostensibly an equal partner of the Gotei Thirteen, the existence of the Onmitsukidou and their usefulness to Seireitei had made the Second Division a power in shinigami matters. It had been almost thirty years now since the Shihouin Clan had faced the threat of obliteration and they had reacted to the fact admirably, piecing

back together the pride and honour of their family from out of the ashes and forging a formidable force of stealth fighters and shunpo experts. It was partly thanks to the strong guiding hand of the current Clan leader, Shihouin Midori, but, as he gazed up at the crescent moon crest that had been expertly scorched into the soft wood of the gateway, Juushirou knew that his old school friend Kai had been as much a part of the regeneration as the infamous Shadow Cat. Though Midori was Clan leader and Division Captain, Kai's position in the Onmitsukidou gave him almost equal status among the shinigami squad chiefs and, though his official rank in Second Division remained Vice Captain, he was more often referred to by his Onmitsukidou honours.

Juushirou was sure that many of Kai's current subordinate officers had no idea how adverse to the idea of killing and death their leader really was, for in the time since he had inherited the mantle of secret ops leader, Kai had perfected the art of public impassiveness. He was known for treating all those who worked for him with objective efficiency, and though there were none of the warm bonds of family Juushirou liked to foster within his own division, the operation was efficiently run and rigidly held together. Juushirou did not know how many shinigami were currently included among the Onmitsukidou's ranks, but he did know that, far from being all pure-blooded Shihouin, Kai had accepted recruits with shunpo and combat potential from the District levels, training them remorselessly until they could meet even the strictest inspections without a flicker of concern. It was a different type of unity to Thirteenth Division's, but it worked, and the Shihouin Clan had continued to move from strength to strength as a result.

He did not come here often — nobody did, for the secretive Second did not encourage always quick to offer help and support to other divisions in dangerous and difficult situations, Midori preferred to run a tight ship, and Juushirou knew that this was as much to protect the Onmitsukidou agents as it was any other reason. Juushirou had heard rumours that some of the members of the Onmitsukidou had once been tried as felons in District Seireitei, pardoned and retrained according to their particular skills. Such things were technically against Council law, but, since Second Division had accepted responsibility for policing the Gotei prison, Juushirou privately thought it was a rumour grounded in some fact. That thought brought back to mind the reason for his coming, and he frowned, pressing his lips together.

Was the person who had abducted Tenichi a former Onmitsukidou, and if so, had he been one of these escaped felons whose reformation had proven half-hearted?

“Ukitake-taichou!”

The voice of a young woman drew him from his reverie and he turned, bowing his head politely towards the speaker, who echoed his formality with a grave expression of her own. Dressed in the all black of the secret operatives, and with her dark hair in a tight braid, it was hard to recognise her as a former playmate of Shunsui’s in the depths of District Eight, but Juushirou knew that this was Etsuo Saku. As Third Seat of the Second Division, she was both Midori’s personal aide and Kai’s current second in command. She was an unassuming yet diligent and, when the need arose, ruthless member of the secret forces. Looking at her now, Juushirou was in no doubt that, if anything she held dear was threatened, the sword that hung idle at her waist would be at the enemy’s throat in less than a heartbeat, ready and willing to slash through the jugular and redden the pale cobbles with blood.

The Second Division was that kind of place, the assassin traditions of the shadow Clan reborn into something legitimate yet terrifying within the Gotei’s accepted structure. The Council endorsed the actions of the Onmitsukidou, and Juushirou knew they had many positive uses, but he had learned not to ask too many questions, certain he did not really want to know all the answers. If was for this reason that any meetings with his old friend Kai generally took place in neutral territory or at Thirteenth’s own barracks, places where, in general, Juushirou felt more able to relax.

Still, today was an exception, and there was no time to make formal arrangements.

“You know that this is a closed barracks, Ukitake-taichou,” Saku continued now, faint reproach in her blue eyes. “I don’t remember Midori-sama telling me of your coming this morning, and if she isn’t expecting you...”

“I’ve come to see Kai, actually,” Juushirou looked apologetic, and, as her hands came out expectantly, he removed his weapon from his *obi*, placing it in her waiting grasp. “I have come unannounced, and I’m sorry for it, but it’s a matter of both importance and urgency and I don’t think it can wait. If he’s here, could I trouble you to go find him for me? I won’t stray around your barracks without guidance — you should know me well enough to know I respect a division’s right to run to its own rules — but I really can’t postpone my errand.”

“Kai-dono is very busy at the moment,” Saku sighed, sliding Sougyo no Kotowari through her dark sash, alongside her own weapon. “I know he often makes special exceptions when its you, and I

understand that you're his friend, but with everything in the Spiritless Zone..."

"Yes, I know," Juushirou agreed sympathetically. "It's been a horrible time for everyone — but that is partly why I'm here. You see, an investigation of my own has turned up disturbing information that might connect to the Onmitsukidou — and naturally I want to discuss it with the people here before I look into it any further. It might be a matter of high secrecy, and so..."

"I see," Saku's eyes narrowed, and she nodded her head. 'In that case, I understand your coming. I can't take you to his office, of course, but if you follow me, I will take you to somewhere you can sit and wait whilst I call him. He may not be able to come,' as Juushirou's eyes reflected relief, "but I will ask him. Given what you've said, it would be remiss of me not to do that at least."

"Thank you," Juushirou was grateful. "I promise to go where you lead, Etsuo-san. I'm not here to pry into your people's business — the Onmitsukidou helped to save the life of someone very dear to me in Rukongai, and its a debt I can't rightly repay."

"That's why you're bringing this lead to us and not the Council?" Saku asked thoughtfully, and Juushirou shrugged.

"Maybe," he acknowledged, "but mostly I just want Kai's take on it. If it's something I can't touch, well, that will be that, I suppose — but I'd like his guidance first."

"I'll go see him," Saku promised. "Here... it's not very much, I know, but this alcove is at least shady and it has a seat. I'm sorry that I can't take you within — Midori-sama is currently at her Clan holdings, and her instructions are that nobody steps into the building itself without her or Kai in accompaniment."

"I'm not offended, and here will be fine," Juushirou said agreeably, sinking down onto the wooden seat and folding his hands in his lap. "Will you keep Sougyo until I leave, or...?"

"Another order," Saku looked regretful, tapping the hilt of the Captain's *zanpakutou*. "If Kai-dono allows it, I will return it to you when he comes, but I can't overstep my orders and presume what they want me to do."

"Naturally," Juushirou smiled. "It's quite all right, Etsuo-san. As I said before — your division, and your rules. I am the interloper, so I'll play it your way."

"Thank you," Saku bowed her head very properly in Juushirou's

direction once more, then disappeared into shunpo, and Juushirou sighed, allowing himself to relax back against the wood. This was the outskirts of what was a thriving, busy compound, he knew, for though all he could see was what looked like the most innocent of training fields, he could feel the flickering auras of several squad members doing different kinds of work well out of his sight. Some would be inside the forbidden barracks, but others he felt sure were working beneath the ground in basement arenas and chambers the Shihouin had had specially crafted for the purpose. Rather like an iceberg, he reflected ruefully, only a proportion of the Shihouin's Gotei base was visible to the casual observer. Juushirou had never been fooled by Second's illusion of peace and tranquility, but something about the gentle atmosphere comforted him nonetheless. In the light of day, the previous night's discussion seemed to fall into its proper place.

And at the very least I can thank Kai for his help with Mitsuki. I must do that, because I know he went himself for her sake, and I'm grateful that someone she knew was there when she needed them.

He twisted his hands together absently in his lap, considering. *If the person behind this is an aggrieved Onmitsukidou exile, then that takes things even further away from Aizen Keitarou. I don't know if I'd be relieved or cross if that proved to be the case. I want to catch Keitarou and have him safe within the Council's hands, just to make sure he doesn't cause any further trouble but... I don't really think I'm in a hurry to fight against him again. The last time it took Ojīsama's sword to render him helpless. If he survived Raiurei's wrath, he's probably holding a few grudges and I'm sure I'm top of that list. I'm not eager to renew that acquaintance at all — no, perhaps it is better if this is entirely unconnected with his mischief.*

He frowned.

Actually, come to think of it, didn't Shizuka's notes say that the second in command was some officer called Kounou? Etsuo-san has been Kai's second for the last few years, but before that... was that Kounou? Would I have met that man? The Onmitsukidou are so wroop in secrecy that if I hadn't known Etsuo-san before we became shinigami, I might not be aware of her rank or position in this. Still, I'm sure that was the name Shizuka wrote down. Is he still with the Onmitsukidou, or did he get killed in action? I wonder if Kai would tell me that... providing he tells me anything at all. There's no reason for him to, and calling on old ties of friendship is a bit weak when it relates to security issues.

"Ukitake?"

The sound of his friend's voice drew Juushirou from his reverie,

and he raised his head, meeting the quizzical golden gaze of the Onmitsukidou Captain himself. Saku was nowhere to be seen, but in Kai's gloved hands was the sheathed form of Sougyo no Kotowari, and as the dark-skinned officer crossed the yard towards him, he held the weapon out, indicating for the Captain to take it.

"Saku gave me this, but she shouldn't have taken it from you," he explained, as Juushirou did so, offering his friend a grateful smile. "Whilst it's Aneue's protocol to disarm anyone visiting here without proper clearance, I think she would agree with me that you're a visitor above suspicion. Besides, you're a ranked Captain in full uniform. I hope you won't take it amiss."

"Etsuo-san was doing her job," Juushirou assured him, sliding the weapon back into its customary place at his side. "I understand that, and you needn't worry, I'm not put out. You have to give trust to get trust, and I knew she would do my sword no harm. Besides, it was a small price to pay to get to see you so quickly. I know you're busy, Kai, but I'd like to play on our friendship a little bit and ask if you can spare me a bit of time to talk about something that's bothering me."

"Hrm," Kai pursed his lips, dropping down on the bench at his companion's side. 'Well, I am busy, but Saku implied that whatever it was had some bearing on the Onmitsukidou. Perhaps a direct one? In that case,' as Juushirou nodded, "it's my job to hear you out. Friendship or otherwise, I'd be remiss in my rank if I didn't."

"I hoped you'd feel that way," Juushirou grinned. "Is there somewhere private we could go and talk? I'm sure that this place is secured better than the Council Chambers themselves, but since I don't know if what I've brought with me is sensitive information or not, I don't want to take any risks."

"My office is currently occupied with some of my lower officers going over reports relating to Rukongai," Kai said with a frown, "and Aneue's study is locked and barred — nobody's allowed in there while she's away, not even me. Sacred space, she calls it, so that's out. Otherwise, there's only one place we really could go — but you might not like it."

"Oh?" Juushirou arched an eyebrow, and Kai nodded.

"There's an empty detention cell on the level beneath my study," he said ironically. "If anyone sees us, it might start tongues wagging, but they are soundproof because we conduct interrogations in them and those kinds of things are hardly for outside ears. If you don't mind the indignity of talking in a prison cell — that would seem to be the most

available place.”

“Well, it’s an experience I wasn’t banking on, but I trust you’re not going to lock me up,” Juushirou chuckled. “Very well. I’ll put my Captain’s pride on one side for a while and follow you into the dungeons.”

“Oh, it’s hardly that,” Kai assured him with a grin. “It’s just a detention cell, not an actual confinement one. They’re not in the same area — this is where we keep people temporarily whilst trying to figure out if there’s a charge to pin on them. There’s no torture or anything like that in this room — no bloodstains, just some dust and perhaps occasionally the odd dead mouse turns up in the corners or underneath the mats. You might get dust on your *haori*, but I promise, that’ll be the extent of it.”

He turned towards the barracks, then paused, eying Juushirou speculatively.

“Knowing you, I imagine you’re going to interrogate me, not the other way about,” he reflected. “You have that look about you, and I’m rather worried about what you want to know.”

“It may be nothing,” Juushirou put his hand to his *obi*, feeling the soft crackle of paper beneath the fabric. “It might be irrelevant, or it might not. I can’t be sure, yet, but there’s a bigger picture going on here somewhere and we’re trying desperately to work out what it is.”

“Mm,” Kai’s eyes narrowed, but he said nothing, instead leading the way inside the outer perimeter of the Second Division barracks. Instead of taking the long corridor that led to the inner complex and the Captain and Vice Captain’s offices, Kai turned sharp right, pulling back a wooden divide and gesturing to Juushirou to follow him down a short flight of stone steps until they came to a second wooden door. This led into an underground passageway, doors leading off it to the left and right and, half way along this walkway Kai stopped, pulling keys from his belt and sliding one of them into the lock of a right hand door. It clicked open and he slid it back, running his fingers against the wall to activate the Kidou lamps and indicating for Juushirou to follow him inside.

Juushirou did so, not knowing quite what to expect but, as he stepped into the small, square cell, he realised that Kai had been right in his appraisal. The room was simply appointed, with a low slung wooden bench in one corner and a rolled up curl of moth-eaten, mouse-chewed bedding tossed into one corner. The floor had a thin layer of dust across it, but in all other respects it was clean and,

though there were no windows to let in natural light, the Kidou lamps illuminated the room fairly evenly, making it easy enough to see. Kai ran his hand over the bench, patting the wood to check it was stable, then offering Juushirou a rueful smile.

“It’s safe enough, if a little dusty. Please, take a seat, and let’s get down to business.”

“All right,” Juushirou did as he was bidden, ruefully reflecting on the scolding he would almost certainly receive from Naoko on his return for getting dust and grime all over his pristine white *haori*. Nevertheless he made himself comfortable on the bench, rummaging in his *obi* and pulling out Shizuka’s scribbled note. He handed it to his companion, who took it curiously, leaning up against the wall of the cell as he read the contents. As he did so, Juushirou watched his expression, noting the faintest flicker of consternation surface in the golden eyes. He made no comment, however, merely refolding the paper and handing it back.

“Well?” Juushirou arched an eyebrow, eyeing his friend quizzically. “Does it mean anything to you? Your face says that it does, but...”

“Onmitsukidou business is Onmitsukidou business,” Kai sounded pained. “You know that as well as anyone else, Ukitake... I’m surprised you’d bring something like this here. It’s not the business of the wider Gotei, and given that it’s our jurisdiction...”

“Kotetsu Tenichi was abducted from Inner Seireitei almost a week ago,” Juushirou cut across him bluntly. “He was safely located, from what I understand, returned early this morning thanks to the work of some of Hirata’s people, but his life may well have been in extreme danger. His is the third known abduction of shinigami on duty in a short space of time. On top of that, we have eight shinigami murdered in the Spiritless Zone, with another two taking serious injury and Mitsuki in grave danger of her life, too. Their survival is thanks to her and her alone, but the tragedy is still a considerable one. These are elements that bother me, Kai, and I want to get to the bottom of them. Surely you do too?”

“Why do you think I have my officers working twenty four seven, going over the reports and the evidence from the scenes in Rukongai?” Kai demanded, frustration in his tones. “I know about the Kotetsu boy’s abduction, too — everyone does — but you’re implying the two are connected! No, more than that — you think that a former Onmitsukidou is involved, and that piece of... whatever it was from wherever you found it proves...”

“It proves nothing at all,” Juushirou said simply. “It’s information that raised questions between us, that’s all. Your reaction suggests it means more to you than it does to me, though. It implies to me that the subject of this report may well be alive — and capable of orchestrating some of the things Seireitei has been dealing with recently.”

“Ukitake..” Kai groaned, sliding down onto the floor of the cell and burying his head in his hands. “I knew it. I knew you were going to come here and interrogate me. Do you know how much trouble it could cause, though, if Onmitsukidou secrets started leaking out all over Seireitei? We’re a secret force for a reason. Yes, there are ways in which we cut corners and bend normal rules, but that’s with the Council’s blessing and we never go beyond the limits laid out for us. If I started disclosing to you every single disciplinary event that went on behind closed doors, it would threaten the organisation at its roots. There’s an element of trust in what we do — a bond, in some cases, of protected anonymity. I can’t break that bond — if I do, it would mean betraying my people and I can’t do that.”

“No, I understand that,” Juushirou agreed. “This paper, though, didn’t come from Onmitsukidou anything. Two lower ranking officers found a record in the Shihouin court papers relating to this hearing. You brought it into the court of the Clan, rather than the Onmitsukidou court. Nobody has been digging in your private files, Kai — I would never sanction that, nor presume it of our friendship that you’d delve into them for me. This one was in the Shihouin records, though, which made me think...”

“I might talk about it?” Kai looked troubled, casting his friend a pensive glance. “The reason it went through the Shihouin Court is ugly and unpleasant to remember, and I’m sure there were few, if any details put in written record. There was no other way to deal with it, so Midori-nee sanctioned my doing so, but... I regretted it even as it happened. It was against our usual order — it hasn’t happened before or since.”

He let out his breath in a long, slow sigh.

“What evidence have you that this business connects to that one?” he continued. “The abduction of the shinigami and the murders in Seireitei being connected is also a stab in the dark for which we have no tangible proof whatsoever. The timing is conveniently troubling, but there’s not a shred of anything to connect that to this. We’ve some good evidence relating to the murderer of the shinigami in Rukongai. Madeki-dono’s witness statement, along with the autopsy reports have

given us plenty to work with, though all searches of the area have so far come up empty. We have a female suspect in that case, though. The report you're referring to relates to a male of more senior years — perhaps the same age as you or I, perhaps even older. There's no way one could be mistaken for the other, not even given that..."

"Not even given that?" Juushirou pressed, and Kai groaned.

"There is no way that any Onmitsukidou, living or dead, committed the murders in the Rukon," he said frankly. "The murderer left no spiritual presence. The Onmitsukidou are trained to conceal theirs, but also trained to trace it. There is absolutely no evidence whatsoever of a foreign reiatsu. They were killed by a Plus soul. What her reasons were we'll know when we catch her and interrogate her — but we are looking for a girl and we are, I think, looking for one killer."

"And the abductions?"

"I know nothing detailed about them, since the Onmitsukidou are not investigating those," Kai responded with a shrug. "As I understood it, Ukitake, you were."

"Which explains my being here. Shunsui and I, and Hirata too — we have a theory that this Onmitsukidou of yours who committed some unknown crime and then was killed as he attempted to escape justice may not have been killed, and, because of some grudge he holds against Seireitei, is involved in kidnapping members of the Gotei for ransom and profit."

Juushirou met his friend's golden gaze even on.

"In any part, even if it's just a vague nod or a word of confirmation... in any respect, do you think that could happen?"

Kai was silent for a moment, then he pulled a graphic face

"I can see I won't get out of here without telling you at least the bare bones of what I know," he said with a sigh. "It's against Onmitsukidou policy, but this case was exceptional, so I'll bend my way around the rules and give you what I can. I can't give you everything you want, Ukitake. There are rules and I created them, so I need to stick to them most of all. The Onmitsukidou is my province, and I will die to protect it just as you would your people in the Thirteenth. Not everyone I have under my command has come from a settled, stable background. Some of the people I recruit would never be Gotei officers if not for the strict discipline involved in the Onmitsukidou training program. You have to understand that — becoming an Onmitsukidou means a life of doing things other people

can't bear to do. I'm not a killer by nature, and I dislike the need to kill — but I accept that there are tasks and times that fighting without hesitation and killing without question are needed. The Onmitsukidou I lead are capable of completing those tasks... and that requires a certain kind of focus... a certain kind of soldier."

"So the stories about recruiting felons is a true one?" Juushirou mused thoughtfully. "I rather thought it might be."

"We don't consider them felons, not as such," Kai shook his head. "Those who are guilty of minor crimes, petty offences... they're sometimes given the choice to train and make something of their lives, or be subjected to punishment as meted out by Council law. We don't recruit people who are not capable of being trained or of cowing to necessary discipline. This is a special organisation with special rules... but it exists within the Council's regulations at all times. I make sure of that. There are no anomalies."

"I'm sorry," Juushirou was apologetic. "I didn't mean to imply otherwise. I don't personally have a problem with the idea of rehabilitating petty criminals, either. If it gives them a purpose in life, then so much to the good. There are many forced onto bad paths by hardship in the Districts — this is a way for them to move beyond that — all in all I find it commendable."

"You would," despite himself, Kai smiled wryly. "All right. So long as you understand that, I'll try and explain about Suzuki."

"Suzuki?" Juushirou's ears picked up, and Kai nodded, reaching across to tap the piece of folded paper.

"The officer that relates to was called Suzuki Naoto, and he was a ranked officer of mine until ten years or so ago," he agreed. "He wasn't a Clansman, but he did have dilute Shihouin blood, and all the natural traits and tricks for stealth work, so we took him onto our training program and he took to it like a duck to water. By the time the incident occurred, well, he was the head of one of my sub-squads and respected by a good many of the other men. He was a good officer as a rule — if a little obscure at times. Fanatical, perhaps, about his work, but nothing unusual for an Onmitsukidou. He had a wife — a fact he kept secret right up until his arrest, when she turned up to beg for his freedom. I never met her myself, so you can't ask me for her details," as Juushirou opened his mouth to speak. "I was away during the worst of it, and I still curse myself that I was, because I didn't see any of it coming."

"Suzuki betrayed your trust?" Juushirou asked, and Kai shrugged

his shoulders.

“I still don’t know, quite, what happened,” he admitted helplessly. “What I do know is that there were several serious accusations of theft and handling of stolen goods in a particular area of Seireitei near where Suzuki was stationed. He was arrested. The evidence incriminated him, but he claimed he’d been framed, and a couple of the other Onmitsukidou seemed prepared to back him up. The matter went to my deputy in my absence. The two shinigami who had spoken in Suzuki’s defence disappeared before attending the hearing, and their bodies were later found mutilated in a ditch not far from the Onmitsukidou barracks. Suzuki’s escape attempt came two days later. He slipped the fence but was pursued and, as the report goes, was cut down and killed. My deputy sent men to retrieve the body... but it wasn’t found.”

He rubbed his temples.

“I liked Suzuki, for the most part, despite his oddities,” he added. “When he was arrested, he wrote me a letter and asked me to come intercede on his behalf — just hear his side, and see whether I believed him guilty or not. I had written to my deputy to stay any sentencing until I could return, but the letter apparently never arrived and, with Suzuki’s escape, well...”

“So it had to go to the Shihouin court?”

“Yes,” Kai agreed. “On two counts. One, there was a risk of internal corruption — the murder of the two shinigami and Suzuki’s claims he had been framed were serious issues that needed addressing in an objective space. Two, I had sent an official message from the Shihouin manor via a Shihouin messenger who also disappeared en route and was later found murdered. That being outside of Onmitsukidou jurisdiction... it had to become a Clan matter, and so it did.”

He grimaced.

“The upshot was that my deputy was behind the whole business. He was stripped of his rank and imprisoned to await trial. The trial never happened, though — Suzuki’s guilt or otherwise was unprovable without his testimony, and though I knew my deputy was involved in the smuggling, I couldn’t prove he deliberately framed Suzuki nor planned to kill him despite my orders to the contrary. The matter got dropped, and I promoted Saku instead. I knew I could trust her, and since then, all has been well.”

“Your deputy...” Juushirou glanced at the piece of paper, then, “Kounou?”

“Yes,” Kai looked uneasy. “I’d rather not dig too much into his case, though. I know he isn’t behind the kidnapping of the shinigami, because he’s in prison and has been for the past ten years, locked away with maximum security and no way to get free. I’m not at liberty to discuss his involvement in this any more with you, not without Aneue’s agreement. Kounou is... was... well, by blood, he is a Shihouin, therefore a Clansman. You came to ask about Suzuki, but not Kounou, and I’d rather keep it that way.”

“A living skeleton in the closet, huh,” Juushirou’s expression became grave. “I see. Very well. If Kounou is imprisoned for his smuggling crimes then he’s probably irrelevant in all of this. Suzuki, on the other hand... could he have escaped?”

“An eye witness saw him shot down with poisoned arrows,” Kai responded. “They were quite certain and clear that he had taken at least two arrows to the back and one to the neck — giving him three times the necessary dose to kill him. His survival would have been unlikely.”

“But not impossible?”

“I always believe that without a body, there is no proof of death,” Kai said grimly. “I can’t tell you how, it’s not my area of expertise, but I do know that people with grudges hold onto life a lot more resolutely sometimes than those who are at peace. Suzuki had grudges all right — his pleas to me unanswered, his pleas before the court unheard. He may have been guilty — many, including my sister, believe he was Kounou’s accomplice and Kounou turned on him only when he got careless and incriminated himself in the crime. Me, I’m not sure. I’m not wholly convinced of Suzuki’s guilt in anything except being in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

He bit his lip.

“I shouldn’t tell you this, but Suzuki was a petty thief before he joined our organisation,” he added. ‘He was also very gifted in the art of... concealment. Disguise. That kind of thing. His spirit power related to being able to camouflage himself in the most unlikely of places. He couldn’t completely alter his form,’ as Juushirou stared at him, “but he could blend in with surroundings better than any agent I’ve ever known. I’ve wondered for a long time if that was how he escaped that day.”

“So you do think he did escape?”

“I would, except for one thing,” Kai shook his head. “I have it on good authority from those who knew him that in the last ten years he

has not returned for his wife. She lives alone, a widow, in one of the villages in District Two. I don't know which and I don't intend on digging into it — her life has been made hard enough without my interference. If he had lived, though — by all accounts, they were a close couple and he kept her a secret so he wouldn't have to give her up when he became an Onmitsukidou. He loved her very much... so why not return for her when the coast was clear? Ten years have passed... it doesn't make sense."

"Maybe he felt it was a risk," Juushirou suggested, and Kai snorted.

"You should know that lovesick idiots don't factor in risk when it comes to the object of their affections," he said bluntly, and despite himself, Juushirou reddened. "Yes, exactly. Would you leave Edogawa behind if it were you? Of course you wouldn't. The wife never believed in his guilt, so she didn't forsake him. He didn't go back for her... which probably means that, even if he escaped the arrows, he died ten years ago."

"I take your point," Juushirou sighed, nodding his head. "All right. But, just for argument's sake, if Suzuki had lived... do you think him capable of abducting someone in plain sight in the middle of Seireitei? Onmitsukidou have particular ways of circumventing the normal tracing devices on *Senkaimon* and he'd have known how to do that — do you think this Suzuki would have been able to pull such a thing off?"

"In all honesty?" Kai looked Juushirou straight in the eye, pressing his lips together. "If he was alive and I knew he was, he'd be right to the top of my list. The events in Rukongai? Not his style. The abductions, though? Right up his street."

"So in the tiny percentage of doubt in your mind about his being dead... is there any way to counteract the poison in those arrows?"

"Mm, not unless you had some knowledge of poisons and antidotes, and certainly not unless you intervened within a short time of his being poisoned," Kai responded. "The chances of that are slim. Not impossible, but slim."

"Not impossible," Juushirou looked pensive. "Kai, do you think that someone with the ability to conceal themselves effectively could also mess with Hollows and make them behave oddly?"

"Hollows?" Kai blinked, and Juushirou shrugged.

"Just a thought. Never mind."

"Onmitsukidou can do a lot of things, Ukitake, but manipulate

Hollows is not one of them,” Kai looked bemused. “Nobody can control them... and who would benefit by doing so?”

“Someone,” Juushirou said darkly. “I can’t pinpoint it, but something is up with them and has been for a while. It’s like something is messing with their normal signals and making them act strangely. I can’t explain it any more clearly than that, and I’ve no actual proof — but some of my officers also believe to be the case, based on their own experiences in the field. I wondered if you thought someone like Suzuki could be capable of that — but obviously you don’t.”

“I can’t see how he would,” Kai said honestly. “He had skills and he was good at what he did, especially at shunpo and at concealing himself. But Hollows are Hollows and that’s a whole other ball game. I’m sorry, Ukitake. That one’s a blank.”

Juushirou was silent for a long while, digesting all of this. Then he groaned.

“No matter how I try to divert it, it always keeps coming back to the same point,” he muttered, and Kai eyed him keenly, folding his legs beneath him as he waited for his companion to expand on his statement. There was another pause, then,

“Kai, I don’t like where my thoughts are heading, and they’ve been in that area for longer than just today,” he said slowly. “The more I try and find other explanations and the more I tell myself that it’s unlikely, the more circumstantial information suggests the opposite. I have no case to put before the Council of Elders, but Shunsui and Hirata and I have discussed it in passing — and I’ll mention it to you as well. This whole thing reminds me of events already lived... a time when someone who should have been incapable of acting against shinigami acted against them, and when, unseen, someone in the shadows twitched and pulled at puppet strings to make a whole performance spill into place.”

Kai’s eyes darkened, and his lips thinned in comprehension.

“Aizen Keitarou?” he asked softly, and Juushirou nodded wearily.

“I don’t want to consider it, yet I keep coming back to him,” he admitted. “Keitarou’s whereabouts are unknown, but I never thought he died of his wounds and I’m sure nobody who ever met him believes that he did. You said the abductions were the kind of thing your dead agent would have been capable of — and it makes me think of Onoe Tomoyuki and the corpse puppet Keitarou once used to slaughter innocent people. I can’t connect him to the manipulation of Hollows,

not yet — though I sent Naoko out to hunt for Chudokuga's reiatsu, she couldn't make a match. Even so, though, I can't help believing that somehow that's him — hurting innocent people by destroying their livelihoods in order to bring us into bad repute. Then there's Rukongai. A plus soul attacked shinigami — but plus souls don't do that kind of thing. A Hollow attacked Mitsuki and the others at the same time — and by Mitsuki's own testimony the Hollow was more interested in killing Shinigami than it was feeding on their souls. There are too many things which, on the face of it, seem completely separate. That's Keitarou's power, though — and it makes me believe they are all connected. Somehow... and don't ask me how, not yet... this whole business leads back to him."

Kai muttered a curse.

"When you put it like that, I understand your reasons for coming here and why you wanted to know so much about Suzuki," he said gravely. "I shouldn't have forgotten Tomoyuki so easily, but now you say it, there's every possibility you could be right. No matter what state Suzuki was in when he was shot down, if by some fluke someone like Aizen found him, with his science and his *zanpakutou*, he could probably make use of what was left. All he'd need would be a lifebeat — and a genius like Aizen would probably be able to maintain that if nothing else. If, like Tomoyuki, Suzuki lost his wits from the poison, then he probably wouldn't remember having a wife, let alone be able to go back for her. It's a particularly nasty substance — does some serious damage to tissue both inside and out — but someone like Aizen would see that as a challenge to his skills rather than an obstacle."

"I wish you'd told me I was being stupid," Juushirou looked sad. "Your putting it into those words only makes my worries bigger."

"I think they're worries with possible foundations," Kai replied apologetically. "All I can tell you about Rukongai is that there's no evidence of anyone with spirit power attacking the shinigami. Madekidono seemed to think the girl was in her wits, but savage at the same time. If she was trained... brainwashed... by Aizen, then I suppose that behaviour might be explained. Healers aren't designed for combat — and that's a huge oversight on Unohana-taichou's part, if you want my honest opinion. Unless she makes moves to forcibly train more of her people in sword skills and self defence, events like this are just waiting to happen. This has proved that even a Plus with the right motivation and drive to carry out a kill can overcome trained officers if gifted with the element of surprise. There are hundreds and thousands of Plus souls across the whole of Rukongai. The concept is a

terrifying one.”

“It is, but one for which we have absolutely no evidence,” Juushirou sighed. “There’s only so much I can do at Captain’s meetings, even now. I’m not Clan, and I already push my weight around far more than many of my colleagues would like. I don’t let them stop me, but when it comes to initiating active searches for Keitarou, well, my authority is lacking. Without that piece of proof...”

“Well, then we’ll just have to find that piece of proof,” Kai said firmly, getting to his feet and dusting his black uniform down briskly. “I’ll reopen investigations into Suzuki’s disappearance, and send some officers to interrogate Kounou again, see if there’s anything we might have overlooked the day the prisoner escaped. I’ll also put Saku and some of my more trusted people on active alert to search for him. Nobody’s tried to do that in ten years, but it doesn’t mean there aren’t ways we can search. There’s his wife, too. If I can, I’ll bring her in and interrogate her about the last time she communicated with her husband. Kounou told me that she came to see Suzuki once when he was imprisoned, so she might know something about his attempted escape. Suzuki is a common name, but there are people who know where she is and locating her should be possible. Whatever resources I can spare from Rukongai, Ukitake, I’ll put into trying to establish whether or not Suzuki Naoto is still flitting in and out of his old hunting ground. If he’s here, I’ll catch him — and if I catch him, I’ll get the truth out of him. You have my word on that.”

“I believe it, and thank you,” Juushirou’s hazel eyes reflected a faint glitter of relief. “In the meantime, Hirata’s going to talk to Tenichi about his abduction. I stopped at Seventh briefly on my walk over here this morning, and saw Souja — he didn’t tell me much, except that Tenichi was safe and being examined by a healer to make sure he was not damaged in any way. I got the impression Seventh were going to conduct their own, private investigation into what happened to their officer, so hopefully that will throw up some leads as well. As for the Hollows...”

“If you say they’re odd, then I believe you, but without proof that Aizen’s behind it...” Kai shrugged, and Juushirou nodded.

“Naoko said that she sensed some kind of reiatsu — very faint, almost indiscernable, but she was sure it was there,” he responded. “Whatever it was, though, it didn’t belong to a shinigami, and it didn’t belong to Keitarou’s sword. She couldn’t place it and nor could Dokusou Houshi, meaning it’s nobody she’s worked with in the years we’ve been in the Gotei. The best theory we have is a Seireitei

renegade. They might or might not have links to Keitarou — it's hard to know for sure who the players are with so many missing pieces. If my gut didn't say so strongly that this is his *modus operandi*...

"No, I think that you should hang on to that hunch and follow it through," Kai advised. "Even if you can't take it to the Council, yet, it's better to be ready for whatever he has to throw at us next."

"I think so too," Juushirou agreed. "I need to be getting back to Thirteenth, but there is one other thing, Kai, before I go."

"Mm?" Kai cocked his head, eying his friend inquisitively. "You mean you don't think you've already given me enough to consider this morning?"

"More than, for which I apologise, but you've been in the Spiritless Zone and I know you were there when Mitsuki was found," Juushirou shook his head. "I'm grateful for that, by the way — that you went yourself and made sure she was safely returned to Seireitei."

"My job," Kai said dismissively, but his expression belied the clinical abruptness of his words. "What of it?"

"Mitsuki said that she was helped by a stranger who killed the Hollow who attacked them, then helped bring Aomori across terrain to the shinigami camp in Hokutan," Juushirou responded. "She didn't get his name, but he was young, dark haired, with blue eyes and an amiable demeanour. She didn't feel threatened by him, but he was able to use raw spirit power to destroy the Hollow. It wasn't Kidou, she was sure about that... but she thought he had absconded from Seireitei and was maybe wanted for some petty crime but had somehow slipped the border and escaped."

"Not possible," Kai said bluntly. "Nobody can slip from Seireitei into the Spiritless Zone without hundreds of levels of security clearance. That's true even for us Onmitsukidou and for the healers of the Fourth. There is no point in the boundary weak enough for a random felon from Seireitei to sneak through undetected. You can take it to Nagesu-sama and have him tell you officially, if you like, but I'm one hundred percent sure of it. There is no way through from Seireitei to the Spiritless Zone except through heavily controlled gates."

He pursed his lips.

"But you did just say something interesting," he added. "I don't know if you realised it, but a few minutes ago you talked about Shikibu and the Hollows, didn't you?"

“Yes..?” Juushirou looked startled. “What about...”

“You said she picked up reiatsu, not that of a shinigami, and only fleeting, but enough to be sure there was something there. Right?” Kai pointed out, and Juushirou nodded. “Well, the next minute you’re telling me about some nameless youth in Rukongai who can destroy Hollows with raw power — only he’s not a shinigami. Do you see where I’m going with this?”

“You think the person who saved Mitsuki is the one manipulating the Hollows?” Horror and anger flared up in Juushirou’s gaze, followed by a moment of doubt. “But... you just said getting from Seireitei to Rukongai is impossible without clearance. Mitsuki met this person in the Spiritless Zone, in which case...”

“I said it was impossible to get from Seireitei into the Spiritless Zone, yes,” Kai nodded. “That’s what you asked me, so that’s what I told you. I didn’t say it was impossible to enter the Spiritless Zone through other channels, though. If you took a roundabout trip from Seireitei to the outer Rukon and then tried to find a point of penetration along the Sekkiseki divide... yes, then you might find a way through. It’s not beyond the realms of possibility that there are leaks between the Real World and Rukongai, too, given that we know there have been cases of clear reiatsu contamination among Plus souls. There are a few weak spots that our time deployed over there has made me aware of. I think it unlikely an escaped felon would leave Seireitei only to break into a closely policed Shinigami-controlled space like the Spiritless Zone. It would increase his chances of being caught and returned here, so it defeats the object of escaping. If there was another, more particular reason for them to be there, though...”

“To manipulate the Hollow to kill shinigami,” Juushirou’s eyes darkened with rage, and he clenched his fists. “I knew it. I knew that this person who helped Mitsuki was somehow dangerous. I knew...”

“No, you said yourself that he saved Edogawa, and helped her bring Aomori to safety,” Kai cautioned. “My theorising might be wrong, or it’s possible his manipulation of the Hollows had another motivation. Perhaps he didn’t intend for shinigami to be killed — or maybe Edogawa and the others were intended to survive in order to bring us into the equation. It’s just as possible that he’s been hurt by Keitarou and he’s acting on his own whims, activating the Hollows to draw our attention to something deeper and darker. If that’s the case, it’s worked, because it’s got your attention. There are a lot of different explanation — who knows which is the right one?”

“If we find him, we’ll find out. I want to know who he is and why

he was in the Spiritless Zone,” Juushirou said blackly. “In the meantime, I’ll be making very sure that nobody is able to get near Mitsuki on any premise — not while she’s still recovering from what happened over the border. Maybe you’re right, Kai, perhaps this youth is innocent of anything and truly did come to her rescue — but if I find that he put her in any danger, you can mark my words that I will hunt him down and take him before the Council for justice.”

“Where Edogawa’s concerned, you’re still as irrational as ever,” Kai’s expression was one of amusement. “All right, I suppose that makes sense. I’ll see if I can find any clues around the scene of the Hollow attack, too. We’ve not spent much time there since retrieving the two bodies, but if you think that might’ve been a crime scene too, I’ll investigate. My Onmitsukidou will be stretched very thin for a while — but if this does involve Aizen, it’s worth the overtime if we can stall him before any more blood is shed.”

This part of Rukongai was always cold.

Katsura sneezed, pulling his cloak more tightly around his body with a shiver as he turned to survey his bleak surroundings. Once, he supposed, it had been a forest, but now only the dead trunks of the trees stood like silent skeletons, their bony branches reaching lifelessly out to each other in a mesh of criss-crossing wood. Although the foliage was long since gone, there was very little light that penetrated through the thick fingers of the boughs and, though for once the wind was still and silent, there was not even the faintest flicker of warmth from Rukongai’s lacklustre sun.

It was a place he hated to come, and for that reason he had come here, struggling to put his thoughts in some kind of order before he was summoned back to the centre of his father’s domain.

He rested his hand on the trunk of a nearby tree, trying not to draw his touch back in disgust at the dampness or the specks of rotting bark that clung to his skin. As a child he had been frightened of this place, certain that he could hear the lost spirits of the dead trees wailing and moaning on the breeze. Now, though, he found the silence twice as oppressive. Ever since the Spiritless Zone had been established, the spirits themselves had abandoned this place for fresher pastures and, though he had walked the length of the old wood several times, now the only noise was the sound of his feet softly crunching the dry ground beneath his sandals.

He closed his eyes, remembering the look of raw anger in Keitarou’s eyes. For a moment, fear gripped him, then, just as quickly, it slid

away into resignation and despair.

"If you don't face your fears, Katsura-kun, you'll never overcome them."

The scientist's voice, calm and logical, rippled through his thoughts as a memory overtook him, casting him back for the briefest instant to his youth. He could still see himself, a small boy with tufts of dark hair standing every which way on his head, cheeks red and eyes streaming with tears as he had begged and pleaded with his father to take him back to the village. Unconsciously he reached out his fingers, mimicking the desperate way in which he had once grasped at his father's ragged kimono, beseeching him not to go back alone.

"A night or two here will teach you that there's nothing in this wood that can harm you."

Keitarou had been gentle, but his words had been firm. He had knelt for a moment before his son, meeting his gaze at eye level, and Katsura had seen a flicker of affection in the muddy brown eyes. Then the scientist had gone, and Katsura had been abandoned in the skeleton wood.

That was before I knew about Koku. Everything changed after I met him. Father didn't bring me here any more... as though he thought my fear of the place had healed.

Katsura patted the tree absently, glancing at the brown smear that now coated his hands.

He didn't understand how the voices teased at me. They were here, I know it — calling and taunting at me, whispering through my thoughts and trying to turn me mad. He thought leaving me here cured me — but instead it drove me to fear the place more and more. If I hadn't met Koku, maybe he would still have brought me here, even into my teens.

"Of all the places for you to come, this wasn't the first on my list."

As though summoned by his thoughts, Koku's voice broke through his contemplations, and, startled, Katsura jerked back from the tree, swinging around hastily as he tried to verify whether the speaker was real or his imagination. At his reaction, Koku's lips twitched into a faint smile but, from the gravity in the younger man's eyes, Katsura knew his companion was troubled.

"Are you all right?" he asked softly, and Katsura groaned, sinking back against the tree with a defeated sigh.

"How can I be?" he murmured. "He's never been like that with me before. No matter what I've done, or what's happened, he's never..."

He trailed off, running his fingers through the cold dark earth that surrounded him.

“Even when he brought me here, time after time, it was never with anger,” he whispered. “He was always patient, always firm... as though he was doing it for my own good. To face my fears, he said. To make me stronger... to teach me to deal with the thoughts and feelings I picked up from other things and other people. It was part of my training, and... even though I was scared, deep down I knew that it was for my own benefit. He was trying to help me... I always felt it was that way. But today...”

“He was very angry,” Koku agreed pensively, crossing the barren ground and pausing a couple of feet from his companion’s hunched form. “He thought you’d lied to him... you should know that lying is something he doesn’t easily forgive.”

“I did lie to him,” Katsura raised his gaze helplessly to the other man’s. “What else could I do? You told me just as surely not to tell anyone. They wouldn’t have understood — I’m not sure I even do.”

He clenched his fists.

“Wait till I get my hands on Kurotsuchi! I’ll rip him limb from limb myself!”

“No... no, I wouldn’t do that,” Koku cautioned, shaking his head. “Right now, you have bigger troubles to deal with than one tale-telling spy. If Kurotsuchi wants to cause trouble, let him. If there’s anything to be done there, you can trust me to handle it. You need to stop and think about what you’re going to do... because Keitarou-san was serious. I tried to convince him otherwise, but he intends you to go to Seireitei and kill that Edogawa girl. If not...”

“It might lead people back here. I know. I know!” Katsura buried his head in his hands. “I spoke to her. Helped her. Gave her plenty enough time to remember what I looked like.”

“Did you think she wouldn’t tell her comrades about you?” Koku sank down onto the soil, pulling the folds of his *hakama* closer to his body to keep them as free from grime as he could. “That was naive, Katsura, even for you.”

“I didn’t think about it at all,” Katsura admitted. “I just didn’t want to kill her. That’s all.”

“That argument won’t wash this time.” Koku sighed. “He’s indulged you before, and Eiraki-san will plead your case, no doubt, but when it comes down to it...”

“I made the mess, and I need to fix it,” Katsura’s eyes narrowed. “I don’t know how to get into Inner Seireitei, if that’s even where she is,

and Koku, that's the least of my problems. Even if I go, which I will... even then... I'm not sure I can complete this order. I daren't defy him a second time, but... I don't think... I can kill her."

"Why not?" The question was neither accusing or surprised, and Katsura met his companion's calm, questioning gaze with a hesitant one of his own, somehow reassured by Koku's characteristically unflappable demeanour.

"I don't even know myself," he admitted now. "Does that sound strange to you? I'd risk my life... I'd risk everything for someone I've met once... someone who's my enemy, clear as day, and who would probably look at me with the worst eyes if she knew... what I'd gone to the Spiritless Zone to do. If she knew I was wrapped up in the deaths of her comrades... she'd hunt me down and drag me before the Council without a moment of hesitation. Those things I know all too well, but despite that..."

"Are you in love with her?" Koku asked softly, and Katsura shook his head.

"I'm not. If I were, maybe I'd be able to override it," he said regretfully. "You've always called me fickle, taking my affections from one woman to another, and I suppose that, if this was that kind of feeling, it'd pass in just as quick a way. No, it's not that. I don't have those kind of feelings for her. She's a shinigami. She's older than me. It's just..."

"Just what?"

"I don't know. I really don't know." Katsura muttered. "It's driving me crazy, but I can't pinpoint it at all."

"Hrm." Koku was silent for a moment, drawing his hands across his knees as he contemplated. Then he let out his breath in a long, slow, sigh.

"It would be easier, I think, if you'd fallen for her," he observed at length. "As you said, those things can be overcome. I'm afraid for you, Katsura. I don't like the path you're walking down, and I'm not sure I know a way to bring you back."

"Koku?" Katsura shot his companion a dismayed glance, taking in the hooded shadow of the other man's eyes beneath the criss-cross cover of the dead tree branches.

"You're going to warn her, aren't you?" the younger man asked softly, and Katsura swallowed hard.

"You're reading my thoughts again," he accused, but Koku shook his head.

"I don't need to," he said, his voice pained. "I already know you won't kill her. I knew it before, and I know it now. You can't kill her, because you're not like Sakaki. You can't kill someone just because you're told to, or because it's sport. You have to believe that they're your enemy -someone evil, someone unredeemable. You have to feel there's justification to kill them, but you can't do that for this Edogawa girl, can you? You've seen her as a person — like you or I, she's real to you now. You read her thoughts, understood her real feelings, and you identify that with your own beliefs. She's not your enemy any longer, and that means you can't kill her. Even if Keitarou-san orders it, it's too late. As soon as a foe takes on human form in your mind's eye, you hesitate. He'd do better sending Sakaki to finish the job."

"He can't." Katsura said shortly, and Koku nodded.

"I know, but it complicates things," he said grimly. "Keitarou-san believes that, if he sends you with a threat of abandoning you, he'll force you to comply... but he really doesn't understand you very well, does he? You'll go, yes, but..."

"I'm not turning against Father, Koku!" Katsura said hurriedly. "That's not my intention — I'm not going to betray him! I just... want to find a way to let Mitsuki go, that's all. I thought, maybe, if I went and I spoke to her... if I asked her that, in return for saving her life, she might protect mine..."

"That's why you're naive," Koku rubbed his brow wearily. "By showing yourself to her, you give her even more ways to find you. I don't know if your Edogawa Mitsuki is someone you can trust, and nor do you. More, Keitarou-san believes her death will weaken Seireitei considerably. I don't think he'll take any chances, even if you did manage to negotiate a deal with her."

"Then what do you suggest I do?" Katsura demanded hopelessly. "I can't kill her, Koku. I can't. Maybe it's as you say, but it doesn't change the fact that I've decided to let her live. I can't go back on it — to me, she's someone who shouldn't die. She's someone who's valuable to the well-being of innocent people, and she cares about them. I won't kill that spirit. If I did, it would make me a murderer, and I'm not going to become that!"

Koku eyed him sadly for a moment, then, slowly, lowered his head in defeat.

“I don’t want you getting hurt, Katsura,”

This time the words trickled across a psychic connection, and Katsura flinched at the genuine sadness in his companion’s tones. ***“I don’t like this path, and I’m afraid you won’t be able to turn back.”***

“You think I should kill her?”

“I think you should be very careful. That’s all.”

Koku pressed his lips together thinly.

“I don’t believe in killing as a means to an end, so you won’t ever hear me tell you to go kill anyone. I don’t agree with Keitarou-san in that regard, so he’ll never send me to Seireitei to do that kind of dirty work. My case and yours are different, though. I don’t know whether he’d sacrifice you... even as his own son, I can’t be sure...”

‘I don’t know what’s going to happen, either,’ Katsura admitted. ***“If I don’t come back here with the deed done...”***

“How strong is your resolve to let her live, Katsura?” Koku’s question was sharp, like a bullet through Katsura’s thoughts, and he started, eying his companion in consternation.

“Pretty strong. Why? What do you have in mind?”

“Mm,” Koku’s eyes became near slits. ***‘Enough resolve to defy Keitarou-san a second time? Even, lie to him again?’***

“Tell me what you’re thinking.” Katsura demanded, and a cold, humourless smile touched Koku’s pale features.

“I can think of one way,” he murmured, his voice so soft Katsura could barely hear his words. ***“If you’re already decided to be reckless, then maybe... maybe there is a way to resolve this that means nobody has to die.”***

20. Skies of Blood

Chapter Nineteen — Skies of Blood

The village of Motonoyama was bustling with the weekly market as Katsura ducked his head beneath the branches of a swaying willow tree, pausing in its shade to observe the local people running here and there in a hurry to get their errands completed before the setting of the sun. Although apart from the crowd, an occasional wary glance his way told him that his presence had not been overlooked, and he chewed absently on his lip, scanning the horizon for any sign of a familiar face.

Motonoyama was as close as Katsura had ever been to the hallowed walls of Inner Seireitei. Though he had manipulated Hollows in various different regions of the eight Districts, he had never come this close before to the white stone divide that, at four points marking the notches of a compass broke into huge wooden doors, the planks cut from the strongest oak and pinned together several layers thick with strong iron nails. Behind each one of these gates, Katsura knew, Clan retainers stood guard, interspersed with shinigami of lower rank belonging to the Second Division's sinister Onmitsukidou, and so in the past he had been careful to keep his distance. Motonoyama had acted as a natural barrier between safe ground and the land over which the Shinigami held the strongest sway, for, as the name suggested, the surrounding territory rose up into a broken mountain, once tall and grand but, savaged by time and the elements, now little more than a ridge that curved protectively around the flourishing settlement within. It was one of his favourite places in lower Seireitei, and he had flirted and dallied with the daughter of more than one trader there in the past, but now its sheltered location seemed oppressive and claustrophobic, reminding him that he could not easily turn back.

There was a further half a ri before the white walls of marble encased Sekkiseki would come properly into view, the spirit dulling effect of the harsh stone all but negated by the fancy ornamentation the noble Council of Elders had insisted on incorporating into the divide. Though the Districts held many towns as prosperous as Motonoyama, the wall was a reminder that no matter how hard a trader sold or a farmer laboured, he would never reach the grandeur of those born of higher blood. It was a distinction Katsura had always

disdained, for to him, people were people and there was no reason for one group to be exalted whilst others, unseen, scrambled along in poverty. It was largely this misplaced naivety in human equality that had persuaded him to the right in Keitarou's politics, but now, watching the locals go about their daily life, he found himself assaulted once more by doubts.

Edogawa Mitsuki is a good person. Killing good people is unnecessary. Father said that, too — that I needn't kill the local people if I didn't want to, because they were people without crime. Mitsuki didn't commit any crime against anyone. Shinigami might be corrupt, greedy and selfish, but she wasn't that way at all. I don't understand why this is so important to him... I don't understand what makes killing her right. Aren't we meant to be defending the good people?

He bit tighter on his lip, tasting blood as he remembered Koku's words to him as he had prepared to leave the evening before.

"Do what you believe is right to do," the younger man had said, gravity flickering in his often impassive dark eyes. "Leave the rest to me. If you don't want to kill her, then do as we discussed. I'll make sure it will be all right — even if I have to spend a night and a day arguing with Keitarou-san about it."

"You'll get into trouble yourself," Katsura had warned his companion doubtfully, but Koku had just laughed, shaking his head.

"Do you really think so?" he had asked, his words full of a bitter irony that had, for a moment, made Katsura feel guilty for focusing on his own concerns. "No. I'll be fine, Katsura. I'm always fine. Whatever happens, do what you believe in doing."

"And if I can't kill her, what then?"

"Then don't. Don't kill her." Koku's response had been simple and unequivocal. "If you don't, though, then take care. Make sure you know who and what to trust before you trust in them, Katsura, because whichever path you choose, there'll be no going back from it either way. I won't judge you for it, but others may... even the Edogawa girl herself."

He had smiled faintly at that moment, his eyes taking on the distant look that always made Katsura feel as though he, not his companion were the younger man.

"I don't think Edogawa Mitsuki ought to die, either," he had admitted, his tones confidential and barely above a murmur. "I think

her death would be a bad thing, and just the first mistake of many. If Keitarou-san is right, and this person you rescued has close ties to some of the important shinigami in Seireitei, killing her is more likely to bring people here hunting for revenge. Letting her live is better. Keitarou-san fell foul of the Kuchiki Clan once before, by arranging the death of their chosen heir. He escaped that time, but everything since is a consequence of that. Treading on a tiger's tail is a bad omen... if he can't see that, then it's up to you and I to make sure history does not repeat itself."

I wish I had your confidence in things like this, though, Koku-kun.

Katsura grimaced, spitting out the blood and wiping his mouth on the back of his grimy sleeve.

Still, I'm here, and there's nothing to be done about it but go forward. At least dealing with people like this is something I can do.

He pulled the hood of his cloak up over his head, stepping purposefully into the mingling crowd and making a beeline for a particular stall, selling trinkets and amulets in a shaded corner of the town square. At the sight of him, the man scowled, his pock-marked face crumpling up with displeasure, but Katsura greeted him with a grin, resting the palms of his hands on the table and leaning towards the stallholder in a gesture of amiability.

"Gato-san, it's been a while. How's your daughter? I'm sure she's as beautiful as ever — maybe even more so, since I haven't walked this way in some time."

"I'm sure I told you once already not to play games with Amame," Gato growled, his bushy brows burrowing deeper into his lined skin at Katsura's frivolous comment. "What do you want, anyway? You haven't shown your face here in a long time — I thought maybe you'd curled up and died of shame. Linger round these parts too much and more vicious men than me will take their sticks and come drive you out by force — there are a lot of respectable young women living in this village, and they don't need to be sullied by the likes of you."

"As it happens, I'm not looking to kill time with one of Motonoyama's famed beauties, not this time," Katsura twitched his features into a look of regret that was only half an act. "I came to buy a good luck charm — and, at the same time, find out the latest news."

"You intend to buy from me?" Gato looked suspicious. "Since when has a rogue like you had money he hasn't palmed or stolen from another unwary traveller, hrm? I won't take your coin, not since it's as dirty as your hands and your mud-stained robes. You should leave

here, before people get cross with you. You're not welcome around these parts, not since the scandal with the weaver's daughter."

"Weaver's daughter?" Katsura looked blank for a moment, then a rueful smile touched his lips. "Ah, that. I meant no harm by it. All I did was ask her to walk with me among the trees — it was the birds flying out of the branches that caused her to trip and fall, and of course, I wouldn't have been much of a man if I hadn't have caught her. It was unfortunate that those hunting gentleman happened to see us... but it was all a gross misunderstanding. Really, I came to cause no trouble. And I have money — not stolen coin, but given me by my father for this particular pilgrimage of mine."

He slid his fingers into his *obi*, pulling out a tattered purse in which rattled a handful of copper coins. Keitarou had given them to him before he had left, in order that he could buy information along the way. There was no money in Rukongai, and how his father had come by the coins he neither knew nor wanted to ask, but at the very least he knew that he had not stolen them, and so he jangled the purse with clear conscience, offering the trader a benign smile.

"A pilgrimage, is it?" Gato snorted, swiping the purse away with the back of his hand. "I hope it's to some shrine of note, because with sins like yours, you'll need all the blessings you can get to settle them. I told you, I don't want your coin. Get away with you — you'll buy nothing from me."

"Fine," Katsura pouted, but obediently put the money away, taking a step or two back from the stall. "In that case, you can tell me something, and in return I'll leave the village directly. Is that more to your liking, good sir?"

He used formal language, his tone mocking and playful, and Gato bristled, glaring at him angrily.

"Impudent whelp," he muttered. "Fine, but you make sure you keep to it and leave right away. I've real customers to serve, and if I'm seen talking to you, my reputation will take a hit."

"There are shinigami patrolling this area, aren't there?"

"As ever," Gato frowned. "Why, what business is it of yours what they do? They're unlikely to show interest in someone like you."

"Well..." Katsura drew out his word slowly and carefully, then shrugged, offering a sheepish, half-guilty smile. "I might have stepped a little close to the line on a couple of occasions. You know, they let girls fight with men in those Seireitei squads? Some of them are real

pretty, too. It's hard to ignore them, dressed up in that black uniform, when it shows their figures so nicely."

"You really are a rogue, aren't you?" Gato groaned, and Katsura grinned.

"You live once," he said unrepentantly. "I'd rather avoid their patrol ground, though, if I possibly can. Which way do they usually go? I'll take the other and then I'm less likely to get myself into trouble. Father told me himself that if I caused him any more embarrassment, he'd take me to task — and I'm not really eager for a beating when I get home."

His lips thinned slightly as he realised how close to the truth this lie had come, and Gato nodded his head in defeat.

"If it gets rid of you, that I can do," he replied wearily. "They usually take the northern path, skim the outer ridge and then come back through the village, cutting through the square towards dusk each day. They cause us no trouble, unlike some young harum-scarums — they go about their business and we about ours."

"That's all I needed to know," Katsura's grin widened, revealing a row of white teeth. "I'll save my coins for the next time we meet, Gato-san — perhaps then I'll bring Amame-chan something pretty as a gift in gratitude for her father's kindness."

"Why you..." Gato was already reaching for the sturdy stick that stood up against the stall as defence against thieves or cutpurses, but Katsura was too quick for him, already halfway across the village square and making his way towards the twisting path that fed out towards the opposite side of the village. Once out of view, however, he doubled back on himself, tracking slowly and cautiously around the outside of the ridge and settling himself in a patch of long grass to wait for the distinctive, humming presence of approaching shinigami.

Far from avoiding them, he knew that if he was going to get entry to Inner Seireitei, the only way to do so was to tackle the enemy head on.

Gato said that they come towards evening. That suits me well. I can rest here and wait for them and, in the meantime, see what dark spirits lurk in the valleys hereabouts.

He stretched out on his stomach, unfolding his sharp senses to sweep across the peaceful landscape in search of the tormented soul of a newly turned Hollow.

In the confusion, I should be able to pick one of them off, take his

robe and conceal myself among them for the return to Inner Seireitei. With any luck, the setting sun and the clash with the Hollow will distract them from paying me too much attention... and then, once inside Inner Seireitei... then the drama really starts. I hope I can pull this off, Koku. You're far better at the strategising than I am, and if it goes wrong this time...

He put a hand absently to his throat, stifling a shiver.

I don't know if Father would really abandon me to Shinigami justice, or whether that was just a ruse to get me here, but I don't want to find out. I can't kill Mitsuki, so my only other hope is to make an ally of her. Her life was in my hands, and now, mine will be in hers.

"Well, well, this is a heartening sight."

As Kirio swept the last of the dust from the division courtyard, a merry voice assailed her and she swung around, her eyes widening in surprise as she registered who stood beneath the wooden gate that led into Thirteenth Division's compound.

"Tenichi-kun?" she exclaimed, the broom and her chores forgotten as she hurried to greet her old friend, flinging her arms around him and hugging him tightly. "Oh, I heard that you'd been found, but... I didn't expect..."

"That I'd come so soon back to the scene of the crime, as it were?" Tenichi offered her a rueful smile, detaching himself gently from her embrace and holding her at arm's length. "Have I worried you, Kirio-chan? I'm sorry. It wasn't on purpose — believe me, I didn't choose to go anywhere."

"You're an idiot for getting grabbed, though, and that's unforgivable," Kirio swiped him across the shoulder, casting him a pretend glare of severity. "Didn't Taichou teach you how to protect yourself better than that? Your skills have slipped since you moved divisions, Tenichi-kun!"

"Maybe that's true," Tenichi agreed ruefully, scratching his head. "I've already spoken to the Fukutaichou about maybe doing some extra stealth and hakuda training. The person who grabbed me cuffed me with spirit cuffs almost at once, and I realised I rely way too much on my spirit power to get me out of trouble. You can consider me much humbled by the experience — I've spent this morning prowling the thoroughfare outside the Twelfth Division with Kikyue-dono, trying to pinpoint the place I was assaulted and having my commander go over and over my failings is a bit denting to my pride."

“You deserve it, making us all so frantic,” Kirio stepped back from him, putting her hands on her hips. “Did you come to see Ketsui? He’s training with Tsukabishi in the Kidou arena, but if you want to see him...”

“Actually, this time, I came looking for you,” Tenichi shook his head, running his fingers through his thick reddish hair with a sheepish smile. “I saw my brother last night. I spent most of yesterday being poked and prodded by healers and superior officers, and then had a three hour session being grilled by my Captain on everything I remembered about the experience — which, incidentally, isn’t much — but then they relented and Fukutaichou agreed to have Ketsui brought to see me. It was only for a little while, but I saw the strain it had taken on the lad, and I thought I ought to drop by here in case others were similarly bothered by my absence.”

“I don’t need you knocking around, so you needn’t fret on my account,” Kirio said matter-of-factly. “I’m well able to carry on with my duties regardless of where you are or aren’t, but it was rough on Ketsui-kun. He seems to think you’re some paragon and that nothing can possibly hurt you, so this was a blow to his brotherly expectations.”

“Well, we only have each other when it comes to blood family, so I guess that’s natural,” Tenichi acknowledged. “Fukutaichou said I’d been missing five or six days... that’s a long time with no word of my situation, so I’m sorry for it. All joking aside, Kirio-chan — I really am.”

He frowned, his eyes momentarily clouding.

“Time moves strangely when you don’t know where you are or what’s going to happen next,” he murmured. “Fukutaichou wants me to pick up where I was before and put it behind me, but it’s not so easy to do as all that.”

“I thought you couldn’t remember what happened?” Kirio linked her arm in her friend’s, leading him into the courtyard and pausing to pick up her discarded broom. “Come on, the Taichou will be keen to see you, too.”

“I’m sure he won’t, since I heard that Kikyue-dono came here in a flurry demanding if you people had seen me the first day I was gone,” Tenichi grimaced. “I’d rather keep a low profile from your Captain for now, if it’s the same by you. I came to see you, Kirio-chan, not the whole of Thirteenth Division. The Fourth Division’s healer who saw me yesterday said I shouldn’t hurry back into active service till my

body's readjusted to having the spirit cuffs removed, so, since I'm at a loose end, I thought I'd wander by here. It's better than being on my own and dwelling on things I can't very well change."

"I see," Kirio looked thoughtful, glancing at the broom before setting it down properly against the wall. "All right, then. I'm done here, and I've nothing else pressing for a little while, so why don't we take a walk away from here and you can tell me all your troubles? You look like there are a few hanging over you — even though you're pretending like all's fine and dandy, you've lost weight, and you look pale. I guess spirit cuffs don't agree with you, huh?"

"Not at all," Tenichi groaned. "When they came off, I swear, for a moment I thought I was going to die. My spirit power flooded back through me and it wasn't nice. I feel better this morning, granted, but still a little delicate. I've had my sword confiscated until my *reiryoku* is steadier, so I think Taichou believes I might explode and destroy the barracks if they don't treat me with extreme care."

"Endou-taichou let you loose, so I suppose he's not so very cross with you," Kirio observed, as they left the Thirteenth Division's barracks, crossing over the thoroughfare and slipping between two barrier stones along the well worn path that led away from the military heartland of Inner Seireitei. Near the border with the Districts was a patch of open green which, in the warm summer months, was often frequented by dozing shinigami taking a break away from the pressures of their division and so even without saying their destination out loud, Tenichi knew exactly where they were heading.

"So lush and green, it seems wrong somehow," he murmured, as they stepped beneath the exuberant bough of a blossoming sakura tree, pushing the foliage aside so that they could enter the green proper. "Don't you ever think that it's strange how alive and fresh this place is, in the middle of a military base?"

"Not really, though I am glad of the chance to stretch my legs and get away from drill for a while," Kirio looked surprised. "You're not usually given to that kind of contemplation, though... why all of a sudden?"

"The idea of losing it, maybe?" Tenichi grimaced, dropping down onto the grass and indicating for his companion to follow suit. "I'm sorry, I guess I'm still trying to put the pieces back together."

"What happened, Tenichi-kun?" Kirio softened her voice, obediently settling herself on the grass beside him. "You can tell me, even if you don't want to tell your Captain everything. I'm your

friend, and it won't change anything."

"Kirio-chan..." Tenichi paused, eying her carefully for a moment, then he sighed, shrugging his shoulders.

"I think I was drugged with something," he said at length, his words soft and almost sad. "I don't remember much. Someone grabbed me on my walk back to Seventh, and pulled me into what felt like a *Senkaimon*. Then... bits and pieces, disjointed fragments... that's all. Faint smells I couldn't identify, voices I didn't know, and the blur of day and night without knowing which was which. Then..."

He hesitated, wetting his lips, and Kirio watched him keenly, waiting for him to compose himself.

"I woke up somewhere in Seventh," he continued cautiously. "It was a dense piece of forest, and... Fukutaichou came to get me. I'm not allowed to say any more than that — but I really don't understand how I came to be found or why I'm safely back here like this. I'm not hurt... but I don't know what kind of ransom Taichou had to pay in order to secure my release."

"I don't know that, either," Kirio admitted. "Taichou might not even know, though Endou-taichou and Kyouraku-taichou have both been here a few times lately, and yesterday morning, Taichou went to the Second on some kind of business. You've heard about what happened in the Spiritless Zone, I trust?"

"Yes." Tenichi's eyes darkened. "Fukutaichou gave me the bare outlines, and I've heard bits and pieces. Someone said one of the healers was with you, recuperating — is that right?"

"It is," Kirio agreed. "She's an old classmate of Naoko-san's and the Captain's, so I suppose Unohana-taichou thought it best she came here. She seems a nice person — smart, and very pretty. I haven't heard what happened in the Spiritless Zone in any detail — it seems to be classified — but I know Edogawa-san was attacked by a Hollow, because she said so herself. One of her comrades is currently in Intensive Care in the Fourth because of that same Hollow... though what it was doing in the Spiritless Zone in the first place is anyone's guess."

"I suppose there are broken souls everywhere. Maybe even here," Tenichi sighed, flopping back on the grass and gazing up at the sky. "It's a shock, though... that something could decimate a whole platoon of officers like that."

"Naoko-san said that healers aren't really trained in combat arts

very well,” Kirio responded. “They’re looking into changing that, but Naoko-san says that they’re far too unaccustomed to the kind of conflict the rest of us face up to every day. They come and pick up the pieces of our battles — but they don’t really learn to fight their own.”

“I suppose the Fourth are at sixes and sevens then, at the moment?”

“Yes, very much so.” Kirio agreed gravely. “Otherwise there’s no way that Unohana-taichou would’ve wanted Edogawa-san to be taken care of here. They just don’t have enough people to cover all bases and deal with the investigation into the deaths. The Spiritless Zone is in jeopardy... who knows what will happen from hereon in?”

“I see,” Tenichi chewed on his lip, then he hauled himself up into a sitting position once more. “Kirio-chan, this is a strange question, and right out of the blue, I know, but... are you still in contact with Ukitake Shikiki?”

“Shiki-chan? Of course!” Kirio looked indignant. “I’m not that fickle, Tenichi-kun! Even if my friends go into different squads, that doesn’t mean I change my view of them! You should know that, being that you’re proof of it!”

“All right, all right,” Tenichi grinned, holding up his hands in mock surrender. “You don’t need to get so defensive, I wasn’t questioning your loyalty. I just wondered, that’s all, whether you still found time to talk to her.”

“Shikiki was my roommate and my best friend at the Academy,” Kirio retorted. “Did you really think I’d forget her that quickly?”

“I thought I was your best friend?” Tenichi adopted a hurt expression, and Kirio grimaced, punching him playfully on the arm.

“You were my other best friend, but you weren’t my roommate. Sensei would’ve had issues with that,” she told him teasingly. “Besides, in the final year, you were all formal and Anideshi-ish. Ordinary mortals like us couldn’t compare.”

“Now who’s being an idiot?” Tenichi arched an eyebrow. “I don’t remember forsaking anyone I was close to.”

“What about Shiki-chan, anyway?” Kirio rolled onto her stomach, resting her chin in her hands and casting her companion a questioning look. “If I remember right, you and she knew each other before you and I met — before she and I met, too. You never did spend much time with her at school, though — I dunno, I never really understood why, since you didn’t seem to hate each other. Now, all of a sudden you’re asking after her? She wasn’t in the Spiritless Zone — though I’d

think you'd at least know that."

"No, it isn't about that," Tenichi plucked a blade of grass, rolling it absently between his fingers until his skin was stained with green. "It's something else. Kirio, you remember I talked to you about things, before I was kidnapped? Things that I asked you not to mention to Ketsui?"

"Things about Daisuke-san?" Kirio asked curiously, and Tenichi nodded. "Tenichi-kun, you were just abducted and you're meant to be recovering from it — is this the time to be pursuing that as well?"

"Because I was abducted, I need to pursue it," Tenichi admitted. "It occurred to me how easily life can be taken, and, well, how quickly everything can change. You think the world is one way, but in fact, maybe it's another. It made me think of Father... and all the questions I still have relating to what happened to him."

"You look serious all of a sudden," Kirio frowned. "Tenichi-kun, something did happen while you were abducted, didn't it? Something you remember, but you don't want to talk about."

"I'm not allowed to talk about it. Fukutaichou told me I mustn't," Tenichi said flatly. "He came to get me, so I won't betray his trust — but yes, I suppose it did. Something to remind me of Father, and put him foremost in my mind. Please don't ask me questions, Kirio — just hear me out instead."

"If it's that kind of thing, then of course I won't pry," Kirio agreed. "Well? What about Shikiki, then?"

"I'd forgotten, but when we were small, Shikiki was often there with Ketsui and I," Tenichi explained. "I didn't really question why, since Father and Mother treated her as though her being there was perfectly normal. Then we left, but Shikiki didn't come with us. She stayed behind with Father, and I wondered... if she knew about what happened to him. As a child I never thought about why Father didn't send her with us, but, as time's gone on, it's dawned on me that it wasn't because Father didn't want to protect her. It was something else entirely."

"Such as?"

"Shikiki didn't belong to Mother and Father, so he couldn't send her anywhere," Tenichi replied darkly. "She was the ward of someone else, and that's why she stayed behind."

"Someone else in the village?"

“She never talked to you about it?”

“She only ever really talks about the Ukitake-ke as her family,” Kirio said pensively. “I know that her parents died, and she spent some time with you and your brother, but no. She never spoke to me much about that time. She said it hurt her to remember, so I didn’t ask.”

“I see,” Tenichi sighed. “Then she might not like me asking her questions, either. I’d like to know what she remembers, but...”

“Would you like me to broach it with her for you?” Kirio suggested. “If I explain to her why, she might be willing. We’re friends, and you and she do go way back. I don’t mind, if you want me to — it might be better than you suddenly descending on her with all kinds of questions.”

“Would you?” Tenichi’s face flooded with relief, and Kirio grinned.

“You didn’t really come to see me so much as to get me to help you speak to Shikiki,” she accused lightly. “I’m nothing more to you than a means to an end, Tenichi-kun — how cold!”

“On the contrary, seeing you makes me feel a whole lot more myself,” Tenichi returned the grin with a faint one of his own. “I’m every which way about a lot of things at the moment, but one thing that’s stuck with me is that I could’ve died without ever knowing what happened to Father. I need to know for sure what did — and where he is, and whether the bits and pieces I know about it are true or not. Shikiki might be the person who can answer those questions — so if you don’t mind helping...”

“I’ll ask her, but I won’t make her relive things she doesn’t want to relive,” Kirio warned. “You’re my friend, but so is she, and she’s had a lot on her plate lately. It was Shikiki’s spirit power that helped save the people in the Spiritless Zone, and Unohana-taichou has been relying on her a lot recently. If she says no, Tenichi, then that’s how it is. I won’t force her.”

“Fair enough,” Tenichi agreed. “If she says no, I won’t go after her of my own accord. I’ll just have to find another way... but I hope she’s willing. Even though it’s a friendship that’s drifted apart, we did used to play together, and for the sake of those shared memories, perhaps she will.”

“When I see her, I’ll mention it,” Kirio promised, getting to her feet and reaching down to pull her companion up with her. “Meantime, I’m playing hooky and you’re going to be the subject of a search party

if you don't go back to your barracks safe and sound. I'll walk back to Seventh with you and deliver you there myself, then I'll go pick up where I left off with my duties. You might be taking it easy, but not everyone has that luxury."

"You said you had some free time," Tenichi objected, and Kirio dimpled.

"That was because I was glad to see you, and you obviously wanted to talk about something," she said with a shrug. "It's not as free as all that, but now I know you're okay, I can get back to what I should be doing with an open mind."

"Well, don't blame me if you get scolded," there was a little of Tenichi's usual mischief in his voice and he clapped her lightly on the back. "I was led here under false pretences, so I won't be taking responsibility for the consequences."

"It's good to have you back, you know, Tenichi-kun," Kirio eyed him pensively. "I've missed you."

"That's some admission," Tenichi said playfully, and Kirio shrugged.

"I think you should follow Souja-dono's instructions, too, and try and put it behind you," she advised seriously. "Finding Daisuke-san is one thing, but whatever else it is that's bothering you, Tenichi-kun, try to let it go. Whatever you say, I'm sure there's something about the last few days that's on your mind, and if you're not careful, it'll eat a hole right through you. Whatever it is, you're safe now. You're back home where you belong — it's over, so let it be, huh?"

Tenichi was silent for a moment, and Kirio's brow creased in consternation.

"Tenichi-kun?"

"Maybe," Tenichi conceded at length, reaching to take her by the arm and lead her back towards the path that led to the barracks. "I'll keep it in mind, Kirio-chan, I promise."

The sky was leaden, a sheet of cobalt grey that hung heavily over the hills as though draped there by unseen hands. The air was thick and dark, the fragments of dust and moisture clinging so tightly together that it was almost impossible to see a way through. Shapes without form or identity loomed suddenly in and out of view, as though there was a world outside the haze, but these disappeared just as quickly as they appeared, no more than ghosts or illusions set against a murky horizon. The path beneath his

sandalled feet made only the most muffled of sounds, as if it too were subdued by the heavy aura permeating every inch of visible land. Still he walked on, the road appearing endless, not knowing where he had begun, nor where his final destination might be.

It felt as though he had been walking forever, but, at length, through the cloying mist, he could hear the faint call of a bird of prey, the sound growing fainter and fainter as the creature dipped deeper and deeper into the fog. A shadow followed the raucous sound, making the creature real before stealing it away again behind the blanket of smoky grey. Disorientated, he blinked, straining to see more clearly through the haze. The bird told him there was land hereabouts, not human land but wild land, perhaps dotted with trees and wild grasses, where small creatures made their nests and where a creature could hunt on the wing unfettered by the barriers created by man. All these things his mind pieced together, yet though he continued to walk, none of them came into view. Only the bird seemed to be real, flying and looping over his head but no matter how close it came he could only catch the briefest glimpses, the tip of a grey feather, perhaps the glint of a golden beak.

He reached out futile hands, trying to grasp a creature he knew would never come to him, for though some folk kept birds like this for sport, he could tell from the creature's defiant call that this one was governed by nobody. It's sleek, dull features hid a shrewd killer's heart, and he wondered whether the bird's beady gaze was fixing on him, hunting him instead of the small fry that scurried in and out of the invisible hedgerow.

The next moment, a slash of silver like lightning cut through the sky, splitting it in half and causing it to fall in heavy, sooty rain around him, smothering the landscape in ash-like debris. Coughing and struggling to catch his breath, he realised that the sudden slash had cut away the mist and fog, rendering his surroundings fully visible for the first time. To his surprise, he had not walked any distance at all for, as the world came into clear focus, so did his recollection of his journey's start and end. He was still where he had been at the start of his walk, the dead tree's bleached branches casting twisted, ugly shadows over the ground, the spring bubbling with fresh water over dusty, dry earth, and then, at the end of a long, shadowed path, the wall of a hut, barely concealed by a twisted fence of brush and scrub.

A sudden screech of terror jerked his attention away from the scenery, causing him to raise his gaze once more to the sky. Now he could see the bird clearly, but, to his dismay, it was no longer freewheeling, its stalking hunt curtailed by the thin thread of silver wire wrapped around its throat and the top of its left wing. As it struggled, the wire drew tighter, making the bird's movements more uneven and jerky as it fought to break itself

free. The silver feathers began to shimmer with specks of red as it fought in vain, the thread winding itself slowly like fishing twine around the branches of the dead tree. With each tug of an unseen hand, it brought the bird lower and lower until he could see it clearly, gasping for breath, its eyes wide and fearful and its struggles more and more frantic. As it fought, stray feathers fell to the ground and, as those feathers touched the earth they turned to pebbles, fragments of smoothly polished stone that rattled and rolled together like the chattering of teeth. Now the creature was within his reach, but even as he reached up a finger to touch the stained plumage, a second bolt of silver slashed down between them, causing him to stumble backwards as it scorched through the earth.

No, not scorched. As he gazed at the place the lightning-silver bolt had made impact, he saw that it was a sweeping, clean cut through the soil, as though weaved by the blade of a warrior's sword. The ground was wet with blood, and his heart lurched in his chest as he realised the significance of that fact. Slowly, reluctantly, he raised his gaze, registering as he did so that the bird's panicked cries had ceased completely.

The creature, trapped against the tree flapped motionlessly in the gentle breeze, its chest scarlet with red. The end of what appeared to be a tree branch protruded from its chest, but as the bird moved, he saw the implement glint like metal in the pale light. The heavens shuddered once more, expelling a third silver bolt, but now he knew it was not lightning but the blade of a katana, wielded by an unknown killer. It sliced through the thread trapping the bird to the tree, then cut through the bird's body, paring it neatly in two and causing it to fall like a dead weight to the ground below. As it hit, it shattered into more fragments of stone, and, as those fragments seeped into the earth, the whole world shook and twisted, juddering with all the force of a seismic spasm.

It was no longer raining ash, but drops of blood, fresh and crimson, running over the remains of the savaged tree and through the crevasses and dips that the tremors had created in the earth. The land shook again, more violently this time, and deeper cracks began to tear through the ground, splitting across and across again. From within the cracks a flurry of insects flew up into the air, swarming and blocking what little light there was, and, as the blood pooled around his feet, he felt as though he was sinking, pulled down by invisible hands, the whisper of disembodied voices echoing unnervingly in his ears.

Koku opened his eyes, breathing hard, his heart pounding fit to burst in his chest. Something damp soaked his brow and his clothing, and for one terrible moment he thought it was blood, but, as he touched his finger to his skin he realised it was perspiration — the images that had seemed so vivid seconds before were only in his head,

and the dream was already beginning to fragment and slip away.

He dragged his shaking body into a sitting position, leaning up against the wall of his reading shelter with an unsteady sigh. The room around him was pitch black, though thin slivers of light seeping through the cracks in the wood told him that it was still daylight out. Scraps of worn, recycled parchment lay scattered around him, testament to what he had been working on before he had fallen asleep, but he could not force his mind back to the coherence of before, the colours and sensations of his dream still too vivid in his mind's eye. His head span and ached, his stomach turning from the violent nature of the images, and for a moment he closed his eyes, immersing himself in the reassuring darkness. There were no pictures lurking there now, just empty black, and he focused his attention on this, drawing deep breaths into his lungs and exhaling slowly as he attempted to calm his body down.

Katsura's in Seireitei.

He opened his eyes slowly, pushing himself to his feet and using the wood to hold himself upright, transferring his weight to the makeshift bookshelf to support his trembling form.

Katsura's in Seireitei.

He repeated it again, almost as a calming mantra, trying desperately to bring his consciousness back onto an even keel. He glanced helplessly at the scraps of paper, knowing that the words they contained were important, but unable to read even the simplest character as anything more than a black smear against the beige. The more he looked at them, the more the kanji seemed to squirm and wriggle across the page like insects, and with a jolt the dream returned to him in violent technicolour, the swarming insects filling the room before disappearing into the dappled patterns the faint streams of light made against the walls. Bile rose in his throat and he screwed up his eyes, fighting to resist the urge to vomit. The feeling would pass soon enough, he comforted himself. All he had to do was keep breathing, and, little by little, the panic would subside and his brain would reassert control over his body.

In the meantime, I need to help Katsura. I need to do something... to make sure he's all right.

He leaned back against the wall, running his hands against the rough seam of the wood in a rhythmic pattern, rubbing his skin against the uneven surface until the surface of his hands became red. By focusing his mind on that discomfort, he could rationalise what was running through his head, and, as he forced himself to draw forth

the backbone of his dream, he remembered the whispers of those voices, murmuring two syllables, over and over again.

In his dream, he had been too frightened to register them, but now, as he ran the sensation over again through his mind, he realised he could make out the sounds, and his eyes narrowed as he understood what they meant.

He stumbled forward, pulling the curtain back and forcing himself to step out into the dull daylight. Though there was no sun, the brightness bored through his aching, dizzy head, and this time there was no holding back the nausea, his stomach clenching and spasming and driving him to his knees. For a few minutes he was helpless to the demands of his instincts, then, as his stomach emptied and his body calmed, he sank back onto the dusty ground.

Get a grip on yourself, Koku. You're pathetic, letting yourself be floored by such little things at your age.

He gritted his teeth, forcing his protesting body back to his feet. *You don't understand it, yet. You don't need to understand it. You need to worry about Katsura — don't let yourself get distracted by other things.*

He turned his gaze back to the hut, reaching with a trembling hand for the discarded papers and, pressing them against the outer wall of the shelter, he read the words slowly to himself with painful determination.

I need to help Katsura. I promised I would, and I will.

He folded the paper into four, sliding it into his *obi* and leaning up against the shelter for a moment to steady his balance. Closing his eyes, he tried briefly to forge a psychic link to his missing companion but, with Katsura's absence, the activity proved futile. Katsura was on the other side of the *Sekkiseki* wall, a barrier that cut through all spirit power like a knife, and, in any case, Koku knew that in his current state, forging the concentration needed to link to another's mind was beyond him. The skill was Katsura's, not his own — he had poached it and exploited it, but without Katsura's native ability, there was nothing he could do. If Katsura wasn't trying to reach him, then they would not be able to link thoughts over so wide a distance. He would just have to hope that all was well over the other side.

To which end, I need to ensure that happens.

Koku's brows knitted together, and he pushed his body away from the shelter, walking slowly but resolutely back along the path towards the village. The auras of the local people swirled against his own, causing panic and confusion to rise up inside him like a stray match

setting dry tinder aflame, but he soldiered on, searching through each and every presence for the one that he sought the most. Of all the people in the ramshackle settlement that Koku called home, there was one reiatsu that was identifiable by its lack of presence rather than its obvious existence. More even than the suppressed slithers of Keitarou's transient aura was the spiritual presence of one alive yet not alive, the emptiness and lack of substance making him the hardest of all the Rukon's residents to immediately track down. To most, it was an undetectable presence, but although Koku did not have Katsura's skill of reading minds, when it came to detecting auras, his senses were exceptionally sharp. It did not take him long to get a fix on the subject of his thoughts and, as he approached the river, he made out the hunched form of Keitarou's chief spy, wrapped in his customary black cloak and cupping his hands to the dismal flow in order to drink. He was relaxed, Koku noticed with detachment. His duty completed, he was easy and unhurried in his movements, apparently basking in the pleasure of a job well done. This rankled the young man even more, and he fought to keep a grip on his flaring temper, knowing that in his current unsteady state it would be far too easy for him to fly off the handle and take matters into his own hands.

If he was to succeed, he needed his composure and his cool, shrewd mind at his beck and call. He was still pale, his body trembling from the violence of his dream and the aftermath, but with a will of iron he suppressed it, focusing his attention on his companion alone and putting all other thoughts firmly out of his head. He could not show weakness, not in front of this one. The moment he did, he put himself in danger of being attacked, and Koku had no mind to begin a game of the hunter and the hunted around the wasteland village.

At the young man's arrival, Masaya glanced up, casting the young man a look of quizzical surprise.

"About Katsura," Koku did not bother with niceties, getting straight to the point and fixing his companion with a dark, uncompromising stare. "You know that he's been sent back to Seireitei, don't you?"

"It's not for me to judge the instructions Keitarou-sama gives his children," Masaya spoke waspishly, tilting his head on one side and fixing Koku with that cold, reptilian gaze of his. "He made an error, and it's only natural he should fix it. Such things are basic training for someone who works in the shadows. Katsura-sama is young, yet, and has a lot of things to learn. This will be a good lesson for him that he cannot always be so carefree with his appearance."

There was an edge of smugness in his tones, and Koku fought again

the rising wave of anger, knowing that, despite the apparent disinterest of his words, Masaya was taking particular personal pleasure in Katsura's apparent disgrace.

"If it's not for you to judge the situation, I wonder why you are," he said bluntly now, folding his arms against his chest and leaning up against the trunk of the tall tree that overhung the water, resting his weight against it in an assumption of nonchalance that concealed how unsteady on his feet he still was. "In any case, I didn't come to discuss right or wrong with you. I came to give you an order."

"I don't take orders from any but Keitarou-sama," Masaya turned his head back towards the river. "If the order comes from him, then he will doubtless summon me himself."

"It has nothing to do with him," Koku said evenly, sliding his hand into his *obi* and pulling out the parchment. He glanced at it for a moment, then held it out.

Masaya did not move to take it, nor even shift his gaze to acknowledge it, and Koku narrowed his gaze.

"Kurotsuchi."

"I told you, I don't follow the orders of any but..."

"Are you sure about that?"

Koku's voice had changed, dropping to a low, ominous tone that, though barely above a whisper, held a certain chill that made the spy flinch, turning to eye the young man with sudden uncertainty. "I told you, this is an order. Take it."

Masaya hesitated, and Koku sighed, thrusting the paper into the spy's hand.

"Instructions," he said curtly. "You're going to Seireitei, and you'll follow my word to the letter, understand?"

"But I..."

"Katsura may have been careless, but you got him sent back there out of personal spite, not any other reason," Koku's words became even more icy. "You know it and so do I. I'm not fooled by your pretences. You'd like to see Katsura removed from the equation, because he takes so much of Keitarou-san's attention. You're connected to Keitarou-san by science, but Katsura is tied to him by something deeper and more permanent, something you can't compete with, no matter how much you abase yourself and grovel at your master's feet. You can't equal Katsura's connection to Keitarou-san and

Eiraki-san, so you'd be happy to see him caught, killed, incarcerated by the shinigami as an example of reckless abandon. You imagine him abandoned by his father to rot in a Seireitei jail, but you've miscalculated. Because of that blood connection, Keitarou-san won't abandon Katsura as easily as you think."

"Keitarou-sama's orders are his own concern. I did not have any part in his decision to send his son there, as you likely well know," Masaya said frankly.

"Seireitei has no evidence to link Katsura with Rukongai or with anything here," Koku snapped back. "His going back to kill one shinigami specifically puts him in a position that could threaten all of us if he were caught. More importantly, it could lead to him losing his life and I'm not about to let that happen. You're going to be my insurance to make sure it doesn't."

"Why should I listen to you?" Masaya demanded, a dark glint in his golden eyes. "It's not my job to clear up other people's messes."

"Well, then let's put it in language you do understand," Koku moved to sit beside the spy on the riverbank, smoothing down the fabric of his kimono carefully before meeting the other's gaze head on. "If Katsura gets caught and imprisoned, probably they'll kill him. If that happens, nobody will be very happy, least of all Keitarou-san. He's banking on Katsura succeeding and coming back here safely, and you're going to make sure he does. See, if he doesn't come back here, Keitarou-san might accept it as the sacrifices of war. He might look on it that way... but I won't. He might not blame you for his son's death, but Kurotsuchi, I will. If Katsura doesn't come back here safely, then I will kill you myself."

"You can't," Masaya said smugly. "I'm not like you. I'm not so easy to kill. This body has as good as died already. You can't slay it as easily as any common man. Not even Sakaki-sama, with her demon sword skills could sever my life — an untrained whelp like you wouldn't stand a chance against my Onmitsukidou training and the unique life force granted to me by Keitarou-sama."

"You are comparing me with Sakaki?" Koku reflected on this for a moment, then snorted, shaking his head. "I'm disappointed in you. I thought a spy never underestimated anyone, but you've clearly underestimated me."

"Meaning?" Masaya's golden eyes became suspicious slits, and Koku let out a humourless chuckle.

"You really don't know me at all, do you?"

“I have no interest in knowing people. I do what Keitarou-sama commands me, and that is all.”

“Perhaps that’s true, but just because you view the world that way, it doesn’t mean everyone else does.” Koku’s eyes glittered suddenly, an ominous aura flickering briefly around his body, and Masaya’s eyes widened with dismay at the sudden chill in the air. “Did you never hear the words, ‘knowledge is power’ before? I *know* how Keitarou-san saved your life, Kurotsuchi. I know *everything* about you — everything, even the things he doesn’t. I know how to kill you just as sure as I know how to keep you alive... so keep that in mind before you decide to disobey me. You think it wise to stay on the right side of Keitarou-san, and you’d be right to do so — but you should remember that there’s a *reason* why Keitarou-san indulges me like he does. I’ll say it again. If Katsura comes to any harm in Seireitei, then *I will kill you*. It won’t be pleasant, I assure you — but I *will* do it, and as slowly and as tortuously as possible. Keitarou-san can protect you against a lot of things and people — your past, the shinigami you used to work with, Sakaki, even Katsura... but remember this. He cannot protect you against me.”

“Ko...”

Masaya’s lips mouthed the remaining syllables, horrified recognition suddenly flooding his gaze, and at his companion’s clear terror, Koku smiled, a chilling, terrifying smile that did not reach his ice cold eyes.

“Yes. We understand each other,” he murmured. “Good. Then read. Follow those instructions then destroy that paper. Nobody, not Katsura and especially Keitarou-san need know anything about it. If need be, you make sure Katsura stays safe, *whatever* path he chooses to take, even if that means you have to lie. You do *exactly* as I’ve instructed you, and if there’s any danger, *any chance at all* of Katsura getting caught, you make sure he does not. Even if that means putting yourself in harm’s way. If you come back without him, I will kill you — no matter what excuses you put forward.”

He reached out to rest a hand on his companion’s arm, and Masaya let out an exclamation, flinching back as though stung by a jolt of electric energy.

“I don’t like violence,” Koku said simply, “but I also don’t like betrayal or duplicity. Katsura has to fix his mess. You fix yours, or else there will be consequences.”

He got to his feet, offering the spy a last smile before turning on his

heel and padding up the bank towards the dead forest. He moved purposefully but, once out of sight of the river and its shady occupant, he faltered, putting his hand against the wall of a nearby building as everything swam and danced in front of his eyes. At the edges of his consciousness, the image of the struggling, straining bird had dyed itself in blood into his thoughts and the more he tried to suppress it, the more he was sure he could hear its terrified, hopeless cries.

He cursed, screwing up his gaze and clenching his fists, battering them against the wall of the derelict building again and again as he tried to pound the images out of his thoughts.

“Stop it.”

A calm voice interrupted his frenzy, gentle and reassuring hands taking him around the wrists and carefully yet firmly pulling him away from the wall. “Calm down, Koku. Whatever it is, you’ll not settle it by blooding your fists. Look, you’ve made a complete mess of your knuckles. Come back with me to my hut and let me put something on them, before they become infected.”

“Keitarou-san?” Koku opened his eyes, staring blankly at his rescuer, who offered him a smile, a curious, compassionate look in the muddy brown eyes.

“We can talk too, if you wish,” he suggested, already beginning to lead the young man towards his own domain as though consent had been implicitly understood between them in that one, brief glance. “I don’t want you acting like that in public, though. You’ll scare the villagers, who aren’t used to seeing you so ruffled and upset.”

“Katsura...” Koku wetted his lips, allowing himself to be guided through the village, aware of the flickering spirits of the residents watching them behind screens and curtains with interest and apprehension. “I’m worried about him. I can’t reach him from here.”

“Katsura will be quite fine, I’m sure,” Keitarou spoke with certainty. “I have faith in his coming back successful, and so must you. You can’t expect him to make contact with you from so far away, not when he’s undertaking an important mission of his own. This petulant behaviour does you no good. I don’t want to see it again — do you understand? Losing your temper in a public place, whatever the cause, brings nobody any pleasure.”

“Mm,” like a small boy being reprimanded by a kindly schoolmaster, Koku bobbed his head forward in a half-nod, only vaguely focusing on his companion’s words. At his unresponsiveness, Keitarou laughed, reaching out a hand to knock back the heavy

curtain door and pushing Koku gently inside the darkened shelter.

“Sit down, rest and calm yourself. I’ll fetch water, and then we’ll talk,” he suggested lightly. “While I clean and bandage those poor hands, we’ll talk about the things that worry you, all right? Don’t worry. I’m sure we’ll put it all to rights, and you’ll feel much better.”

“Yes, sir,” The words passed Koku’s lips almost automatically, his gaze fixed on the wall of the shelter rather than the face of his companion as the images of his dream flashed in and out of view once again. Keitarou sighed, shaking his head slightly, but he made no further comment, instead slipping back out of the office in search of water.

Koku shivered, leaning up against the wall of the shelter and pulling his thin clothing more tightly around his trembling body.

I can’t tell him, not this time. Whatever it was, even the idea of putting it into words fills me with terror. This one I have to tackle on my own... somehow. I have to work it out, piece by piece. I’ll leave Katsura to Kurotsuchi — that coward won’t dare go against my instructions, not now he realises what’s at stake if he does, but in the meantime, I have to pull this into some kind of order. If I don’t... if I don’t...

He closed his eyes, barely noticing the tears that glittered on his lashes.

If I don’t, maybe the skies really will rain blood.

21. Father's Honour

Chapter Twenty — Father's Honour

“If nobody minds, I’d like to chair the meeting this morning.”

In the midst of the hubbub of voices in the Vice Captain’s usual meeting chamber, Souja raised his hand, getting slowly to his feet and gazing around at his companions expectantly. There was a sudden hush, all eyes turning to rest on the Seventh’s usually retiring Vice Captain with a mixture of surprise and confusion, and at their expressions, a rueful grin touched his clever features.

“That must be the first time since you took the badge, Souja-dono,” Enishi sat back in his seat until the wood creaked, folding broad arms across a broader chest and surveying his comrade warmly. “What do you think, everyone? I say let him have it, if he’s so keen to lead for once. He hasn’t had a chance to, yet, so it’s only fair.”

“No objections here,” Sora’s eyes were dancing with curiosity, and she nodded her dark head. “Is this to do with the Kotetsu boy, Souja-dono? I heard he’d been returned — is that true?”

“We’ll come to that when the meeting begins properly, I’m sure,” Urahara Shiketsu put in smartly, before Souja could address Sora’s question. “For the time being, Houjou, if you’re sponsoring the nomination of Souja-dono to lead this meeting, allow me to second it. It’s not often we get the chance to hear things from Seventh’s point of view — I think it would be most enlightening.”

“Thank you, Shiketsu-dono.” Souja bowed his head properly towards the heir of the Urahara Clan, moving to the head of the table amid nods and murmurs of assent from the other Vice Captains present. They were not at full capacity today, he realised, sinking down rather self-consciously into the Chairperson’s seat and shifting around to make himself comfortable in what was, for him, something of an unwelcome position. Despite his intelligence and his loyalty to his own men, when it came to his peers and seniors among the officers of his own rank, he generally found it safer to take a back seat, so to have so many eyes turned his way was disconcerting to say the least. He reddened slightly, focusing his gaze on the empty seats of the Fourth, Second and Eleventh Division Vice Captains as he regained his composure.

Unohana Eriko was, he knew, still deeply mired in the aftermath of the Rukongai attacks whilst Kai had sent apologies via Hell Butterfly to say that his current workload was too great for him to spare the time to attend. As for Ikata, he had been commandeered by his Captain and Souja greatly suspected this was to ensure that the loudmouthed adjutant didn't say anything else that might cause Eleventh Division harm, work or embarrassment in the very near future. Souja had heard from Sora's gossip grapevine that, as a result of the abduction business, Minachi had been called to answer questions before the head of his Clan, and, as a consequence, had been going around Inner Seireitei like a bear with a sore head.

With those three accounted for, Souja scanned the room for any other absences, but found none. Even Yamamoto Akira, who rarely deigned to fill his seat at such occasions, preferring instead to get any important information by way of his cousin Enishi had bothered to turn up this morning, sitting at the back with his usual impatient, peremptory expression on his face. Glancing at him now, Souja wondered why he had bothered to attend today, then he realised that it was probably as much to follow up on Ikata and Minachi's actions as it was to take part in meaningful discussion. Souja shifted his gaze across from Akira to the still grinning Enishi, absently marvelling how two men of similar age born of the same bloodline could be such diametric opposites in personality.

Souja himself was among the youngest Vice Captains, which was another reason why he had generally shied away from the spotlight. Whilst it was customary for Clan Leaders to appoint their heirs Vice Captains, there was also an expectation that that heir prove himself worthy of the role and Souja, with all his shrewd attention to detail had quickly realised he would not gain the respect of his comrades by throwing his weight around or pushing in. Today, though, he would break that habit and stand before them to speak.

"I think everyone's here who's going to be here, Souja-dono," Shirogane's cultured tones put in softly from the left hand side of the chamber. "I believe we can start the meeting — it's time."

"So it is," Souja cast a cursitory glance out of the window, nodding his thanks towards the Sixth Division's Vice Captain. "Very well, then. I would like to begin, if I may, with the subject of security in Inner Seireitei."

"This is to do with Tenichi's abduction," Enishi's thick brows knitted together in consternation. "Did the lad say something about it, then?"

“He has been found?” Kanshi arched an eyebrow, and Souja nodded.

“Some of the people in District Seven discovered him unconscious in woodland near their home and took him in,” he said vaguely, being careful to skirt around the truth of who had found the missing shinigami. “They alerted the local authorities who in turn sent me a notice that a person meeting his description had been found. I went myself to retrieve him, and found him spirit cuffed and disorientated but generally unharmed. He’s safely back at barracks now and shows no physical signs of lasting damage from the ordeal.”

“No physical signs,” Shirogane thinned his lips. “No physical ones, but mental ones, is that what you’re trying to imply?”

“That I can’t answer, since Tenichi cannot remember what happened to him during the days of his abduction,” Souja looked regretful. “A member of the Fourth kindly came and examined him on our return, and though the removal of the spirit cuffs caused him some discomfort at first, she couldn’t find anything wrong. She did warn me, though, that suppressed memories and periods of great stress can have a deeper impact on someone — so we’re keeping him to light duties for a little while, just until we’re sure that he’s settled back into normal routine.”

“Are we going to discuss this idiot’s medical history all meeting, or is there a bigger point in all of this other than you sharing your happy ending with the class?” Akira put in abruptly at that moment, and more than a few of the other Vice Captains winced at the bluntness in the other man’s tones. “Not to be funny or anything, Endou, but if all you have to say to us is that your missing man is returned, it’s hardly a reason to take control of the meeting.”

“On the contrary, it has everything to do with it,” Souja kept his cool, fixing Akira with an even gaze. “I’m sorry to have wandered a little off my original point, and I’ll return to it right now. The truth is that, the day after his return, Kikyue took Tenichi out to the area where we believed him to have been abducted, and after some time examining the scene, they both concluded that the most likely method was via a *Senkaimon*, even if there should not be such a gate in that location.”

“There is a gate,” Enishi interjected frankly, settling himself more comfortably in his seat, and Shiketsu shot him a startled glance. “Taichou had me going through dusty scrolls in our archive to check, and he found it, written in on an old map. It’s deactivated, true enough, but there’s still a gate there.”

“Is that true?” Shirogane glanced at Shiketsu, who nodded slowly.

“Yes, but as Houjou said, it’s no longer active,” he said uneasily.

“So it’s not part of your current gate map?” Kanshi arched an eyebrow.

“No, but that’s because it’s no longer active. It can’t be opened — that’s the whole point of sealing it,” Shiketsu said earnestly. ‘It’s been closed off for more than ten years now. It shouldn’t even be under consideration.’

“Nonetheless, it’s our most likely explanation,” Souja said grimly. “Tenichi does remember being grabbed and pulled into what felt to him like an open gate. The existence of a *Senkaimon*, even a disused one, seems far too coincidental to be ignored. I remember, Shiketsu-dono, how you assured us that clearance to the *Senkaimon* is strictly overseen — but in light of Tenichi’s testimony and the scene itself, is it not possible that someone has found a way to hack into something that’s no longer being actively monitored?”

“Is such a thing possible for someone outside of Inner Seireitei?” Ryousei cast Shiketsu a glance, and the Urahara frowned.

“It should not be,” he replied uneasily. “As I said, the gate is sealed. After our last meeting, I went and doublechecked the records, but there’s no sign of any illicit activity anywhere around that region. I did check the area around Twelfth, just on the off chance, but there was no sign of foreign reiatsu at that scene, either. All sealed gates are also kept on record, just in case the Council ever chooses to reopen one or commandeer it for emergencies. If you’re seriously suggesting that someone from the Districts has managed to find out how to open a gate, such tampering ought to have been detected by us... but it hasn’t been.”

“All swords are registered with the Council of Elders, aren’t they?” Sora pressed her lips together. “What if it was an unregistered sword, though, Shiketsu-dono? What if someone somehow managed to summon a *zanpakutou* without proper training and guidance? Would it still show up?”

“It would,” Shiketsu confirmed. “It wouldn’t identify the user — by which I mean there’d be no spiritual fingerprint to tell us which sword was used to unlock it, not if that sword’s reiatsu wasn’t part of our database, but there would still be trace evidence of it having been tampered with. All the *Senkaimon* are set up to respond to and recall contact with individual swords — but in the case of an invading presence — what we call ‘*ryoka*’ — the gate should lock itself until

someone of Captain or Vice Captain rank comes to release it with their blade. That way, nobody should be able to get in or out of Seireitei without the proper clearance. I don't understand how that system could be overridden with a gate in active use, much less one that is locked. Father has worked on it tirelessly since obtaining the research notes and this is the first time in almost thirty years that there's been an incident like this."

"There are no exceptions?" Shirogane enquired. "No loopholes by where reiatsu would not be detected? I had heard that Bankai level shinigami are often able to open gates without leaving a trace behind."

"That is true," Shiketsu admitted, "but the number of people who are capable of Bankai are few, even among the Captains. And I hope that we can assume them all to be beyond suspicion in a case like this."

"What about the Onmitsukidou?" Akira asked. "Wasn't there some kind of agreement relating to their movement..?"

"Mm..." Shiketsu frowned. "I am not familiar with the particulars of that arrangement. There is some special condition that applies to them — but it is strictly monitored and regulated by the Shihouin Clan. Kai-dono isn't here to clearly answer yes or no to your question, but I can't imagine how any of the Secret Ops agents would benefit from kidnapping random division officers."

"Rather than casting aspersions for which we have no evidence nor any real logic to pursue, perhaps we ought to focus on the circumstances in which Kotetsu Tenichi remembers being taken." Shirogane interjected acerbically. "Most particularly, whether anyone else abroad that night might have picked up anything out of the ordinary."

"What about your people?" Kanshi turned towards Michihashi Aoi, the Vice Captain of the Twelfth Division, who shrugged helplessly.

"If you're going to ask if we saw or heard anything, the answer is no," he said regretfully. "Unfortunately Sekime-taichou had a few... er... experiment-related problems that day, and we were all a little preoccupied in putting the outer wall of the Kidou arena back together."

"I wonder if it's safe, having barracks so close to yours, Michihashi," Enishi joked, and Aoi smiled ruefully.

"We all go to bed at night wondering if there'll be a roof over our

heads in the morning,” he said wryly, “but in terms of the *Senkaimon*, we can’t be of use to anyone. We’re all deeply involved in Sekime-taichou’s Kidou research theories, whether we want to be or not — and that leaves very little time for anything else.”

“What about the Thirteenth?” Ryuusei wondered, and Enishi frowned.

“Looking at the old plans, the gate’s out of our sight, really. Closer to Twelfth — too far from our barracks for us to really pay attention to,” he said seriously. “If we’d known in advance something was up, well, I’m sure the Taichou would’ve had us on the alert — but it’s hard to predict something you don’t know is going to happen before it does.”

“That’s more or less what I wanted to talk about today,” Souja agreed. “Nobody can see the future, but we can still improve on the current setup. We all have areas that are our clear territory, but there are patches and blind spots that sometimes are left unguarded. This gate wasn’t seen as a problem before, to the point some of us didn’t know it even existed, but now we know there could be a leak in the system, it makes sense for us to step up our patrols in these areas, too. Perhaps there are other like *Senkaimon* which we think are sealed but are actually not. I want to suggest that, as Vice Captains we look again at the plan of Inner Seireitei and divide up the grey areas a little more concretely. If someone has found a way to penetrate one gate, it means they might have the ability to penetrate more. That means we all need to be more vigilant.”

“In short, stake out every available and unavailable *Senkaimon* in and out of Inner Seireitei and wait for them to make a wrong move?” Sora asked, and Souja inclined his head.

“These people, whoever they are, are getting more and more bold with each assault,” he said gravely. “First they only took people on patrol in the outer Districts, further from Shinigami territory, but Tenichi was definitely taken from under our noses. They obviously think they have us outsmarted. Sooner or later they have to fall into the trap of complacency — I’d rather it was sooner than later. They already made the mistake of leaving Tenichi unattended long enough for him to be found. If they continue making similar errors, we have a good chance of catching them before they cause any more disruption.”

He glanced around at his peers.

“Given the other, more pressing things that the Council and our Captains have to deal with, I thought this was something we as

adjutants could take care of on our own initiative, and, maybe, put the matter to rest once and for all.”

“I agree with Souja-dono,” Ryuusei nodded thoughtfully. “It’s as you say — these kidnappers are getting more brazen. If we don’t act against them now, there’s a good chance that we might fall victim to another of their petty attacks. We have no intelligence as to where or when they might strike next. At least by taking the initiative we might be better prepared.”

“It also means instructing our officers to be extra vigilant and, if possible, to patrol in pairs or threes rather than alone,” Kanshi suggested. “Some will object about being forcibly buddied up, but it’s harder to kidnap multiple people at once here in the heart of shinigami administration. That fact alone might put them off the idea of trying a second time.”

“We should put this to a formal vote, then,” Aoi interjected. “As for me, I like the idea in theory. In practice, I think more danger lurks inside the Twelfth than outside it at present, so I don’t know how many extra men I can spare — but I see the logic of the suggestion and I’ll talk to my Third and Fourth Seats too about rearranging our patrols to better coordinate with other squads.”

“Let’s vote,” Souja raised his hand, again rather self-conscious at taking the lead among so many older officers. “All in favour?”

There were general murmurs and signals of assent, and Souja’s lips twitched into a relieved smile as he realised that his companions had voted unanimously in support.

“I suppose that settles it, then,” Enishi said matter-of-factly. “When I get back to base, I’ll pass the word on to Shikibu and Atsudane, and brainstorm about what Thirteenth can do to help. We don’t have as many members as the other divisions, but then we don’t have so many gates near our prescribed territory, so it should work out quite nicely.”

“I think we’ll all be doing similar things when we get back,” Shirogane reflected. “Someone will need to transmit this information to Unohana, Shihouin and Ikata, so they know what we’ve agreed to do. I don’t foresee any problems in that regard, though. I can’t imagine they’ll have objections.”

“I’ll tackle Ikata,” Enishi volunteered. “It’s on my route home, so I’ll do it, no problems.”

“I’ll pass word on to the Fourth,” Shiketsu offered. “I promised Unohana-taichou some data relating to another matter, so I’ll raise

this while I'm there."

"And Kai-dono?" Souja asked. There was an exchange of glances, and Kanji smiled ruefully.

"It's not that anyone has issues with Shihouin himself, per se," he said slowly, "but I guess nobody's in any hurry to step over the threshold and into Second. It's not the kind of place people go by choice, if you know what I mean."

"Taichou was just there the other day," Enishi blinked, looking nonplussed. "What's wrong with it, Souryou? It's a barracks, just like the rest of them, isn't it?"

"Have you ever been there yourself, though?" Kanshi arched an eyebrow. "Ukitake... Ukitake-taichou is one thing, he's a law unto himself, but for the rest of us..."

"Sure," Enishi frowned, folding his arms casually across his chest. "Not recently, of course, not with them being so busy, but I've dropped by to see Shihouin and we've chatted over sake. I don't see the problem. Sure, they're quite strict there, but it's not like the Second is a dangerous place."

"Sometimes, Houjou, you amaze me — in a variety of different ways," Kanshi's tones were amused.

"I'll take the message to second," Akira interjected at this juncture. "It's like Enishi said, there's nothing to be particularly bothered about. Just a bunch of Shihouin prancing about in black. There's not usually people around, anyway. I'll handle it, Endou. That covers everyone, I think?"

"It does. Thank you, Akira-dono," Souja bowed his head gratefully in Akira's direction. "It's hard to explain, but I feel a lot better knowing that everyone else is on board with making this a reality."

"Soul Society's on edge about a lot of things right now. It's only natural," Shirogane's handsome features twitched into a look of consternation. "It's a little off topic, but I was hoping Eriko-dono would be here today. I wanted to know the state of health of the third survivor from Rukongai. Madeki-dono is apparently now fully recovered from the ordeal, but I haven't heard very much about the other officer."

"Aomori Seri," Ryuusei pursed his lips. "As I understand it, she's still fairly frail. I have occasional conversations with Eriko-dono through the divide between our division training grounds, when she and I happen to pass ways, just to see how things are there, and she

seemed to think that the girl was going to live. Whether she'll be a shinigami on duty again, though, who knows. And there's the matter of Edogawa as well — though she's still with the Thirteenth, isn't she?" this last to Enishi, who jerked his head in a nod.

"She is, but she's all right, I think," he said frankly. "Shikibu's more in charge of her than I am, being that they're old friends, and I'm not so good at the whole sickroom etiquette side of things. I think she's mending, though. She seems to have given a lot of information to the Taichou about what happened, too."

"Ryuu and I were hoping we might have an opportunity to visit her," Shirogane admitted, and Souja saw a flicker of genuine emotion briefly cross the Vice Captain's face. "Ryuu is especially anxious, but I've been keeping him busy since Guren-sama is so tied up with Clan and Council matters of late. I think he'd quite have preferred us to take custody of her when she first came back to Seireitei — but I don't think Unohana-taichou felt mobilising the Kuchiki would do anything to help calm the situation down."

"She's fine with us, but I'll talk to the Taichou about it," Enishi promised. "I'm sure he won't object to either of you coming to see her, in an unofficial capacity. Nobody wants to get the Kuchiki hot under the collar, and it's not like this was an attack on your Clan, but an attack on shinigami in general. That's why Unohana-taichou chose us, I think, because of the neutrality — but I can't see why you'd not be welcome."

"Some neutrality," Shirogane muttered, mostly under his breath, but Souja caught the words and cast his colleague a searching glance, absorbing the tension that was lurking beneath the older man's normally cool countenance.

"I didn't realise Edogawa-san was a Kuchiki," he said now. "As a member of Fourth, I guess I assumed..."

"Mitsuki is a third degree Kuchiki, and a cousin of both myself and my third seated officer, Kuchiki Ryuu," Shirogane shook his head. "Her father, Teitou, serves Guren-sama's Clan court in a high capacity, and so you might say that, by blood, she's quite an important person. If the attack against her was considered to be one against the Clan, it would create a political incident — Guren-sama and I both remember all too clearly the last time someone threatened members of our family, so even though Mitsuki has chosen to follow her vocation in Fourth, we've been watching this matter from afar with caution and curiosity."

“No wonder they gave her to Ukitake-dono to look after, then,” Ryuusei reflected. “Another political incident involving the Kuchiki would be better avoided — no disrespect to our neighbours, of course.”

“None taken. We’d all like to avoid such a thing,” Shirogane assured him. “Houjou, I’d be grateful if you would speak to Ukitake on our behalf. It would put everyone in District Six’s minds at rest — Teitou-dono’s among the others — to know that she was recuperating well.”

“Consider it done,” Enishi agreed cheerfully. “I guess she’s quite bored, not having anything particular to do, so she’d probably welcome visit from kin.”

“Is there any other business anyone would like to raise, whilst we still have a few moments?” Souja glanced towards the window, taking in the position of the sun in the sky. “We’ve spent most of this morning discussing Seireitei security, for which I apologise.”

“It was an important matter, and it needed to be done,” Shiketsu assured him. “I’ll ask Father about the *Senkaimon* again, too, though I can’t imagine it’ll be any use.”

“I think we’ve all got enough to think on for one meeting,” Aoi reflected. “Reorganising patrols to cover grey areas and blind spots is going to take a lot of administrative shuffling on all our parts — I vote we leave it there for today and come to any other issues afresh next time. Anything vital we can take to our Captains — they’re meeting quite regularly too, lately, so some kind of cohesion should be possible.”

“Meeting, but whether they’re resolving anything, I don’t know,” Sora grimaced expressively. “Sh... Kyouraku-taichou won’t tell me much about what goes on at their meetings, but I got the impression the last one was a bit of a heated affair.”

“Father was a little ruffled when he got back to Seventh,” Souja agreed pensively. “He doesn’t usually let that happen, not outwardly, but I got the impression there’d been some kind of disagreement about... something.”

“We shouldn’t be discussing hearsay about the Captains in our meeting,” Ryuusei said reprovingly, and Sora snorted, sending her brother a weary glance.

“Oniisama, this isn’t gossip or hearsay but something that’s going to affect us at some point or another down the line,” she said bluntly.

“Besides, for Shunsui not to tell me about it, it means that it was a big deal and he’s bothered by it. Whatever came up in that meeting, it’s probably something not good. We ought to be prepared for it, whatever it turns out to be.”

“Sora, referring to your Captain in such an informal way in the privacy of your division barracks might be permissible, but in a Vice Captain’s meeting, it is utterly unacceptable,” Ryuusei glowered back at her, and Sora stuck out her tongue, forcing Souja to stifle a smile at the brother-sister squabbling.

“*My Captain* doesn’t mind my calling him that when I’m on or off duty, and *my Captain* has more authority to tell me what to do than you do, so shut up,” she returned neatly. “I’m here representing Eighth Division, remember? In these meetings I’m not a member of the Shiba Clan or your subordinate, so don’t treat me as if I am.”

She got to her feet, casting Enishi a glance.

“I’m heading back,” she said unnecessarily. “I’ll walk with you to Eleventh, though, since I want to ask Ikata some more stuff about his abducted people for *Shunsui*,” she put emphasis on the name, and Souja saw Ryuusei bristle in annoyance.

“All right,” Enishi agreed, heaving his considerable bulk from his seat. “Two of us might be better than one, if you don’t mind the trek back afterwards.”

“I’ll just have to tidy the mess Shunsui’ll have made in the office, so I’m in no hurry,” Sora rolled her eyes. “Come on, let’s go. I’d rather take Ikata than another pile of mismatched supply documents. I swear he does it on purpose, just because he likes to hear me rant, rave and stomp about the office putting the place back together.”

Their voices trailed away as they left the room, heading down the corridor towards the main exit, and Souja too got to his feet, smoothing down his *hakamashita* with his hands. The palms were clammy, he realised with a jolt, giving away the nerves he had felt on taking the lead, yet despite the pressure, he was glad that he had spoken up.

“It’s unlike you to put yourself forward in this manner, Souja-dono,” Shirogane’s voice at his right elbow made him jump, swinging around in surprise, and the Sixth Division Vice Captain offered him a droll smile.

“I startled you, I’m sorry,” he apologised, and Souja shook his head hurriedly, embarrassment crossing his face.

“No, I was miles away for a moment,” he admitted, rubbing his brow awkwardly. “I’m sorry, Shirogane-dono — what were you saying?”

“I was just commenting on your usual reticence to step forward like this,” Shirogane gestured to the room, which little by little was emptying of shinigami. “This business with the lad’s abduction — what was his name, Kotetsu? — has really bothered you, hasn’t it?”

“Mm...” Souja’s lips thinned, and he nodded. “I suppose so. Father, too. There are a lot of things and I’m trying to make sense of them. It bothers me that everything’s happening like this at once. Common sense tells me that they can’t be connected, but at the same time, I feel they must be. Does that seem overly paranoid to you? The Endou are known for their persecution complexes, so perhaps I’m just listening a little too hard to my blood.”

“No... Ryuu and I have had similar conversations,” Shirogane admitted. “Nobody higher up seems to want to link them, but though they can’t be linked, at the same time, they must be. It’s very hard to put one’s finger on — but there’s something there all the same.”

He tilted his head slightly in consideration.

“Your man, Kotetsu — he doesn’t remember anything at all?”

“No, he says he can’t recall his time abducted. He thinks he was drugged,” Souja shook his head.

“He says he can’t, or he can’t?”

“He’s never shown himself as the kind to lie before, so if he says he can’t, I take him at his word,” Souja said carefully. “He was trained by Ukitake-taichou and the Thirteenth, and he doesn’t seem the kind to deceive. If he was an Endou by birth, perhaps it might be different, but he isn’t. He’s District.”

“Unfortunate,” Shirogane sighed. “Oh well. Perhaps with time he’ll recover some memory. There are incidences of suppressed recollections due to trauma — I know from my own past experiences that sometimes patchy memories are hard to piece together into something that makes sense.”

He ran his fingers through his dark hair, loosening the tie, and Souja saw once again the flicker of emotion deep within the other man’s grey eyes.

“If possible, I’d like to get through all of these investigations without any Clans being forced to mobilise in their own defence,” he

said at length. “When bad things stir in the Districts, Clans instinctively shift towards arming themselves against trouble. I don’t want that to happen this time. There are some good people in the Districts who have worked loyally for me and for my family for a long time and I’d rather we didn’t repay them with raids and routs into Outer Seireitei territory because we’re hunting down a few vigilante rebels too smart for their own good.”

“I agree,” Souja nodded. “My family have an especially bad reputation in that regard. Father and Grandfather have worked very hard to rebuild the trust the people of Seventh have in us — I’m sure it wouldn’t take much to destroy those fragile foundations and plunge Seventh back into war.”

“Whenever a world is at peace, it simply means war hasn’t started yet,” Shirogane said soberly, “and when at war, it means nobody’s found a path to peace. The two exist in uneasy balance with one another, that is all. Well, as an Endou, I imagine your understanding in this is greater than mine. My impressions of your family have improved greatly since your Father took hold of Seventh Squad and I have no ill will toward you, either. You are both reasoned, intelligent men who understand the need for delicacy and diplomacy and I believe Seireitei as a whole is moving in that direction. We need to — the balance of this world is stabilising, but if we are unstable, it will fall back once more to a precarious state. Hollow numbers have been increasing across parts of the Sixth, and it concerns me.”

“Hollows. Kidnappings. Murders.” Souja shivered, shaking his head as though to clear it of the sudden cloud that lingered there. “If Seireitei is under seige, Shirogane-dono, I intend to find out what from and how to stop it. You have my word on it — I won’t let us go backwards. As long as I’m heir to this Clan, I’ll keep the Endou moving forwards. If every Clan heir does the same, nobody and nothing can drag us back into war and rebellion. That’s what I believe — that’s why I want us to take the initiative and fight back before we’re really under threat. It’s important to me... there are enough people depending on me in this world and I don’t want to see them treated in the way Tenichi was — or in the way those poor healers were in the Spiritless Zone.”

“I see,” Shirogane’s expression became one of wry comprehension. “You stand back and absorb everything that goes on around you, and you rarely speak up or come to the fore — but it’s there, I see it now. The predator bird of the Endou — its spirit is in you just as sure as it was in your ancestors, isn’t it?”

“We are all birds of prey, Shirogane-dono,” Souja said philosophically. “The only question is who we are hunting, and whether or not we make a successful kill.”

He smiled, shrugging his shoulders.

“I’d rather not do any killing, if it can be avoided,” he added, “but I am an Endou, just as Father is.”

“So I see,” Shirogane agreed. “I have to admit, though, a cautious, patient hunter who sheathes his claws until they are truly necessary is a much preferable neighbour. You and I will both one day inherit our Clans — I am relieved to realise that when that time comes, I am unlikely to have to contend with border animosity of the level felt by other Kuchiki lords.”

“I’m sure we’re not suicidal enough to challenge the Kuchiki,” Souja said wryly, “but if it puts your heart at rest, Shirogane-dono, I hope for a peaceful incumbency too.”

Shirogane laughed, opening his mouth to respond, but instead he faltered, his brows twitching slightly as though trying to pinpoint something faint and indistinct in the Seireitei air. At his companion’s change of demeanour, Souja too glanced around him, realising with a jolt that what his sensitive colleague had detected was the distinctive spiritual pulse of a Hell butterfly, it’s drone like consciousness distorting the even air in the chamber concourse. As it materialised, Souja’s heart clenched slightly as he recognised the silverish wing tips and realised where the butterfly had come. Slowly he held out his hand and the insect fluttered slightly, before landing in a drunken, ungainly heap against his skin.

Shirogane arched an eyebrow.

“That must be an experimental model,” he observed acidly, “as I haven’t seen one with quite that shade of wing decoration before. If this is a new advance in Hell Butterfly technology you’re trialing though, Souja-dono, I advise you to encourage the researchers to work a little harder on its landing accuracy.”

He bowed his head to indicate their conversation was over, and, as he withdrew to attend to his own errands, Souja sighed, sinking back against the wall of the meeting hall and absently stretching out his index finger to stroke the butterfly’s fragile, velveteen body. The insect twitched slightly at his touch, almost as though it were a living creature aware of him and everything around him, as opposed to just a drone carrying a message in spiritual fragments from one place to another. Joumei had never been as skilled with Hell Butterflies as

Souja himself was, and the creature's raggedy wing tips told the Vice Captain that the insect's lifespan was probably almost at its limit.

It was probably trying to find me, since I wasn't in my office, and it wouldn't have been able to get into the meeting hall. It's not an official Hell Butterfly from anyone in the registered chain of command, and so it might've been waiting a while. Joumei's message must be important — but it's probably also something nobody else should overhear. I'm glad Shirogane-dono didn't linger. It might've been hard to explain my behaviour, if I suddenly became furtive and had to dash off.

He closed his eyes, opening himself to the dark insect's fluctuating consciousness as he tried to pick up the strands of Joumei's message.

“...Interesting research results... right away... Izumi found... possibility of... not in Seireitei.”

The butterfly gave one last flap of its wings before disintegrating into the ether, and Souja opened his eyes, chewing hard on his bottom lip as he tried to piece together the fragments into something coherent.

Izumi's found something, that much is obvious. Something to do with Tenichi and where he was held? Not in Seireitei... does Joumei mean Tenichi was taken outside of Seireitei, or is he trying to tell me something else?

He clenched and unclenched his fists in frustration.

Damn him for making me promise not to divulge this business to Father until things were more concrete. If I assume that Joumei's message relates to Aizen and that Izumi has found evidence of him being somewhere outside of Seireitei... a specific, identifiable location, then that is extremely significant information and keeping it to myself could be construed as neglecting my duty to the Gotei. If what Joumei's telling me is that Tenichi was held outside of Seireitei, then, again, it might lead to arrests and a halt in abductions once and for all. But... if what Joumei's saying is that Izumi's found evidence of both of those things — that Tenichi's abduction and Aizen are connected and he has proof... then not to act on it could prove a devastating mistake. I need to go to the Kitsune — as soon as humanly possible — and hear everything for myself. That means persuading Father to let me go there again... and he was reluctant enough about it the last time.

He began to walk slowly in the direction of the Seventh Division, sliding his fingers absently into his obi and gazing around him as he walked at the shinigami running this way and that bent on their own specific errand. Several of them saluted him, or bowed their heads, but although the mood in the air was a positive one, Souja knew that

it hid a deep undercurrent of uncertainty.

Just like in a storm, when everyone waits to see where the lightning will next hit.

He pressed his lips together grimly as he made up his mind.

If I ask Father about going to the Kitsune again, he'll demand to know why. Unless I tell him everything, he won't give me leave — but I promised Joumei and I must keep that promise for the sake of District Seven. I don't have anything like conclusive evidence, and I can't start jumping to conclusions, not about something like this. No, that won't do. It will get Tenichi into trouble too — and there might be no occasion for that, since I find it hard to believe him to be the kind of officer who plots betrayal. No, I need more than I have and that means going to the Kitsune. And that means...

He paused outside Seventh Division's main gate, gazing up at the hunting bird insignia that glared down at him with austere, reproving eyes. For a moment he imagined the bird was his father's hawk, its talons gleaming and its expression without mercy, and he swallowed hard, trying to quell the deep sense of unease that lurked in the pit of his stomach.

And that means disobeying Father, and hoping that, when all is put to rest, he'll forgive me.

“So what exactly is this about, Kirio-chan?”

Shikiki ran her finger along the long row of hooks that flanked the main entrance of the Fourth Division barracks, selecting her cloak and pulling it down with a sigh. Wrapping it carefully around her substantial frame, she knotted the sash at the waist, casting her companion a questioning look.

“Things at Fourth are pretty busy at the moment, you know — Taichou only spared me because you said it was something important. Is Juu-nii being stupid with his fevers again? He was pretty bad the day that Mitsuki-dono and the others came back from Rukongai, but in most cases locking him in Ugendou and making him rest does the trick better than most of the remedies and spells I know. He pushes himself too hard as a rule — and the only cure for that is a spell of taking it easy. Taichou would say the same.”

“No, it's not to do with the Captain,” Kirio hid a smile, shaking her head. “I'm sorry, Shiki-chan. Am I dragging you away from a patient? I don't want to do that. I didn't like to explain all the details to Unohana-taichou, because I wasn't sure she'd understand. I don't

know if I do, not completely — but I still think it's important you come."

"That was even more cryptic than what you said before," Shikiki sighed, rolling her expressive eyes skywards. "As it happens, Aomori-san is sleeping right now, and there are healers better than me for tending to her now that she's beginning to mend. I'm limited in my natural healing skills, so Taichou's relieved me of my duties there and shifted me over to some lighter ones instead. Otherwise I wouldn't be able to take a break like this."

"I suppose not," Kirio agreed, falling into step with her friend as they crossed the courtyard of the Fourth Division towards the main gate that led to the central thoroughfare. Members from the Third and Fifth Divisions were milling around outside as the afternoon patrol shifted to the evening ones, and both Shikiki and Kirio acknowledged the officers with a nod as they passed through into the main street. "I hope Unohana-Taichou never finds out that I had a reason other than healing for calling you out, though."

"Let's both hope that's the case," Shikiki said with feeling. "Well? We're outside now, so you can tell me. Where are we going, and why?"

"Don't be mad with me," Kirio looked apprehensive, glancing down at the cobbles and kicking her sandalled feet absently against the smooth stones. "It's Tenichi's fault, really, not mine — I just agreed to help."

"Tenichi?" Shikiki's eyes widened in surprise. "Kotetsu Tenichi, you mean?"

"Yes," Kirio agreed, turning pensive eyes on her companion. "The truth is, Shiki-chan, he wanted to speak to you and I think it was quite urgent that he did. It seemed... very important to him, and though he wouldn't explain exactly why, I got the feeling that the sooner it happened, the better."

"Tenichi, huh," Shikiki pursed her lips. "We haven't talked a lot for a long time. Why all of a sudden now? He's quite all right, isn't he, after his abduction? I know a bit about it, because healers from the Fourth went to see him when he returned, but I thought he was unhurt?"

"He's fine, so like I said, it's not a healing errand," Kirio responded carefully. "Just, when I spoke to him, he really seemed as though something was on his mind. He'd mentioned it before, but now... I don't know what happened when he was taken prisoner, Shiki-chan,

but it's as though it's heightened all his concerns and made him all the more determined to put the facts together. He says he doesn't remember being abducted, and maybe he doesn't, but... something is on his mind, and he thinks you can settle it."

"I see," Shikiki's eyes shadowed, and Kirio shot her a guilty look.

"You look like you've guessed what it relates to already."

"Maybe," Shikiki sighed, running her fingers through her wavy rose-petal hair. "Tenichi and I haven't really talked for a long time. If he wants to ask me anything, it must relate to when we were children... which is a time I'd rather not remember too clearly, if I'm honest with you."

"It's about Daisuke-san," Kirio admitted. "He thinks you can tell him things about what happened after he and Ketsui left Seventh District... but if it's too much for you to do, I told him that he wasn't to upset you. If it's really bad, Shiki-chan... just, he looked so haunted, and..."

"Daisuke-nii, huh," Shikiki's eyes closed briefly, then she nodded, meeting Kirio's gaze. "That's why he sent you? He thought that, if he asked, I might not agree, but if it was you..."

"I was the mindless go-between, yes," Kirio agreed, chewing on her lip. "You're both my friends, but I never really understood why you didn't spend more time together when we were students. You never seemed hostile to one another, it was just as though there was a big gap between the two of you and... I didn't know what was needed to breach it."

"A big gap... yes, I suppose so," Shikiki grimaced. "Things left unspoken and unasked... probably things neither of us knew how to tackle, or if we even should. Things about Seventh... and everything that happened when we were children."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"We're going to his division, then?" she asked, and Kirio shook her head.

"Tenichi doesn't want to discuss anything about this stuff so near to his Captain, being that Seventh is Endou land," she responded. "He's going to meet us outside the archive. He's not allowed to wander far by himself at the moment, but since the library's such open space, he thinks he should be allowed to go there. Kikyue-dono has him on light duties until he's cleared for full action again, so he volunteered to go do some mundane paperwork for her there this evening, and that's

where we'll meet him. Security is tighter everywhere since his abduction, so it'll probably be all right."

"Mm," Shikiki chewed on her lip, but made no demur, and Kirio shot her another quizzical look.

"Is it really all right?"

"No, not entirely," Shikiki admitted, "but I suppose that I knew he'd have questions about things one day. I didn't know when, and I hoped that they'd never come, but I don't think I can refuse to answer them, Kirio-chan. Dai-nii was someone who connected Tenichi and Ketsui and I when we were young. We all loved him, but I'm the only one who knows... everything that happened. If anyone is going to tell him, it has to be me. Even if I don't like it, Dai-nii was Tenichi's father. I can't not talk to someone about their father, not when there's nobody else."

"I suppose that's true," Kirio's eyes softened. "You and I are different from Tenichi in that we've never had biological family to worry about us. Daisuke-san did worry about his family, though, to the point he sent them into exile to save their lives. I understand why Tenichi wants to find things out, I just don't want you to be upset by dragging up ancient past."

"My family are Juu-nii's, now, just like yours are the people who took you in," Shikiki said matter-of-factly. "You're right, though. It is different for Tenichi and Ketsui."

"Kirio!"

As they reached the library, Tenichi was already waiting for them, and he hurried across the stone slabs towards them, pausing a short distance away and bowing his head towards Shikiki in a mixed gesture of apology and gratitude.

"Shikiki... I wasn't sure you'd come and humour my selfish demands, but I'm happy that you did."

"Kirio says you want to ask me things about the past," Shikiki said gravely. "I don't like it, Tenichi-kun, and I don't know that you will, either. Nothing I can tell you about your family is good or happy, and once it's said, it can't be unsaid. If you really want to know, I'll tell you — but I don't really want to, and I'm not sure you want to hear it."

"I need to hear it. All of it. Everything that you know, about Father after Mother took Ketsui and I to Eighth," Tenichi replied grimly. "I've always wondered, but now... I need to know. I need to know what I

never knew for sure. You were with him, weren't you, when he died? He cared for you, so..."

"I wasn't with him when he died," Shikiki shook her head abruptly.

"But I thought..."

"I was with him when the village was burned down, and he was taken by the shinigami," Shikiki's voice shook slightly, and she let out a little sigh, tears glistening in her aqua eyes. "He told me to wait for him, and that he'd come back for me. He didn't. He couldn't. The next time I saw him, he was dead."

"Shiki-chan..." Kirio rested her hand on her friend's arm, then cast Tenichi a glance.

"Does this need to happen now?" she asked softly. "Shiki-chan's been through a lot of stress lately, with everything at Fourth. I know you want to know about Daisuke-san, and I promised to help, but if it's going to upset Shikiki to talk about it..."

"I'm sorry, Shikiki," Tenichi looked apologetic. "I need to know, though. It has to be now."

He glanced at his hands.

"When I was in Seventh... after I was let go by whoever had me hostage, I found... some sign of Father," he murmured. "I can't explain it, but it was as though I knew he'd been there, somehow. It made me remember... all kinds of things, and I wanted to know exactly what happened. For a brief instant I thought I'd found him... but maybe I was misleading myself. Shikiki knows... I'm sure she does, all the things I don't know. Even if they're not good things, Shikiki, I want to know. If you can tell me, I want to know everything about the time you were my Father's ward."

"I wasn't Dai-nii's ward," Shikiki's voice was edged with a bitterness that Kirio had never heard before. "If I had been, I would've been sent with you and Irie-san to Eighth. I was kept behind because I didn't belong to Dai-nii. I belonged to... someone else. Someone who came back for me... when there was nobody else to come."

"Someone else?" Kirio's brows knitted together, and Shikiki frowned, glancing around her then taking both Tenichi and Kirio by the arm, leading them around the side of the library and down a narrow, twisting pathway towards a stretch of empty land that had once been part of the old Council compound but which had been abandoned and left to ruin when the new quarters had been built. She sank down onto a broken piece of wall, gesturing for her companions

to follow suit, and, exchanging glances, they did so, Kirio settling herself on a patch of worn grass and Tenichi perching on the stump of an old tree.

“I don’t talk about it, not here, and not ever, not now,” Shikiki spoke softly, and Kirio was aware of the sadness in her friend’s eyes. “He abandoned me, and I abandoned him — it was a long time ago, and I became part of Juu-nii’s family. I didn’t need to go back to what came before.”

“The someone else... was that... Keitarou-dono?” Tenichi asked apprehensively, and something in his eyes made Kirio’s heart clench in her chest.

“Aizen... Keitarou?” she whispered, and Shikiki nodded, putting a finger to her lips.

“Shh,” she cautioned. “Like I said, some connnections are better forgotten. I belong to Juu-nii’s family — I’m an Ukitake, and I have been since I was eight. Anything else doesn’t matter — most people here don’t even know.”

“I remember, vaguely,” Tenichi admitted, gazing at his hands. “Sometimes, when Keitarou-dono visited Father, and you’d be there... but I’d forgotten that you were his and not Father’s responsibility. You spent so much time with us, but he would come and go, like a ghost, back and forth to his work with the Endou.”

“Mm,” Shikiki twisted her fingers together. “I loved Dai-nii a lot, Tenichi. I really did. I loved Kei-nii... Keitarou-san, too. He saved me from being killed by the shinigami and the Hollows, and protected me in a place where children with spirit power were being slaughtered. I didn’t know, then, all the ins and outs or what he would go on to do. When he hurt Juu-nii, I realised I couldn’t forgive him for that. I don’t suppose he forgave me, either, because I chose to go with Juu-nii and sever our relationship. But before that, I was with him. Between when the village burned and when Juu-nii’s family adopted me, I was always with Kei-nii.”

“And Daisuke-san?” Kirio asked quietly. Shikiki shook her head.

“The shinigami took him,” she said simply. “They took him, and the next I saw him, he was dead. Kei-nii... Keitarou went to rescue him, but he couldn’t. Dai-nii’s body was frozen, as though he’d been attacked by ice. Kei-nii wanted me to help bring him back, but I couldn’t. He was already dead — his spirit was gone, and I couldn’t do anything about it. All I could do was mend the damage on his body, and Kei-nii buried him.”

“In District Seven?” Tenichi’s voice became choked with emotion, and Shikiki nodded.

“In forestland, where there was enough shelter to hide us while he dug a proper grave,” she agreed sadly. “I’m sorry, Tenichi. I couldn’t save your father, even though I wanted to. Keitarou couldn’t, either. He believed he could, and went to do it, but what he went to face was worse than he predicted. I don’t know what they did to him... to Dai-nii... but his body... was covered in wounds.”

“And frozen by the blade of an ice powered sword,” Tenichi muttered. Shikiki started, staring at him for a moment. Then she nodded.

“Yes,” she agreed. “How did you...”

“Shouichi-dono’s sword was an ice sword. I’ve heard Taichou talk about it,” Tenichi’s voice shook slightly, and Kirio could see the emotions swirling deep in her friend’s eyes. “You said he was taken by shinigami, didn’t you? I know the Endou hunted down the exiled Urahara, and killed them. I’d heard that Shouichi-dono was involved in ordering Father’s death, and I guess that was true. Only he really did do it himself, with his own blade, didn’t he?”

“Mm, I think so,” Shikiki’s tears began to fall now, trickling silently down her plump cheeks as she nodded her head. “It was so horrible... that I think... maybe when death came, Dai-nii... I think he accepted it. Kei-nii said that Dai-nii acted to protect him, but I don’t know what really happened. All I know was that Dai-nii was broken, and that Kei-nii shed tears for him. I never saw Keitarou cry about anything else, not ever — but when Dai-nii was buried, he cried a lot. Later, he told me he’d killed Shouichi-sama in revenge for Dai-nii. I didn’t really understand everything he said to me, but as I’ve got older, I’ve understood. He avenged Dai-nii, but it wasn’t enough to really assuage his hatred. He hated a lot of people, and hating them made him turn against Clans and blame them for the bad things in the world.”

“Aizen Keitarou is a wanted criminal who murdered lots of people, not just one Clansman who took the life of a family member,” Kirio said quietly. “Taichou’s always said that he’s not someone to be taken lightly — he’s dangerous, and whatever prompted him to act how he did, it doesn’t excuse the loss of life.”

“Wars bring losses of life, Kirio-chan,” Tenichi murmured, and Kirio shot him a sharp glance.

“Tenichi-kun?”

“I’m not justifying it,” Tenichi shook his head. “I’m just saying that Keitarou-dono isn’t the only one who’s killed people. People among the Gotei have taken lives, too. I know Taichou killed his cousin in a struggle for Clan power when he was younger, and I’ve heard stories about other people, too.”

“The only solution is to prevent war altogether,” Shikiki said firmly. “If there isn’t war, people don’t take sides and then they don’t have to die. Kirio, I know what you think about Keitarou is right, but like Tenichi, I also remember another side to him — a kind person who I adored and who protected me. That person was destroyed because of the evil that war brings to the world. The Endou waged war on skilled District folk and on underground Urahara, and so lots of people died. Kei-nii became someone beyond saving because of those events — he was broken and twisted up because of them.”

“Maybe so,” Kirio acknowledged, “but even so...”

“He buried my father with honour, though,” Tenichi whispered, bowing his head towards Shikiki, “and so did you. Thank you, Shikiki. I don’t blame you for not being able to save him... but I’m grateful for you doing what you could for him when nobody else was there to do it.”

“I loved him,” Shikiki wiped her eyes, offering Tenichi a wan smile. “An eight year old doesn’t understand politics, or who is truly good or bad. She only understands who’s loved her and shown her kindness. Of course I would do that for him — I would’ve done anything for him.”

She smoothed down the fabric of her *hakama*, then,

“I remember where he is, if you wanted me to show you,” she added softly. “I know the path, and I wouldn’t forget somewhere like that. Kei-nii marked the spot with a stone and he wrote something on it. I couldn’t read, then, so I don’t know what it was, but he said it was something that marked out how important a person Dai-nii was to him.”

“Tomo,” Tenichi’s words were too soft for Shikiki to hear, but Kirio picked them up, casting her friend a concerned look.

“Tenichi-kun...”

“If you wanted me to take you there, I could,” Shikiki continued simply. “If you did...”

“I’m not allowed to go back into District Seven,” Tenichi shook his head, cutting across her with a shrug. “Fukutaichou’s orders, because I

was dumped there. I appreciate it, Shikiki, but I think you've told me what I wanted to know. What happened and where he sleeps... those things are important. Right now I can't go there, and I won't disobey Fukutaichou's instructions because I've already caused them too much strife in being taken hostage in the first instance. But knowing... that makes a difference too."

"I see," Shikiki's features cleared, and she smiled. "That's why you wanted to interrogate me — because you can't go investigate for yourself."

"Yes," Tenichi agreed, though there was something clouded in his gaze that did nothing to dispel Kirio's sense of general unease. "I'm sorry to rake it all up for you, though. I don't suppose I realised how horrible it was for you, but it must've been..."

"The worst time was when the village was razed, and I was all alone," Shikiki shivered. "It seemed like forever before Kei-nii came for me. My whole life changed from that point... I don't suppose I'll ever forget those last months I spent in Seventh District. I've never really wanted to go back there, not in all the years since I've been grown up. It was my home a long time ago, but the good memories of it are tainted by those weeks in hiding, hunted by the Endou and threatened by Seimaru-sama and his people."

She rested a hand on Tenichi's shoulder.

"Dai-nii died so you didn't have to go through those things," she added softly. "If you want to honour him and his memory in the best way you can, Tenichi-kun, then keep moving forward. He'd be really proud, I think, to see how you and Ketsui have grown up and taken charge of your own lives."

"We became shinigami," Tenichi said sadly. "A shinigami killed him... I wonder if he'd understand."

"There are good shinigami and bad shinigami," Shikiki shrugged her shoulders. "I learned that when I met Juu-nii. You and Ketsui are good shinigami, and you help people by protecting them. Dai-nii would understand that, since he used to protect the people in the village as much as he could until it was too much for him to manage. He died protecting people he cared for — that's the legacy he'd want to pass to you. Whatever bad things Kei-nii did, I'm sure Dai-nii would just be happy knowing you survived and were able to grow up free and safe from persecution."

"I agree," Kirio nodded her head, casting her friend a smile. "I never met Daisuke-san, but I knew Irie-san and I'm sure Shikiki's

right.”

“We could have talked about this a long time ago,” Shikiki admitted, looking troubled. “At the Academy, or since then, but the time never seemed to be right. We used to play together as children so much, Tenichi-kun, and yet, when we began studying, although I knew who you were... it was as though there was a wall separating us. I didn’t want to be reminded of the past... and I guess I thought you didn’t either. I didn’t realise it was eating away at you so much — I’m sorry.”

“We both created that gap,” Tenichi said honestly. “I suppose neither of us wanted to be associated with the underground Urahara or with Keitarou-dono and his actions. We were still growing up when the Kuchiki boy was murdered, and yet when we began at the Academy, the Council were still actively hunting for Keitarou-dono and Eiraki-hime. If the people around us had known we had connections to him, we’d have been shunned. Not talking about it made the most sense... but since that was the past we shared, it made it harder to talk about anything at all.”

“True,” Shikiki let out her breath in a heavy sigh. “I’ve always regretted it a bit, though. Whether Kei-nii is still alive or not, or what he does... it hasn’t anything to do with us. We’re both squad shinigami with a job to do, and the past doesn’t have any bearing on that. As District shinigami, what’s more important is that we’re here, and able to do our bit. That’s changed since we were children, and we’ve been part of the change.”

“A lot of District children have conflicting roots,” Kirio pointed out. “I still don’t know what happened to my sister and brother, or whether they abandoned me on purpose. I don’t know if I’d rather they had died, because it would mean they hadn’t left me... or whether I want them to be alive, even though they chose to be alive without me.”

“Seireitei is still changing,” Tenichi got to his feet, turning his gaze towards the setting sun, and for a moment, Kirio could not make out his features. “It has to keep changing. Shikiki’s right. We’re part of that change and we have to keep faith with our roots as well as with our current place in this world. Being District shinigami is important... sticking up for the people who can’t fight their own fights is important. I think, at the very least, Father would understand that, even if he didn’t understand everything else.”

“You really don’t remember what happened during your abduction?” Kirio asked softly, and Tenichi turned to face her, a faint,

rueful smile on his lips.

“Fukutaichou told me not to bother about it, but to get back to my duties, and I will,” he said softly. “There are things I can’t quite resolve within myself, not yet, but I will. Don’t look worried about me, Kirio-chan. I’m all right.”

“Not knowing can be more damaging than remembering everything,” Shikiki agreed. “Tenichi-kun, I know that one of my squad-mates came to see you, and she said you seemed well — but it doesn’t mean the shock of what happened won’t hit you later on. If you feel that happening, don’t be afraid to come talk to someone at Fourth. Nobody will think the less of you for it. None of us know what you did or didn’t go through in the five or six days you weren’t accounted for, and it might take a while for your body and your mind to rationalise what right now it’s blocking from your recollections.”

“No, I think not remembering would be a safer option,” Tenichi said cryptically, shaking his head. “I’ll keep it in mind, Shikiki, but I don’t suppose I’ll need any further help. Really, I just wanted to know about Father. Now I do... maybe I can put that into its proper place in my mind and understand... a little more what he sacrificed for our sakes.”

The sun was setting gently over the rough ridged mountain that shielded Motonoyama, its deepening colours spreading and pooling across the fields and valleys like the steady, resolute flow of molten lava. There were no volcanoes as such within Seireitei, nor within Rukongai, so the imagery was lost on Katsura but, as he stepped carefully over the broken branches and red-spattered, bent blades of grass, he reflected on how much it resembled a lake of blood, dripping over the asymmetrical peaks onto the hapless settlements below.

Such a morbid line of thought was not his usual style, yet for some reason, now the sun was setting and the sounds of Motonoyama’s distant market had quieted for the night, he could not help but focus on the inescapable reality of death as it lay spreadeagled and crumpled on the ground before him.

The Hollow had been a violent one.

Katsura licked his lips, brushing the sweat from his brow and gazing down at the red-smeared features of one of the hapless shinigami, meeting the terrified, sightless gaze with a pensive one of his own. Until the encounter with Mitsuki, he had never really thought of the shinigami as victims with feelings and, perhaps,

families and friends of their own, but something about this broken, doll-like form made him imagine for the briefest instant that this lifeless creature was one of those that surrounded him — people without whom he could not imagine living his life.

Nobody had come yet to retrieve the body, which had surprised him. It had been a small patrol that day — just two agents, one of which had lost his head at the sight of the Hollow and had been knocked down straight away. The other had fought valiently for several minutes before finally managing to take the monster down. This second shinigami had taken a bloody, nasty injury, and had limped off the scene some time before, but, because no help had yet arrived, Katsura wondered whether he too had succumbed to his wounds before he could reach Inner Seireitei and healing support. Still, Katsura was not so naive as to believe that nobody in authority kept a check on which shinigami went where and their lack of return would surely soon be noticed now that night was falling. He did not have very long to achieve his goal — there was no time for sentimental ponderings about the people he had stalked and hunted down.

He knelt down beside the body of the first man. He had died on falling, taking a fatal blow which had sent him flying across the clearing, clattering head first into a tree and shattering his neck on impact. His uniform had caught on a few of the branches, leaving it a little torn and bloodied, but it was not saturated in red like that of the one who had limped away, and for this, Katsura was glad. Steeling himself for what he was about to do, he glanced around him for any sign of witnesses, then grasped the dead man around the wrists, concentrating his haphazard shunpo on lifting the corpse away from the more open field and into a dense thicket he had scouted out some hours before. Here he had hidden, spiritually downwind from the fighting shinigami who had been preoccupied with the threat the Hollow posed to Motonoyama and therefore not concerned with a random commoner lurking in the shadows. It had given him time to prepare the area for the quickest change over possible, and, among the dry leaf litter he had already scraped out a shallow grave, ready to roll the remains into when he had taken what he needed.

It took very little time at all to relieve the corpse of its *shihakushou* and even less time for Katsura to shed his own clothing. He donned the damaged black and white uniform, and then, quickly re-robing the now naked body in his ragged attire, he knelt at the shinigami's side, pressing his hands together in a brief prayer before putting his weight behind the man's body and giving him a hefty shove into the uneven ditch. The body fell into the opening with an ungainly thud, arms

sprawled out at odd angles, and Katsura swallowed his revulsion at the sight of the pale skin, shoving the leaves back over his victim in an attempt to cover the scene as well as possible. In his fervour to conceal the crime scene, however, energy sparked unbidden from his fingertips and he let out a faint exclamation of dismay, jerking back as a lick of strange blue flame seared across the leaves, immediately setting them alight. With a mixture of horror and disgust, Katsura stared as the unbidden energy spread from the leaf matter to the body itself, the limbs jerking and twitching slightly from the heat before curling and blackening against the earth.

Although Katsura had used spiritual energy before, never had he managed to school the power he knew he possessed into a recognisable spell. He had not bothered reading his father's texts nor had he paid particular attention to learning shinigami skills, disdaining them as tools of the enemy and determined to do things his own way as befitted a Rukongai rebel. Keitarou had laughed, but had not pushed him, and so, when he had destroyed the Hollow in the Spiritless Zone, he had massed *reiryoku* and attacked but not fired any specific spell. Here, though, in spiritually pure land and so close to Inner Seireitei, even the faintest hint of stray power had twisted itself into a strange, eerie kind of flame, lighting up the thicket as though it had been possessed by an angry ghost looking to take its revenge.

Katsura did not wait to see whether the fire burned the body completely away, nor did he stay to ensure the corpse's layer of covering leaves was replaced. His heart pounding suddenly in his chest, he got to his feet, fleeing the scene as fast as his legs would carry him. Though he knew that an outpouring of foreign spirit power would alert the shinigami to the presence of something suspicious, it was terror rather than self-preservation that drove him across the fields and the rocky stream that trickled at the foot of the old mountain path. Beyond this he could see the white walls of Inner Seireitei and, his hands clammy and his breath coming in short, uneven gasps, he stood and stared at it, knowing that he had come too far now not to enter, but certain he would be identified as a fraud the moment he tried to step through the gate. He fumbled for the gloves he always carried with him, pulling them hastily over the soot-charred fingers as if by doing so he could conceal the truth of his crime from himself as well as the eyes of the person he was going to see. Though he knew he shouldn't care, he did not want Mitsuki to know the gravity of what he had done.

Go and do what you need to do. Follow your conviction and see it through.

Koku's voice echoed suddenly in his head.

If you can't kill her, don't. You don't have to go there for that. Do what you think is right.
What I think is right.

Katsura clenched his fists, chewing down on his lip hard enough to taste blood.

Mitsuki.

He let out a heavy sigh, then gathered his resolution, hurrying up towards the guard on duty at the gate and schooling his features into a look of purpose.

"There's been an incident in the forest!" he exclaimed, grasping the startled guard by the shoulders and fixing him with an urgent look. "A hollow — we need a healer. We need the Fourth division!"

"A Hollow? Has it been killed?" The guard was immediately alert, and Katsura nodded.

"Yes, yes it has, but one man is down, and another injured badly. He sent me back, and I ran all the way, but I... I took a whack and I'm not all that steady myself. I hurried — one of my squad isn't doing so good. I don't know if he'll live, he was bleeding a whole lot and I don't know much about medical care, so he told me to run back here. Please, I need some help. It's not far from Motonoyama — what if another Hollow comes?"

"You're a mite bloody, and your *shihakushou*'s right torn up over the shoulder," the man on duty looked concerned, patting Katsura gingerly on the arm. "The Hollows have been real strange of late — slashing up people at the least excuse, and that's no joke. Two of my patrol took broken bones just last week, and now you say there's been another one, this close to Inner Seireitei? It's making a mockery of the whole organisation, I swear!"

He clapped a hand to his head, and Katsura realised that the man had completely fallen for his act, believing that the stranger who stood in front of him was simply a comrade from another patrol. Kurotsuchi had said that shinigami from different squads did not always mix, but even so, relief coursed through his veins as he registered the safety his anonymity had afforded him. The bloodstained *shihakushou* was genuine, therefore there was no reason to doubt his right to be there. Was it only shinigami arrogance that prevented an increased guard from being stationed here, or was it rather that those who tried to infiltrate Inner Seireitei didn't usually try to do so through the main gateway? He had also once heard Kurotsuchi grumbling about security methods implemented on the

underground drainage system, and absently he wondered whether the shinigami had forgone mainstream measures in order to cover the less obvious methods of infiltration.

"I'll raise an alert," the man promised. "You, go on to the Fourth and find a healer. From your uniform, you belong to the Tenth, right?"

"Uh, yes. Yes, I do," Katsura nodded quickly, hoping that was the right answer and not a trick, but the guard simply nodded, reaching for and brandishing his writing brush.

"You got your squad number on you?"

"My...?" Katsura faltered, blinking at the guard blankly. There was an uncomfortable pause, then the guard's hand shot out again, grasping the front of the *shihakushou* and pulling it towards him. Katsura tensed, half ready to flare another ghostly burst of spiritual energy in his own defence, but the guard laughed, offering him a reassuring grin.

"You're real shook up, huh?" he asked sympathetically, turning the fold of the fabric towards him and glancing at something stitched into the seam before making a note on his pad. "There, I got it. Shouda Mikisue... that you?"

"Sure is," Katsura managed a wan smile, his heart flip-flopping in his chest at the closeness of the call. "I'm sorry. I just keep seeing all the blood, and for a moment, my mind went blank. I never saw someone cut down like that before... someone I know... I guess it rattled me more than I thought."

"Ah, I can't blame you. It's never nice seeing a comrade struck out," the guard said sympathetically. "Honestly, you do look a little dazed and you're pale as a ghost. I've got your number down so your cleared to enter. I'll put a general alert out to the Fourth for your comrade — you can leave it to me to handle that. I'd go there yourself, though, when you've reported back to Hakubei-taichou."

"Thank you!" Katsura bowed his head, schooling his easygoing features into a grateful grin, then he stumbled into the central courtyard, blinking for a moment as he took in for the first time the heart of the shinigami homeland.

Tenth Division.

His brow wrinkled as he gazed around himself, moving slowly as he tried to absorb his surroundings more clearly. Kurotsuchi had not provided Keitarou with any kind of map or plan of this area, and

Keitarou himself had never been here, but with the entrance guard still within close sight, it would not do to appear as though he was visiting the place for the first time. The shinigami who had died had belonged to the Tenth division, whilst the healer he sought belonged to the Fourth. He knew the location of neither, but shrewdly assumed that the central entrance to Inner Seireitei would be located somewhere in the middle of the gathered barracks. That being the case, he presumed, running his gaze down what seemed to be identical openings to repeated rows of barracks and living quarters, where he was now was likely somewhere around the Sixth or Seventh Division. The sight of a Clan flag fluttering in the light breeze told him that his assumption had been right, for, beneath the ornate crest of what he realised must be the Kuchiki family were the distinct slashes of the number six. Casting a furtive glance back towards the main gate, he decided to choose the right hand path, ducking beneath the white flag with a deep-seated sense of unease.

Mitsuki said she was a Kuchiki. Her family are inside there. I wonder if she's told them about me... and if the rumours about the Kuchiki and Father are really true. Mother said that it was a Kuchiki who gave him the injury that even now causes him to limp. If they knew who I was... or why I was here... if they knew I'd put one of their kin in such danger...

He shivered, quickening his pace until he came to the carved entrance to the next division. He paused for a moment before this one, his eyes widening in dismay as he absorbed the beady, accusing eye of the wooden hawk glaring down at him from atop its proud perch. The number seven rested beneath its talons, like prey dragged in from hunting in the fields, and Katsura swallowed hard, knowing that if the Kuchiki land was dangerous, this area was even worse.

Mother's family. The Endou Clan... the family who kill first and ask questions later.

“Hey, you!”

A voice made him jump almost clean out of his skin, spinning around guiltily to meet the sharp gaze of a young woman of about Koku's age, and for a moment he stared at her in disbelief, stunned to silence by the familiar curve of her features and the shock of dark hair that had been regimentedly schooled back from her face into a tight braid. Eiraki was older now, and her vivid blue eyes were possessed by none of the current generation of young Endou, yet Katsura saw the resemblance nonetheless.

“Why are you lurking outside Seventh?” The woman glared at him suspiciously, her fingers brushing against the hilt of an intricately

gilted sword as she spoke. “Nobody has time to be loitering, and I’m sure your Captain didn’t send you to roam the streets of Inner Seireitei, especially not in such a dishevelled state.”

“No... no ma’am,” Katsura choked out hurriedly, taking a half-step back. “I was just... I had to...”

“Name and division?”

“Er... Shouda. Shouda Miki..sue. Tenth Division,” Katsura babbled out, lowering his head in a bow towards her. “I’m sorry, I was just...”

“Tenth, huh?” the woman clicked her tongue against her teeth, then, “well, Shouda, get on with you to your own barracks. If I catch you lingering around doing nothing again, I’ll be taking a report to your Captain myself and asking him to make sure you have adequate duties, since if you have the time to loiter, I’m sure he can put you to better use.”

“Yes, ma’am,” it was all Katsura could do not to salute under the piercing gaze, taking to his heels and hurrying off in the direction she indicated before she could call him back. Whilst it troubled him not at all if Shouda Mikisue was reported to Tenth Division for dereliction of duty, there was something in the woman’s eyes that reminded him all too strongly of Sakaki when she was determined about something, and he had no desire to find out whether this Endou kinswoman had the same penchant for gratuitous violence as his younger sister. *I’m off limits to Sakaki, but somehow I don’t suppose the ties of blood would work in that case.*

He turned the corner, slowing his pace slightly and letting his breath out in a rush as he saw the banner for the Tenth Division looming up ahead.

I swear, I wish I’d never come here. I wish Father hadn’t ever sent me — I’m in much greater danger of being discovered here than I was in Rukongai. Even if Mitsuki did talk about me, right here there are too many enemies and not enough means of escape. If I run into someone who knows the real Shouda Mikisue, I’m in trouble. But, having come this far... I’m still no closer to finding Mitsuki. She’s from the Fourth division. That’s the opposite direction. I was going to cut past Seventh and double back, but with that woman on duty, I daren’t show my face there again. Knowing my luck she’d frogmarch me to the Tenth and deliver me there personally, and that’s one place I can’t be seen. They’d know I wasn’t who I claimed to be, and the game would be up. How am I going to get to where I need to be, though? I have no idea how to navigate this place. Damn Kurotsuchi for being possessive about information! If he’d only left Father with a map...

He sighed, leaning up against the wall of one of the Tenth Division's barrack buildings.

I don't even know if I can find her in this place, with so many shinigami and so many different spiritual signals, but I don't see anything else for it. If I can't track the normal way, I'll have to do it the spiritual way. I might not be able to lock onto her thoughts directly, but if I can at least track down her general aura, it'll be a start. I only met her the once, but fortunately, once someone's spiritual fingerprint is locked into my senses, I don't usually forget it. Oh well. It's worth a try, anyway.

He closed his eyes, steadying his scattered thoughts and taking a deep breath. Carefully and cautiously he spread his senses out into the surrounding ether, flinching slightly as his sensitive awareness was bombarded by a flurry of competing signals from the nearby shinigami barracks. At first he could make no sense of anything, but then, creasing his brow in concentration, he forced the extraneous signals to the back of his mind, honing in on the faint yet familiar strain of the healer's gentle reiatsu. She was closer than he had expected, he realised with a jolt, his eyes snapping open.

She's not with the Fourth Division. She's not back behind me at all. She's ahead of me. Somewhere along this pathway... somewhere near here.

He frowned, confused.

Why? She's a healer. Surely she should be with the other healers?

He let out his breath in a rush, shrugging his shoulders in defeat. *Shinigami are strange, but at least it saves me a wasted ramble around the back passages of the shinigami's domain. If she's ahead of me, then I'll just keep walking, as far as I'm able to go. Until I know whether she's under particular armed guard or not, I can't plan my next move — but I hope she's not going to prove difficult to get to. I had anticipated more of the healer types, but if she's not with them, she might be with people who have proper fighting swords, and I'm not the best one to deal with that. Swords are Sakaki's department — and I don't know how reliable my spirit power might be if faced with several armed fighters.*

He turned his gaze to the path ahead, squinting slightly in the darkness to make out the shape of the further military buildings that still lay beyond.

I must find her, though, tonight if I possibly can. I can't waste any time, not with things the way they are. Koku might be right or he might be wrong — following my instinct might be good or it might be bad. But whichever way it is, I need to act now, while I still have my resolve.

22. A Life Too Precious

Chapter Twenty One — A Life Too Precious

The air was still that evening, the feeble night breeze brushing half-heartedly against the wisps of cloud that made the slither of a moon appear as a hazy silver slash in the darkening sky. The twinkle of the stars glittered reflectively on the surface of the water, as Mitsuki knelt beside the Thirteenth Division's koi pond, idly tracing her fingers through the cool liquid. Beneath, deep below the reeds where she could not see them, the pond's inhabitants had settled for the night, safe and secure in their stable, unchanging world, yet although Thirteenth itself was peaceful, Mitsuki was restless.

That morning she had been visited by Eriko, the Fourth Division's harried Vice Captain and, at the sight of her superior officer's haggard features and tired eyes, she had almost begged to be allowed to come back to her home squad, to do something to lessen the burden of work that weighed so heavily on her surviving comrades. It was not just the reduction in personnel that was a problem, she reasoned pensively now, eying her blurred reflection in the pond's surface. The people who had died had all been stationed away from Seireitei, so in theory the same number of healers were available as had been before the crisis in Rukongai. In reality, though, everything had changed. The rounds of autopsies, investigations and compiling of reports had taken its toll on the morale of what had always been a serene, peaceful section of the Gotei. Of the three survivors, she was the most fit and well, but with Yuuyugo still less than half reformed into its sealed blade, she knew there was little of purpose she could do to help out. Eriko had given her permission to rise if she felt well enough, but they had parted with the firm instruction that, until further notice, she was not to attempt any spiritual magic nor think to try releasing her sword under any circumstances whatsoever. Only when Mitsuki had made a solemn vow not to attempt to use her healing skills until Retsu had approved it had Eriko been content to leave her once more in the hands of the Thirteenth and so, although her boundaries had been somewhat lifted, she felt just as much a burden on Soul Society as she had before.

Not exactly what I came here to achieve, when I first chose to join the Fourth and be sent to Rukongai.

She sighed, getting to her feet and walking slowly along the bank of

the pond away from the long bamboo-plank walkway that led to the Captain's chambers. She had promised Juushirou not to leave Thirteenth's compound without first letting him or one of his senior officers know, on account of the reported abductions of other shinigami, but that did not mean she had to linger in the Captain's shadow, getting under his feet and distracting him from his duties. She was still getting used to the idea of Juushirou being a Captain, she reasoned ruefully, as she picked her way carefully through the dampish blades of grass towards the patch of trees that marked the boundary of the Thirteenth Division's designated land.

As the final division, and the afterthought in many ways, Juushirou and Enishi had managed to commandeer a fair spread of green land among their territory and so here, away from the bustling main street and the fluttering Clan banners, Mitsuki found a peace and calm that she thought she had left behind in the Spiritless Zone. It was not quite the coastal province where Juushirou had spent his childhood years, but it was a restful place and, as Mitsuki surveyed it, she realised it was one that reflected her old friend's love of tranquility and natural beauty. During the day, she was sure, the division members populated this place for practice exercises, but at this time only those who had been awarded night duty were still patrolling, and therefore she had the inner conclave to herself.

A sudden flicker of light across the pond followed by an unexpected shift in the air current made her pause, turning to glance around her for any sign of Naoko or one of the division's other shinigami coming to check on her. They took their responsibility for her safety seriously, from Juushirou down to the youngest recruit, and so she half expected to see a furtive junior lurking behind a tree, watching to ensure that no harm befell her. She could make out nothing, however, and she frowned, turning her gaze back towards the glimmering surface of the koi pond. Maybe it had been a fish, she mused idly to herself, taking a step towards the water and gazing down at the gleaming ripples that curved silently outwards towards the bank. Though this was shinigami land, it was shared by living creatures both above and beneath the surface, and she marvelled at how easily she had forgotten all of the natural sounds that, in the Spiritless Zone, had been largely absent.

In Seireitei, birds hunt, animals forage, fish swim. Insects buzz and swarm, and shinigami train with swords. There are so few living things in the Spiritless Zone other than the Pluses that I'm aware of every wingbeat or splash as though it were something foreign and strange.

Something moved out of the corner of her eye, but even as she turned, she knew that whatever it was was gone. Turning back to the water, she caught sight briefly of a face reflected in the water, and she

let out a little gasp, stepping backwards instinctively as though whatever she had seen was about to emerge from the koi pond itself. The hard wood of a tree's trunk prevented her from moving very far, however, and before she could process what she had seen, rough hands shot out of the branches, one grasping her firmly around the throat whilst the other clamped itself around her mouth, forcing it shut and preventing her from making any noise. Fear coursed through Mitsuki's jolted senses, and she was only vaguely aware of the soft thud of feet landing in the grass behind her. A brief swirl of spiritual energy prickled against her throat, followed by a muttered curse, then she was yanked back away from the water and deeper into the trees. As she struggled to free herself from her attacker, the wavering spirit power trickled across her worn senses, and a mixture of dismay and consternation flooded her heart as she realised where she had felt it before.

The man in Rukongai.

The hold at her throat tightened slightly, causing her to choke, and her kidnapper faltered, loosening his grasp ever so slightly as if to allow her room to breathe. She tried to bite him, but he had her well gagged, the rough fabric of his gloves pressing against her teeth, and there was the sudden sense of warm breath against her ear as he lowered his head to hers.

"I don't want to hurt you, but if you scream or call for help, there'll be a scene," he murmured, the voice barely above a whisper. "I'm sorry, Mitsuki-san. I didn't intend for this to happen, but I need your help. I think... I need more of it than you can probably give, and definitely more than I have the right to ask for."

Mitsuki's eyes darted upwards, trying to make out the outline of his form from her captive position, and she felt his body shift as though letting out a heavy sigh.

"I'll let you go if you promise not to make a fuss that summons your comrades," he whispered. "I know you believe shinigami have honour, so on that honour, Mitsuki-san, promise not to give me away. I don't have much time to talk with you — but it's vital that I do."

Mitsuki hesitated for a moment, then, slowly, she jerked her head in a nod, and at her gesture, she felt the other's body relax. The hand was pulled away from her mouth, allowing her to breath properly once more. Drawing clear air into her lungs, she shuffled around to face her assailant, anger and indignation in her grey eyes but, as she met his troubled gaze, her annoyance flew away, replaced by consternation and dismay.

Though his features were just as she remembered them, instead of peasant robes he was robed in battered *shihakushou*, torn and dirtied around the edges and with no weapon at his waist. The sight of him in shinigami uniform put the young healer a little on her guard, knowing it was wrong and yet, at the same time, realising how much more normal he appeared in this attire than when she had seen him dressed as the stray. The carefree way in which he had spoken to her in Rukongai was gone, however, and the eyes were almost black with apprehension, regret and guilt flickering in their depths. At her glance, he dropped down onto grass, lowering his head before her in a bow of apology.

“I shouldn’t have done that, I know,” he said softly. “You’re a Kuchiki and this is Inner Seireitei. For laying my hands on you, the penalty is probably death. I had to see you, though. I had to come here... and I didn’t know how else to get your attention. I didn’t know if you might sound an alarm... and I needed to talk to you.”

“What’s happened?” Mitsuki hurriedly gathered her wits, gazing down at him in confusion. “Why did you come here? You told me yourself you don’t like shinigami. If you’re so afraid of them, why venture into the depths of their territory like this... no, even more, why are you *dressed* like one? I don’t know how you got in here, but the chances of you getting out again unseen are...”

“I’ll take my chances,” the young man said bitterly. “They’re the best odds I have, so I’ll cling to them and make them work somehow.”

He glanced at his hands, covered as they were with dusty black gloves, and Mitsuki felt a sudden, overwhelming rush of compassion for the young man now huddled at her feet. Just as in the Spiritless Zone, she could sense the power emanating from him, yet it was fragmented and indecisive, and there was no attacking intent in his aura. On the contrary, she reflected, it was as though between that meeting and this, something had broken the youth’s spirit, making him appear as lost as one of the disorientated young Plus souls that had poured into the Spiritless Zone in quieter days.

The Spiritless Zone.

Her eyes narrowed, and she gazed at him anew.

“How did you even get here?” she asked suspiciously. “The last time I saw you, you were in Rukongai. You shouldn’t be able to get from there to here like that. It’s not easy even for registered shinigami — how could you follow me from there to here, with all the security measures Seireitei has in place? How do you have a *shihakushou*? Who

gave you that, and why?”

“I stole it,” Katsura admitted. “When you go where shinigami are, the only way to do that is to look like a shinigami looks. I wanted to come see you, Mitsuki — the means don’t matter, do they?”

“I think they do.”

“There are always loopholes,” the young man said vaguely, shrugging his shoulders, but there was a sudden defensiveness in his posture, and Mitsuki saw him fold his arms across his chest as if trying to hide the rents in the fabric. For a brief second she thought she caught sight of blood, but in the darkness it was hard to make out, and before she could mention it, the moment had gone. “That’s not important now. What is is...”

“No, you said it wasn’t important before, but it is. It is important,” Mitsuki cut across him, shaking her head. “You were there, now you’re here, and both times it’s me you’ve come to. What do you want from me, and why are you so interested in what I do?”

He did not answer, uncertainty and indecision glittering in his gaze, and Mitsuki sighed, the tension rushing out of her body at his obvious disconcertion. Despite herself, she reached out an arm, resting her fingers gently beneath his chin as she urged him to raise his gaze to hers.

“Tell me?” she asked softly. “I don’t know why you chose me to flee to, when you wouldn’t even tell me your name before, but...”

“Katsura,” Katsura raised his head, a troubled, half-frightened look on his young features. “My name is Katsura.”

He buried his face in his hands.

“I wasn’t going to tell you that,” he murmured. “I was going to lie... I was going to pretend... but I can’t. When you look at me like that, Mitsuki-san, I only want to tell the truth.”

“Why would you need to lie?” Mitsuki settled herself on the grass opposite him, laying her hand on his shoulder. “You saved my life. More, you came here to speak to me. Why would you come all this way specifically to tell me a lie? I don’t understand... and every word you say confuses me even more.”

“I shouldn’t tell you anything about me,” Katsura admitted miserably. “I shouldn’t, but I want you to trust me. There’s no reason why you should, but I thought, if I told you my name...”

He swallowed hard.

"I knew your name," he whispered. "You told it to me, not your comrades. I never saw them, not once, not until I came to save you from the Hollow. I lied to you then. It was you who told me your name, Mitsuki-san, that night we met by the river. I heard it, then, loud and clear. Ever since then, I've been thinking about it... about you... and what happened there."

"Thinking... about me?" Mitsuki jerked her hand back, staring at him in consternation. "Katsura-kun, I..."

"No," Katsura shook his head before she could put words into a sentence, holding up his hands. "It isn't like that. Everyone thinks it is, but it isn't. I just... when I saw you, with that girl, I didn't want anything bad to happen to you. When you fought the Hollow, you were thinking about them, weren't you? The villagers... you wanted to protect them. You were thinking about them and so you kept fighting, even though you couldn't do anything to stop the Hollow yourself. Before I knew it, I came to save you — I couldn't leave you to die with those thoughts left unanswered."

"My... thoughts?" Mitsuki's eyes became big with disbelief. "Are you telling me you read my mind? That's how you knew where to find me — you can read my thoughts?"

"I can't. Not now," Katsura shook his head, distress in his expression. "I don't know whether you believe me or whether you're thinking about calling the shinigami with swords to arrest me and interrogate me because I infiltrated shinigami space and I shouldn't be here. But then, then I did. I sensed how you felt about those people, Mitsuki-san. It's how I feel about them, too. It made me think... we were allies. We should be allies. And I knew... I didn't want anything bad to happen to you."

He clenched his fists together, twisting the black-cloaked fingers together in obvious agitation, and Mitsuki did not speak, allowing him time and space to put his thoughts together.

"I came here to warn you," he said at length, an earnest expression in his dark eyes. "You were supposed to die in the Spiritless Zone, and you didn't. Because of me, you didn't... but that was wrong."

"I was... supposed to die?" Mitsuki's eyes narrowed. "What do you mean, Katsura-kun? What do you know?"

"Someone was sent to kill you, and they failed," Katsura murmured, genuine pain in his eyes. "They were sent before, and they've been sent to try again. They'll come here, most likely, and try to end your life. They have no choice. If they fail, their own life is probably

forfeit.”

“I see,” Mitsuki’s mind was whirling, but somehow she kept calm, her gaze absorbing every inch of Katsura’s tense demeanour as she tried to process his words. “And how is it you know about this? In the Spiritless Zone, too, you seemed to know something was afoot. You came to my aid, but you didn’t want me to go to Hokutan, did you? You knew my comrades were in danger, and that I’d be in danger too, if I went there. I didn’t think of it at first, but, little by little, I’ve realised how odd that was. You knew they were going to be attacked, didn’t you? That’s why you warned me against going back.”

Katsura didn’t respond, and Mitsuki frowned, folding her hands in her lap.

“And this time, you’re warning me again,” she continued. “Why would you do that? We’re strangers — why go to so much risk to protect me? In the Spiritless Zone was one thing, but here... like this...”

“I don’t want you to be killed,” Katsura blurted out, his cheeks reddening at the bluntness of his admission, and Mitsuki stared at him, momentarily taken aback by his words. “That’s all, all right? I don’t want you to be killed. You shouldn’t be allowed to die. You care about the people over the border... someone like that... someone like that should never be attacked. It isn’t right!”

“None of my comrades deserved to be attacked either, you know,” Mitsuki said frankly, and Katsura winced, a troubled look crossing his face once more. He lowered his gaze, and Mitsuki had the sudden impression that her young companion’s presence in Rukongai had been far from coincidence.

“I didn’t meet them,” he said honestly, “so I don’t know. They’re nothing to do with me, so I wasn’t thinking of them. But I met you. I saw you help the little girl, and I know how much you wanted to help the people in that village. I... I admired that. Approved of it. So few people care about the lives of others... and shinigami in particular, they care even less.”

“Not the shinigami I know,” Mitsuki said matter-of-factly. “But you’re sidelining the point. If I’m to believe you came here to warn me, I need to understand why and how you know I’m still in danger.”

Katsura averted his gaze, and for a moment Mitsuki thought he would not reply. Then, at length, he reached out a hesitant hand to take her pale fingers in his.

“If anyone finds out I spoke to you like this, or at all, I am dead and so are you,” he said quietly. “I can’t answer your question, because if I do, it will put both of us in even more danger.”

“From what you’ve said, I’m already a target, and if it puts you in that much danger, you shouldn’t be here telling me these things,” Mitsuki pointed out matter-of-factly. “If you’ve come to me, Katsura-kun, it means you want me to know... to understand something, and you still haven’t told me what that something is. You know, don’t you, what really happened to the shinigami in Hokutan? You know that, and, knowing that my comrades and I were there too, you came to warn me, thinking that we might still be targets, even though we came back alive.”

“I didn’t kill anyone in Hokutan,” Katsura said softly, and Mitsuki snorted, grasping the young man by the shoulders and giving him a gentle shake.

“Of course you didn’t. You were with me, helping me against the Hollow, so how could you have been?” she scolded him, and Katsura’s eyes widened, staring at her as though seeing her for the first time. “If that’s why you’re so afraid, you needn’t be. I owe you my life, whatever and however you came to be in Rukongai when you did. If your warning tonight is true, maybe I owe you it again — but that’s no reason to hide. If you’re so afraid, why not come with me and talk to my allies? They would protect you, once they knew you’d helped me, and...”

“No!” Katsura pulled back, alarm glittering in his dark blue eyes. “No, you don’t understand. You don’t... I don’t belong here. If it got known... that I’d crossed over... that I’d told you anything...”

“Katsura-kun, how involved in this are you?” Mitsuki asked sharply, and Katsura sighed, looking suddenly weary.

“I would never hurt you,” he said soberly. “I give you my word, I never would. I didn’t save your life in order to end it, and I wouldn’t ever want to.”

“You’d risk your own life — more than once — for someone you barely know?” Mitsuki pressed, and Katsura reddened.

“It sounds crazy to me, too,” he admitted awkwardly. ‘I don’t really know how to explain it, except that when I’m around you, everything goes completely contrary to my expectations. I’m not in love with you!’ as Mitsuki arched an eyebrow, “it’s really not like that. If it was, maybe I’d understand it, but it... it isn’t. It’s more like...”

He sighed, turning to glance at the pond for a moment, then meeting her gaze with an earnest one of his own.

“It felt like saving your life was a good thing. An important thing for me to do,” he said at length. “I can’t put it into better words than that, I don’t think. I see a lot of people, and I travel a lot, Mitsuki-san. I see rich people and poor people. Happy people, sad people. Old people, young people — good and bad. But you... there’s something different in your aura. Something I touched against that night I saw you with the young girl. It felt as though you would know... how hard things are for ordinary people. I was surprised when I heard you were from one of the Clans. You really don’t seem like that to me at all.”

“I’m not sure I completely understand,” Mitsuki owned. “Something in my aura? Something you didn’t expect?”

“Yes,” Katsura agreed pensively. “I don’t really understand either, but nonetheless it was like that.”

He shrugged.

“I don’t know how shinigami use magic and things like that. I haven’t ever learned any of your tricks or spells, though sometimes I can do things with *reiryoku* and I know that I have it,” he added. “Sometimes it lets me see people through more than just their appearances. Some people I can connect to, and I can see what those people are really like deep down. I can’t read your thoughts now, Mitsuki-san, but I have read people’s minds before. I don’t know if it’s normal or if it isn’t — I don’t know enough people with spirit power to ask. Some folk are easy to see right through, but others, you can only catch a glimpse when their guard is down. When that happens, you see right to the core of who they are, and you... you understand things about them that maybe nobody else does. We’ve only just met, I know, and it may seem odd to you, but... when you were fighting the Hollow, I made that connection to you.”

“Almost like a healer would,” Mitsuki murmured, more than half to herself, and Katsura stared at her uncertainly.

“I’m not a healer. I can’t heal anything,” he said hurriedly, and Mitsuki smiled, shaking her head.

“No, I don’t suppose you can,” she agreed lightly, “but that empathy, that sense of reading someone’s character and connecting to them in a way you can’t explain, that’s how healers often are. It’s how we reach out to our patients... maybe that’s what you sensed when you and I met. Maybe it was, I don’t know, a hint of a kindred spirit — someone with a different kind of empathy, but a common

understanding nonetheless.”

“Healers... can do that?” Katsura had suddenly gone very white, his eyes huge in his face. “Healers... like the people who died... they can feel like that... think like that?”

“Yes,” Mitsuki agreed soberly. “We’re trained to help others, even if — as it sometimes does — it costs us our lives. We can’t be afraid to go into dangerous places, Katsura-kun. We’re shinigami, and we’re meant to face risks if there are people who need our help. You don’t need to look like that. They were friends of mine and I miss them horribly, but I also know that when they were fighting that Hollow, they believed in giving their all. Saving the villagers was important to all of us — with your help, we kept them safe from harm.”

“Mm,” Katsura chewed on his lip, then, “I need to go. I’ve been here too long as it is, and all these things you’re saying... I’m not sure I ought to hear them.”

“Why not?” Mitsuki was startled. “I thought you wanted to talk about your spirit power... even come to understand it?”

“Perhaps some things are better left alone,” Katsura sighed. “I didn’t come here because of that, anyway. I truly don’t want you to get hurt, and so I took this risk. In return, please, trust me. There are people who can hide in unseen places and witness things they’re not meant to see. If you don’t listen to me, someone really will come to kill you — and they might hurt others at the same time. People dear to you... I don’t know where it might end.”

“People who can hide in unseen places?” Mitsuki echoed, and Katsura nodded.

“Maybe even now,” he admitted uneasily, glancing around him as though expecting someone to emerge from the shadows to strike him dead there and then. “People who wouldn’t hesitate to kill both of us, if they knew we’d ever talked.”

Mitsuki was silent for a moment, then she fixed Katsura with a quizzical glance.

“Was it you who was sent to kill me, Katsura-kun?” she asked directly, and Katsura flinched, a stricken look crossing his dark eyes. Mitsuki sighed, slowly nodding her head at this obvious confirmation of her suspicions.

“It was,” she murmured, more to herself than to him. “In Rukongai, I was meant to die, but you interfered and someone got cross. Someone threatened you... someone backed you into a corner and

forced you to come here, didn't they? Someone told you to kill me, else... else what? What will happen to you if I don't die, Katsura-kun?"

Katsura did not answer, and Mitsuki reached out to take her hand in his.

"I'm not afraid of you," she said softly. "You didn't come here to hurt me — if you had that intent, I would be able to read it from your aura the same way you read mine, but I don't. You aren't a bad person. I don't know how you got messed up in this, or who you're so afraid of, but if you let me help you..."

"You can't help me, not like that," Katsura shook his head firmly, getting to his feet and pulling away from her grasp, eying her sadly.

"I told you my name so you'd think me your ally," he added, "but I'm not an ally of your friends. I can't trust them, and so I only came to speak to you. I told you, I didn't come to hurt you. I came to warn you. Please, stop the shinigami from looking for me. If they come after me, I'll be killed — whether by them or by others. The best thing you can do for me is let me alone. Let me slip back into the shadows and vanish, as though I never existed at all. If you do that, then you'll have repaid me for your life by protecting mine. That's all I ask from you — please, stop your friends from looking for me."

"But..."

"If you really want to help me, and want to keep yourself and your comrades safe, tell them to look for the one who should be dead but isn't," Katsura seemed to make up his mind, a flare of resolution briefly illuminating his troubled gaze before fading and disappearing like flames to ash. "Tell them to look for the shinigami who cheated death — tell them to find him, and leave me alone. I'm just the messenger — *he's* the one you should beware. I won't ever hurt you, Mitsuki-san — but dead people have no souls, and there's no telling what they might do."

"I beg your pardon?" Mitsuki blinked. "One who's dead? Dead how? I don't... explain, what do you mean?"

"I've already said too much," Katsura glanced around him uneasily again. "This is shinigami ground. It's too dangerous."

"Katsura-kun..."

"Goodbye, Mitsuki-san," Katsura cut across her words, bowing his head solemnly before her. Then, as soon as he had arrived, he was gone, leaving only the faintest hum of reiatsu in the surrounding ether

to tell that his visit had not been a dream or an illusion.

“Katsura... kun,” Mitsuki ran her fingers over the bent blades of grass where moments earlier he had been, biting her lip in consternation.

Juushirou wasn't able to find any record of you in the criminal courts in Seireitei, but what else could you be but an escaped felon if someone is able to blackmail you and back you into a corner like this? I don't know who these shadows are — these others who are always watching, and I don't know whether my life is really in any danger. You believed it was, though, and even though we barely know each other, you came all the way here to warn me. I'm proof that not all empathes are born within the Unohana Clan. Maybe it's even more widespread — further proof about how little we know regarding what District-born children can do. If you had been Clan born, you would've been guided and trained — but you aren't, and so your power is left to fend for itself, and so, it seems, are you. Because of that, you've got mixed up in something dangerous... yet even if you were the one sent to harm me, I can't see you as a killer.

Slowly she got to her feet, pulling her cloak more tightly around her shoulders as she made her way towards the barracks' building.

Again, I was completely vulnerable in your company. You could've killed me in Rukongai, and again tonight, but you didn't even try. I don't know if the name you gave me is your true one, but I do believe you when you say you don't want to hurt me. I'm not the one who really needs helping, Katsura-kun. You came to me today because you need my help. For my life, I owe you that much. Whatever happened in Rukongai, you were with me when my comrades were killed. Even if you did know about it — and maybe you did — you saved Seri and I, you didn't kill us. I don't want you to lose your life because you protected ours.

She frowned, her brows knitting together thoughtfully.

I might not have sensed killing intent from you tonight, but I did sense genuine fear. You've trusted me with information, and I have to work out the best way to use that information. Firstly, though, I need to make sure that Seireitei stop their search for you. If you really do know what happened to the healers in Hokutan, then I need to convince you that the shinigami aren't your enemy. To do that, I have to prove they won't hurt you.

She rested her hand against the barracks door, glancing up briefly at the thin sliver of silver moon. It reminded her of a curved sword blade, she reflected absently, an apt symbol to hang high over shinigami headquarters.

You're not the only one uneasy in the heart of this place, either. I belong with the people of Rukongai, and maybe, so do you. Maybe that's what you meant when you said we should be allies.

She sighed, pushing open the door.

In that case, the first thing I can do is try and get to the bottom of your last, cryptic message. I don't know what you meant when you talked about a shinigami who cheated death, but obviously you felt it was important. I haven't been here, but maybe others who have been will know more what that means. I'll have to ask Juushirou... if I can work out a way to do so without alerting more suspicions. In any case, if it's a way I can make myself useful while my sword is still recovering, then so be it. Whatever it is, I'm sure it's important, or you wouldn't have come here to risk telling me, Katsura-kun. You wanted me to trust you... so I'll trust you. I'll look into it, and see if I can't find justice for my squad mates at the same time.

He could no longer sense her presence.

From his hiding place, curled up tight among the thick, covering branches of his namesake tree, Katsura let his breath out in a long, shaky sigh, glancing ruefully at his still-trembling fingers as he acknowledged to himself how frightened he had been so close to the shinigami barracks. It would have been very easy, he reflected, for her to have alerted her comrades and summoned them to capture him, but she had not done so. She had listened, and once more, spoken to him with gentle kindness and understanding.

What she had said had troubled him, and he sank back against the trunk, pulling the gloves from his hands and gazing down at his pale fingers, chewing on his lip as he imagined them covered in blood. *I said I wasn't going to become a murderer by killing those who didn't deserve it, but maybe I already did. I didn't know Mitsuki's friends, but if they're as she said, maybe... it was wrong.*

He closed his eyes, clenching his fists together and fighting to control the swirl of confusion that rose inside him at the thought.

I can't focus on this now. I've taken enough risks for one night. Questioning Father is not a sensible course of action for anyone to take, least of all me. Bad enough I disobeyed his orders a second time. Koku said to leave it to him, but I never saw Father so angry. Persuasive as Koku is where he's concerned, I'm not sure even he can soften Father's judgement this time.

He glanced down, his sharp gaze taking in the shadowy figures of this shinigami and that rushing across the cobbles to take this message or carry out that duty. They seemed ill at ease, he mused, often

glancing over their shoulders as if sensing his gaze on them, and for a terrible moment Katsura thought that his suppressed *reiryoku* had been detected and that they were looking for him. The longer he perched there, however, without a single soul looking his way, the more his fear subsided, and he began to consider his next course of action, aware that the dawn could only be a few hours away. He didn't know whether his crime in the forest had been discovered yet, or whether the body he had inadvertently burned would be identifiable as the real Shouda Mikisue, but he knew that lingering too long in enemy territory was a bad idea.

If they see me, they'll catch me. If they do that, then there'll be no help from the other side of the barrier. Father really will discard me, then. Maybe he will anyway, but at least, if I get back to Rukongai unscathed and unseen, maybe, if I bow before him enough, he'll let me off the slitting of Mitsuki's throat.

His gaze flitted back towards the boundary that separated Thirteenth Division from the general concourse, and he sighed.

In other circumstances, I think we'd be friends. I think... I'd like us to be friends. More than that, maybe. I don't know what this feeling is, but when I'm near her, I feel as though I've met someone who'd understand how I see things. Perhaps she'd even be able to explain to me why this energy prickles from my fingers sometimes without me really intending it to. I'm sure she would know why that body caught fire, when all I intended to do was cover it — but that's a question I could never ask her. Bad enough I told her my name. Koku told me to do what I believed was right, but... I didn't intend to go that far.

He shivered as a chill wind blew through the compound, teasing the wisps of dark hair away from his face.

If she chooses to betray me, then it's over. If she chooses to tell those allies of hers that I was here — or that I still am — then I might not even survive the night. I've put my life completely in her hands, this time. Also, if Father knew I'd told her something about Kurotsuchi, he'd be angry. Even if I told him it was Koku's idea, I'm sure he wouldn't go easy on me. It sounded so much more simple when Koku outlined it — but I'm not as good as he is when it comes to thinking out all the angles. Maybe Mitsuki will take my bait, transfer her interest to Kurotsuchi and away from me... but I can't help but think I've somehow made things more complicated by telling her what I did and how.

He reached for the branch above his head, pulling himself to his feet and gazing down at the ground below, wind whipping through his hair and the thin fabric of his clothing.

Enough worrying about that now, though. I need to leave here,

preferably before the sun rises. I'll go home and I'll follow Koku's plan through to the end. He said he'd take care of things there — and deal with getting Kurotsuchi out of my way — so all I have to do is go back and report that I didn't attack Mitsuki because it was too dangerous to get close with all the guards protecting her. I'll tell Father that they were investigating Kurotsuchi, just like Koku suggested. Even if it's not true at the moment, it will be, now I've sown the seeds. If I tell Father that I infiltrated Inner Seireitei without a single person taking a bit of notice of me, but that they were looking into reports of a former Onmitsukidou turning traitor, then surely it will distract him away from what happened in Rukongai. And if Seireitei catch Kurotsuchi..?

He smiled, a faint, humourless smile that twitched briefly at the corners of his mouth.

If they catch and kill a dead man, well, then it just returns normal order to the world. If a dead man dies because of this, so be it. We can move on, and Father will discard his puppet if he starts creating ripples. No, Koku's right. I can't undo what Seireitei already know about me, so distracting them with something more juicy is the only angle. I just hope... that Mitsuki doesn't tell anyone I was here tonight. I want to trust her... I need to trust her... but she's still a shinigami, and I guess we'll find out exactly how far I can have faith in one of

them.

—

The woodlands of District Seven were quiet as Souja made his way cautiously towards the usual Kitsune meeting place, pausing every few moments to scan the air for any sign of unfamiliar followers, or to listen for the sound of muffled footsteps that would tell him someone was on his path. All was silent, however, and, with the exception of the hunting owls flying high above his head, he was alone.

"I was starting to wonder whether you were planning to come at all."

The disembodied voice came suddenly from the darkness of the forest and, despite himself, Souja started, a rueful hand going to his chest to calm his pounding heart. He turned, seeing the shadows move slightly as a hooded, cowed figure made its presence known, Joumei's outline visible enough in the blackness for Souja to know where to head, but not so much that a person watching from distance might be able to track their path. He cast a careful glance around him, then crossed towards the trees, deliberately skirting away from Joumei's position before doubling back on himself and following the faint,

uneven hum of his friend's mutated reiatsu until he was standing beneath the branches of a large, gnarled pine tree.

"You Endou really need work in discretion, too," Joumei ducked out from behind the broad trunk, and Souja could see resignation in the silverish eyes. "Never mind. As it happens, there are no alien spirits abroad tonight. We've kept the area under very careful surveillance... but since you took that shinigami back with you, there has been no sign of foreign activity hereabouts."

"Perhaps we were jumping to paranoid conclusions, then," Souja reflected, following his companion deeper into the woodland towards the entrance to the Kitsune lair. "The Endou are good at that, even if they're not good at other things."

"No..." Joumei hesitated slightly, then sighed, pushing back the branches and vines that covered the entrance and sliding his body through the narrow gap, moving a few steps forward to allow Souja to do the same. "I wish we were, Souja-dono, but I'm afraid we're not. I sent you the message because it's important someone in a position of authority knows about it, and as soon as is humanly possible."

"Someone in authority, but not Father?" Souja questioned, as they headed below ground, this time avoiding the deep stairway that led to the funerary chamber and instead following a more even pathway towards the chambers which Joumei used as his own. Joumei reached up to knock back the hood of his cloak, shaking his head grimly.

"I'd rather report it to you first, if you don't mind," he said slowly. "I'm worried what might happen if Hirata-sama were to get involved. I think... it might be a bad thing for all concerned."

"Your message was broken up when I received it," Souja admitted. "I heard you say that Izumi had discovered something from beyond Seireitei — but more than that, I couldn't make out. Still, I decided it was important I come as soon as I finished my day's duties. Whatever you have to say, Joumei, I think it safer told face to face than through Hell Butterflies, especially if you don't want Father listening in."

"You didn't tell him you were coming, did you?" Joumei paused at the entrance to his private chamber, turning to fix his companion with thoughtful pale eyes, and Souja sighed, shaking his head.

"No," he admitted. "He'll be cross, if he finds out — or no, I'd better say when, because he will. Probably I'll go to him and tell him the truth myself, if I'm honest about it — once I know what truth he needs to be told. Am I right in thinking that Izumi's findings relate to Tenichi specifically — rather, to do with the samples she took when

he was here with you?"

"They do indeed," Joumei said grimly, pushing the door open with a shove, and ushering his companion within. A dim light cast the small, windowless space in a hazy glow, and Souja could make out the slight form of Joumei's sister leaning against the wall, waiting patiently for their arrival. As they entered, she raised her head, and from the consternation in her vivid silver eyes Souja felt a sense of deep unease wash over his heart.

"Well?" he asked softly. "What are we dealing with? Tell me what you know, both of you — whether it be good or bad, I need to hear all I can."

"That was the idea," Joumei pulled out the chamber's only makeshift stool, indicating for Souja to take it before squatting down on the cold floor, crossing his legs and leaning back against the wall. "Now we're here and quite alone, Souja-dono, I want to be frank with you. That shinigami of yours... watch him."

"Tenichi?" Souja's eyes became slits. "Explain?"

Izumi's gloved fingers twitched together in a series of fluttering movements, and Souja frowned, shaking his head in frustration.

"More slowly, please, Izumi-chan. I can't follow your signals as fluently as Joumei, and I want to understand clearly everything you've found."

Izumi frowned, but obediently repeated her gestures, this time more slowly and deliberately, and Souja made out the word 'Rukongai'. He chewed on his lip.

"Rukongai? Tenichi was taken there?"

"We think so," Joumei said gravely. "More than that, though. We — well, Izumi — thinks that he wasn't taken to the Spiritless Zone. The minerals she found on his clothing are not compatible with that area of land, nor with anything in Seireitei. There are two, maybe three deposits that only exist in the Rukon, but they are found in spiritually potent areas, as they show some level of exposure to *reiryoku*."

Izumi's fingers twitched again, and Joumei's lips pressed together.

"Continuous *reiryoku* exposure," he amended. "In other words, a place where people with spirit power have resided and probably for some duration."

"Outside of Seireitei?" Souja demanded, and Izumi lowered her

head solemnly.

“You’re completely sure?”

“As sure as we can be.” Joumei confirmed.

“But... have you been to Rukongai? Taken samples there? I don’t understand how you can be so precise.”

Izumi unfastened the tie of her cloak, pulling it back and retrieving a scroll from the inner folds, crossing the room towards Souja and holding it out to him with a formal bow. Hesitantly Souja took it, and, after glancing at his young companion, he gingerly unrolled the aging paper, smoothing it against his knees as he scanned the contents for any sign of clarity.

There was none. A list of figures and lines of complicated characters greeted his eyes, and he raised his gaze to Joumei’s helplessly.

“This is..?”

“Survey documentation from an Urahara expedition into Rukongai, approximately a hundred and fifty years ago,” Joumei said matter-of-factly. “We have no recent records from the Urahara archives, but certain documents from before the *Reidoku* incident got brought and stored here to allow us to continue a measure of research in secret. This particular document relates to mineral deposits found in specific zones of Rukongai. The minerals Izumi identified are only all present in one area that we can see. Bearing in mind that this data is old, there may be some inaccuracy, but... we believe it to be a region apart from the current Spiritless Zone and, from the *reishi* residue on the particles, a place where people with spirit power currently reside.”

“So Tenichi was taken to a part of Rukongai the Gotei thinks is empty,” Souja frowned, setting the scroll aside. “That’s a pretty big security oversight. I know land was evacuated when the Spiritless Zone was begun, but... my working memory doesn’t go back far enough to remember all the political wranglings over the Rukon before that. Could there be people living in those places still?”

“I think it’s almost certain they are,” Joumei said grimly. “Look, Souja-dono, I’ll cut to the point. Your shinigami, Tenichi, he’s an Urahara as sure as we are. You know it and so do I. He went missing and conveniently turned up here, near where we are. Izumi is sure there was another Urahara here, and the only one who’d still be interested in us is Urahara Keitarou. Tenichi is Daisuke-sama’s son, and Daisuke-sama was Keitarou’s right hand man. The story goes that

he martyred himself to save Keitarou's life. There are too many coincidences and the scientist in me dislikes their frequency. It's far more likely that there is no coincidence. We've no evidence to clearly prove it, but there were threads of foreign reiatsu on Tenichi's clothing, too. We don't have anyone to match them to, but there were Urahara fragments present in those samples. Izumi thinks it was the same person who was with Tenichi in the forest — in the location of Daisuke-sama's grave. The only people cognisant of that burial place, aside from us, are Urahara Keitarou and a District girl Tenichi went to school with. She's not an Urahara, which rules her out... and rules back in prime suspect number one."

"You think Tenichi wasn't abducted, don't you?" Souja's heart ran cold as his worst fears began to come into focus. "You think he's cooperating with Keitarou in some way because of this shared genetic past."

"I don't know," Joumei admitted. "The boy's answers to our questions... well, there wasn't a loophole in them, and it is possible all of this happened without his active knowledge. Nonetheless I think he was taken by Keitarou and for a purpose. Maybe it's a greater purpose than finding us... I don't know. I do remember, though, that Keitarou's *zanpakutou* has certain specific qualities of control..."

"You think he might have made a puppet out of Tenichi?" Souja asked sharply.

"If he had, you would probably have noticed certain symptoms by this point." Joumei glanced at Izumi for confirmation, who nodded her head decisively. "Tenichi has spirit power. Keitarou's sword would cause a reaction with Tenichi's natural spiritual defence system. Wearing spirit cuffs might have delayed it, but by this point you'd probably notice... has he been pale, lethargic, even coughing since he came back to Seireitei?"

"On the contrary, he's been fine," Souja let out a sigh of relief. "Then he probably hasn't been infected?"

"Probably not, but that might not be a good thing," Joumei warned. "I said his story had no loopholes, but it doesn't mean I entirely believed what he said. Izumi's test results only add weight to those suspicions. So, my advice is watch him. He may or may not know Keitarou is interested in him, but I suspect that he does, and more, that he's hiding more than he's told you. It may be that he's just frightened to admit the person who kidnapped him was someone he knew, in which case, time will probably bring the truth to the fore but... just in case it's not so simple... be careful, Souja. It might not

just be about finding and killing us. It might be about something far more, and we're simply one distraction in a much larger web."

"I understand, and I'll keep it in mind," Souja promised, getting to his feet. "I also want you to take care though, both of you. Whether you're the main target or a side fancy, your lives are precious and nobody wants you killed. I can see why you don't want me to tell Father, since he might act against Tenichi without any real grounds to do so — but..."

Izumi's fingers danced together briskly, and Souja paused, furrowing his brows.

"Wait... Izumi-chan, say that again. Did you... I must've misunderstood, but..."

Izumi repeated the gesture, and Souja's brow creased even more.

"Children?" he whispered, and Izumi nodded.

"It's highly likely that Keitarou has a child," Joumei said softly. "The reports go that when Eiraki-hime disappeared, she was already pregnant. That child would be about your age now, I think, maybe a little older. If it were a son, Souja-dono..."

He trailed off, and Souja swallowed hard.

"A son might be considered legitimate, mightn't they, in a claim for the Clan," he realised. "If they challenged me and won in witnessed combat, then they would be accepted without question in my place. Worse, they could challenge Father. I see, and I understand. I'll be on my guard, Joumei. Don't worry. And I won't bring Father into things, not till we know more. If you find out further information, though, you must bring it to me at once via whatever method you are able. If Keitarou is lurking in Rukongai, he almost certainly had a hand in the murders in the Spiritless Zone. I'd like to see him brought to justice... he's been free to cause suffering for far too long."

"In that we are completely agreed," Joumei said acidly. "I think it unwise that you come here again, whatever the provocation — instead, I will try and find a way to send a message to you that's less unstable than a Hell Butterfly. If you don't hear for a while, don't worry about us. We will find out all we can, and we will be in touch."

"Then I'll return and try and cover my absence as best I can," Souja decided. "I'll also keep close tabs on Tenichi, as much as I'm able being that he's in Kikyue's patrol. If he knows nothing about anything, then all should be well, but on the off chance he is hiding something, it's better that it comes to the fore before anyone gets hurt and before

it ruins both his career and his life.”

“I suppose we’ll see whether that’s possible,” Joumei reflected. “Travel back safely, Souja-dono. The night is quiet tonight, but those nights are always the ones that bring the biggest dangers.”

“I thought Taichou told you you weren’t to stray too far from the barracks, Mitsuki-chan,”

As Mitsuki pushed back the sliding door of the Thirteenth, Naoko was waiting for her, arms folded across her chest and a decidedly put out expression on her proud features. “I’ve been looking high and low for you, and no wonder I couldn’t find you! You might feel up to going for a walk, but...”

“I didn’t leave the grounds, Naoko-chan, I promise,” Mitsuki carefully fastened the latch behind her, turning to face her friend with a faint smile. “I’m sorry you were worried about me. Fukutaichou came to see me earlier, and she gave me leave to spread my wings a little — but I promised not to go outside of Thirteenth’s territory and I didn’t. Just, the koi ponds are so pretty and tranquil and, well, this isn’t my division. It’s a foreign place full of people I don’t really know, and I needed some space from that for a while.”

“Not everyone here is a stranger.” Naoko looked hurt, and Mitsuki sighed, linking her arm in her friend’s with a nod.

“I know, I didn’t mean you,” she said apologetically. “You and Juushirou and Houjou-kun have been kind to me and it isn’t as though there aren’t other familiar faces. I suppose what I meant was the atmosphere was foreign. You all belong here, but I don’t. It’s not my division, and I’m not really sure, yet, what being in a division in Seireitei means. I’m not used to it — that’s all. Juushirou told me how pretty the grounds here were, and it’s true.”

She cast the older girl a quizzical look.

“You said you were looking for me? Any reason why?”

“You have a visitor, from Sixth,” Naoko nodded, pursing her lips and eying her companion thoughtfully. “Mi-chan, were you really all alone out there? I came to the door because I thought I felt something on the breeze... and it wasn’t your reiatsu.”

“Who would have been there?” Mitsuki opened her eyes slightly in a show of surprise, inwardly feeling guilty at deceiving her friend. “I only know a handful of people here, and this is Thirteenth’s barracks. Nobody else would be coming here without your knowledge, surely?”

“No, that’s true...” Naoko agreed cautiously. “I’m not sure, maybe it’s nothing, but...”

She trailed off mid-sentence, loosing her arm from the other girl’s and moving to the door. Slowly she unfastened it, sliding it back and staring out for a moment into the darkness, then she sighed, shutting it again with a click.

“Maybe it’s my imagination,” she admitted at length. “We’re all so on edge lately, and I want to make sure you’re safe as well, you know. Perhaps I’m overthinking it, but I could’ve sworn...”

“There’s nobody there, Naoko-chan,” Mitsuki said softly, reaching out to take Naoko gently by the hands. “I came in by myself, and there was nobody else by the ponds when I left them. I would have seen them, wouldn’t I? Or I would’ve sensed them. My spirit power is recovering — I’m sure I’d have known if someone else was there.”

“That’s probably true,” Naoko acknowledged with a rueful smile. “I’m probably reading too much into nothing, then. Just, a short while ago when Taichou sent me out to look into something, Dokusou Houshi picked up a reiatsu I couldn’t quite place and nor could he. It was so faint I could barely pick it up, but it was definitely there. Tonight, I thought I sensed it again — but I don’t sense it now. You didn’t pick up on anything?”

“No,” Mitsuki looked thoughtful, feeling guilty for deceiving her friend but shaking her head all the same. “Meanwhile, you said I had a guest?”

“Oh! Oh, yes, you do,” Naoko nodded, thick braid of auburn hair falling over her shoulder. “It’s Kuchiki-kun... I mean, Ryuu-dono. He’s come on behalf of the Sixth Division and Sixth District’s Clan, I think, but... I imagine he asked to be the one to come with the message, since I think he’s been worried about you too.”

“It’s been a long time since I saw Ryuu,” Mitsuki’s eyes softened, and a smile twitched at her lips. “I’d like to see him very much. I know the Kuchiki didn’t want to make a political incident of my being involved in this, so they’ve kept away, but... I’m all right now, and they are family. People like Ryuu and Shirogane-senpai... no, I shouldn’t call him that, should I? Shirogane-*dono*, they’re dear to me beyond the ties of Clan. Will you take me to him, Naoko-chan? If he has news for me, I ought to hear it.”

“Of course. He’s in the Taichou’s office, and Taichou sent me to get you,” Naoko agreed. “Follow me. I’ll show you the way.”

Author's Note: IMPORTANT please read.

Hi all — it's been a little while. I've had exams, gomen nasai.

However, recently I've also had a bit of a crisis of conviction where *Bleach* as a whole is concerned. This story still has a few chapters to upload before we get into the unwritten abyss, but this week's manga chapter rather shook me from a fannish perspective, most specifically because of the MANNER in which a certain event was handled (not its happening, but the WAY it happened — if in fact, it happened as I think it must). It's made me wonder what else there is to come, and whether I really want to see it happen.

Consequently, I am in two minds about this story and whether to continue and try and finish it before worse things happen in canon, or whether to ditch it completely. What I really want to know is how many people are still reading/want me to continue?

If you are still reading, please review this chapter and tell me your thoughts. It is seriously in your hands. If there is enough interest, I shall do my best to continue regardless of what Kubo does — but I want to know that it's worth my doing so.

Thanks for reading and sorry for the sober tone.

places a marigold and flits out

23. Mitsuki's Guest

Chapter Twenty Two: Mitsuki's Guest

It was not a long walk from the main barracks to Juushirou's 'Ugendou', and, as Naoko raised her hand to knock on the door, she could hear the sound of low voices coming from within. Ryu was not a frequent visitor to Thirteenth, for his own conscientious attitude towards his squad and the frequent duties placed upon him made it difficult to pay house calls, but his friendship with the Thirteenth Division's upper members had not diminished any in the process and, as Naoko cast Mitsuki a sidelong glance, she knew that another glad reunion was about to take place on the other side of the door.

The young healer was still pale, but there was more colour in her cheeks now and secretly Naoko was glad that her friend had found the physical strength to rise from her bed and rejoin the general population. It was for this reason that she had not pressed the issue of the reiatsu too hard, not wanting Mitsuki to question her still recovering senses, but as they had walked across the long wooden bridge that led to their destination, Naoko had once more been sure that her friend had not been in the garden alone.

If someone was stalking her, though, and she knew nothing of it, better I don't frighten her. She's been through enough already... there's no need for her to go through more, not while she's recovering like this. Maybe later, maybe when she's less unsettled... but right now she looks better than she has done, and I don't want to change that.

She rapped on the wood sharply, waiting for Juushirou's familiar summons to call her in, then slid back the door, bowing her head towards her superior then ushering Mitsuki into the small chamber. Within, the Captain was seated at his usual desk, Enishi propping up the wall in the far corner with his broad arms folded across his chest. On the other side, perched stiffly on a cushion which Naoko knew with a wry smile had been hurriedly pulled out of storage for their guest was the Sixth Division's Third Seated officer, Kuchiki Ryu.

He had changed little in the time since they had all graduated from the Academy. His dark hair had grown longer, but he still wore it tied in the same tail, and his black and white *shihakushou* were smart and clean, stitched from the finest fabrics Sixth Division could provide. About his throat hung the pendant of the Kuchiki Clan, and, in any other circumstances, his appearance might be seen as foreboding or

austere. Naoko knew Ryuu, though, and, like all those present, she knew that his proud Kuchiki veneer concealed a loyal, if sometimes awkward sincerity which had never wavered. Now, despite the gravity of his demeanour, she could see relief and pleasure glitter in the slate grey eyes as Mitsuki entered the chamber.

“Mitsuki,” he murmured, and Mitsuki hurried forwards, grasping his white gloved hands in hers and squeezing them tightly. An only child, Mitsuki had always seen Ryuu more as a brother and a cousin and Ryuu had reciprocated the affection, preferring Mitsuki’s company to that of his own sisters.

“I’m sorry to have worried you,” she said now, kneeling on the tatami mat before him and casting him a warm smile. “It’s been a long time, Ryuu-kun, but you look well and happy — I’m glad.”

“I wish we weren’t reuniting in such circumstances as these,” Ryuu admitted, returning the smile with one of his own. “Nonetheless, I am content to see you alive and more, risen. I was under the impression you had been incapacitated with exhaustion — but clearly you are making some headway now.”

“I’m all right,” Mitsuki agreed vaguely. “It wasn’t nice, and I’d rather not talk about it too much, but I’m recovering. Once Yuuyugo has recharged her spirit power, I’ll go and see what I can do to help Retsu-sama, too. Please tell the rest of the Clan that, if they ask about me, Ryuu-kun. I’m all right — they don’t need to get involved.”

“On the contrary, Shirogane-fukutaichou has done everything in his power to prevent Clan involvement in this matter,” Ryuu said softly. “We are all too aware of the dangers of allowing the Clan to mobilise to avenge its pride and Guren-sama also agrees that such a venture would be unwise. He has taken the line with the family that you have chosen to live and act away from the Clan, therefore this is clearly not a case of a Kuchiki being targeted — and so far, things are calm. I have come here tonight to see how you are for myself — but there will be no action from the Clan without the sanction of the Gotei, you have my word on that.”

“I think that’s a relief for all of us,” Juushirou put in, gesturing for Naoko to sit down too and reaching to pour her a mug of tea. “Here, Naoko, you should join this meeting too. Ryuu brought some news with him from Sixth Division and I’d be interested for you and Enishi both to hear it.”

“News?” Naoko obediently did as she was bidden, taking the mug of tea gratefully and casting her opposite number a quizzical look.

“What kind of news, Kuchiki-kun?”

“Yes, the other reason for my coming was to convey information from my Vice Captain,” Ryuu nodded sagely. “Given the Kuchiki’s position in this, he felt it better that the message was passed to a more neutral authority. When I heard that he intended to pass it to Thirteenth, I volunteered my services as messenger. Truly, Mitsuki, I believe he would much like to see you too — but Guren-sama’s occupation with Clan affairs often means that Shirogane-fukutaichou is left holding full responsibility for the squad. I think he would rather not have spared me — but he understood why I wanted to go, and so allowed it.”

“When I’m more able, I’ll come to Sixth and see him,” Mitsuki promised. “I’d like to hear news of Father, too — I know he’s still alive, but I’d like to get a message to him, if possible.”

“Teitou-dono is in good health and would doubtless like to hear from you, too,” Ryuu promised her. “I will ensure such arrangements are made. You have my word.”

“So, this news, then?” Enishi drained his own mug of tea, dumping the ceramic vessel back down on the floor with a thud. “I’m pretty intrigued to know what Shirogane-dono’s got lined up for us. Tisn’t often the Kuchiki throw a bone our way, so to speak — it must be something pretty important.”

“Possibly, depending on how you read it,” Ryuu said cautiously. “As you may or may not know, Houjou, my Vice Captain has certain contacts among District individuals — nomadic traders he met some years previously and with whom he has established agreeable arrangements. They provide him with information — one woman, Funaho, is particularly sharp in this regard, and the data she provides almost always proves accurate. That being the case, when she came to beg an audience with him last evening, he admitted her to his study at once.”

“Shirogane-dono has contacts among the District classes?” Naoko blinked, and Ryuu nodded.

“I believe it was an acquaintance formed during his brief exile, when my Clan was in less happy straits,” he reflected. ‘I do not know the particulars, but she is an intelligent individual and not given to exaggeration. Shirogane-fukutaichou puts a lot of trust in her, furnishing her with tokens by which she can enter parts of Inner Seireitei on his errands and she has never betrayed that faith. Last evening she brought news of a village... or no, perhaps a small town

on the border between Second and Third. There were some rumours of dissident activity there. I believe the name of the settlement was Haruna. Houjou,' he turned to Enishi, "would I be correct in suggesting that some Gotei officials were abducted in that vicinity?"

"Haruna?" Enishi rubbed his chin. "Now you mention it, I think Ikata did talk about that area when he was holding forth about his own men. Yes, Kuchiki, I think you're right. I think they did disappear not far from the border with Second and Third."

"That's too convenient to be coincidental, surely?" Naoko said sharply, and Ryuu inclined his head.

"I believe so too, and so did Fukutaichou when he heard it," he agreed gravely. "He gave the impression there had been discussion over this at a Vice Captain's meeting — it seems that was correct."

"Yeah. Yeah, it was," Enishi agreed. "Haruna-chou, huh. Rum place, if I remember right. Not quite Second, not quite Third. Lots of trading goes on there — as you'd expect, being that the border runs right through the middle."

"You've been there?" Mitsuki shot him a questioning look, and Enishi nodded.

"Ran some patrols there a few years back," he agreed. "The area we cover changes from time to time, Edogawa, so it's been a while since last I went. I think it's now part of Kuchiki patrolling land... isn't that right?"

"It is, but Shirogane-fukutaichou would rather not become directly involved," Ryuu said matter-of-factly. "There has been some stickiness already in Sixth District over the abduction of the Ninth Division recruit, and he would rather not make that worse. Ukitake-taichou,"

He turned towards Juushirou,

"My Vice Captain requests that, as part of your ongoing investigation into these events, your Thirteenth Division be deployed to investigate this lead in our stead."

"That's a little cheeky of him," Naoko remarked. "Doesn't he think we have our own work to do?"

"But Thirteenth are actively involved in investigating this, Shikibu. Since Tenichi was nabbed, that's been the case," Enishi pointed out. "What do you think, Taichou? I'm game to go if you like, check it out and see if anything strange is afoot."

"Wait a minute," Juushirou raised his hand, casting Ryuu a

quizzical look. “Did Shirogane-dono’s informant give any other details about the kind of dissident activity we might be looking into? I’d rather go into the scene prepared — are we talking rebel District individuals with sticks and barbs, or something more?”

“I am not entirely sure,” Ryuu looked apologetic. “Being an outsider to the town, I believe Funaho could only glean bits and pieces and it was on her own initiative she decided it was information Shirogane-fukutaichou should hear. All I know is that some rebel element may be using this town. That, and one other thing which probably has no connection whatsoever.”

“Things with no connection often are connected,” Juushirou said dryly. “Shunsui’s always saying that, and it’s true.”

“Well, then I will divulge it, too,” Ryuu shrugged. “I believe it to be a fancy of the common folk populating the area, but if it is of interest, I have no reason to keep it secret. There have been stories — rumours — of restless spirits being sighted in this region, too.”

“Ghosts don’t exist in Seireitei,” Naoko said frankly, and Ryuu nodded.

“I would concur,” he said simply. “However, the rumour still persists. What manner of spirits, I don’t know. Funaho was also unclear, only that she had heard a few of the young folk talking at the town well, and it had struck her as strange. She later heard a similar discourse between two elderly women as they were selling their wares, and it put her on her guard. She saw no sign of these so called ghosts, I hasten to add. Only both the old and the young folk seemed sure that the ghost of a dead man had walked through their village a few times in recent weeks.”

“The ghost... of a dead man?” Mitsuki murmured the words softly, and Naoko sent her a sharp glance, noting the change of expression that crossed her friend’s features.

“Mitsuki-chan? Does that mean something to you?”

“I... don’t know,” Mitsuki admitted, looking troubled. “Perhaps... not. I’ve never been to this Haruna place, so far as I know... and...”

“Does it strike a chord with something that happened in the Spiritless Zone?” Juushirou asked gently, and Mitsuki shrugged helplessly.

“I’m not sure how to explain it,” she said at length. “Just, it’s not the first time I’ve heard someone talk about a dead man walking. I can’t be any clearer than that, but... I wonder... whether such a thing

could really happen.”

Juushirou’s eyes narrowed to near slits, and for a moment he was silent, processing this. Then he sighed.

“Perhaps it carries some meaning for me too,” he admitted. “Not a dead man, exactly, but someone believed dead, perhaps?”

“This is a story I haven’t heard,” Enishi’s eyebrows shot up. “What are you talking about, Taichou?”

“When I sent Ketsui to the archive to investigate the man who helped Mitsuki escape in Rukongai, he brought back notes about an Onmitsukidou who was allegedly killed ten years ago absconding from the Shihouin’s prison,” Juushirou said slowly. “Kai will not be pleased, probably, that I’ve divulged that much — but when I went to see him, he confirmed that it was true. They never found his body... and now you say that people from a village have seen ghosts. Ghosts can’t exist in Seireitei — Naoko’s right about that. However, someone who ought to be dead but isn’t... someone might see them and think they’d seen a ghost.”

“A dead Onmitsukidou, watching from the shadows, hiding in places he can’t be seen,” Mitsuki blanched, and Naoko sent her friend a concerned look.

“Mitsuki-chan?”

“An Onmitsukidou could certainly do those things,” Ryuu said grimly. “You went to see Shihouin about this, did you say, Ukitake? And he confirmed such a person had existed?”

“Yes, as you say,” Juushirou agreed. “This occurred on the border of Second and Third, and Kai told me the man — his name was Suzuki, I think — was from Second District. He had dilute Shihouin blood — but was not a member of the Clan. I believe he was a petty thief before he became an agent of the Shihouin’s secret forces. This information remains confidential — I trust everyone in this room to treat it with discretion. I wouldn’t have mentioned it now, only Ryuu’s story strikes too many chords to ignore a possible connection.”

He sat back on his hands, deliberating, then,

“I’ll go to Haruna myself, I think,” he decided, causing startled looks from all of his companions.

“Taichou?” Naoko frowned. “But surely... in a situation like this...”

“It’s best that I take on Shirogane-dono’s request personally, and I think Kai would prefer me to do so, given the conversation we had,”

Juushirou said simply. "I'll take a couple of officers with me — Kirio and Tsunemori, most probably, since Kirio's quick and I might have use for Tsunemori's Kidou. Enishi, I'll leave you in charge here. Naoko, I don't even need to ask you to back him up, I suppose?"

"Of course not," Naoko shook her head. "But if you're going... what about..."

She glanced at Mitsuki, who frowned.

"I won't get in anyone's way," she said softly. "I might not be much use to anyone, but I won't be a hindrance, either."

"Perhaps it would be a good time to take Mitsuki back to Sixth with me?" Ryuu suggested. "Shirogane-fukutaichou wishes to see her anyway, and she could pursue enquiries about her family more easily there. I think that to be the best idea, Ukitake — with your permission, I should like to take my kinswoman home."

"Mitsuki, what do you think?" Juushirou asked, and Mitsuki hesitated for a moment before nodding her head.

"If Ryuu is with me, I'll be safe enough," she said decidedly. "If I'm at Sixth, too, I won't be getting in the way here. There are people there I want to see and speak to — and whilst Thirteenth has been kind to me, it's not my division. Truly, I'm a little lost here, without anything specific to do. Maybe, if I go home, I'll find something... and if not, I'll at least be able to see my kin and, perhaps, contact my Father."

"I see," Juushirou's eyes clouded briefly at her words, but he nodded his head. "Then I'll give my consent for you to go. Ryuu, please take her straight to Sixth Division, though. No diversions, nothing like that. We still don't know what dangers may lurk in the shadows at night, and I'd rather we were too careful than not careful enough."

"It's understood," Ryuu inclined his head. "Mitsuki will be quite safe with Sixth Division, I assure you."

"I'll go and get Yuuyugo, then," Mitsuki got to her feet, offering her cousin a faint smile. "Thank you, Ryuu. I appreciate it."

With that she was gone, and Juushirou let out a heavy sigh.

"Twenty five years is a long time, sometimes," he murmured, more to himself than anyone, and Naoko frowned.

"She's still shaken up over a lot of things," she agreed. "Taichou, while Mitsuki isn't here, there's something I want you to know. In

light of what's been said this evening, I think it important I raise it, even if it proves to be wrong."

"Go on," Juushirou nodded, and Naoko bit her lip.

"When you sent me out scouring for evidence about the Hollow behaviour, I told you I picked up something like a reiatsu, but I wasn't sure how to place it," she said slowly. "It was real, but I couldn't identify it."

"I remember," Juushirou agreed. "What of it?"

"I thought I felt that reiatsu again tonight," Naoko admitted. "Here, within Thirteenth Division."

"Here?" Enishi reacted at once, sitting bolt upright and almost banging his head on Juushirou's shelves. "But... *within* the Division's barracks?"

"Yes," Naoko looked uneasy. "I think... whoever it was... was here. And I think... they were watching Mitsuki."

"Mitsuki?" Ryuu looked horrified. "With what intention?"

"I don't know, and I didn't want to frighten her by pushing the subject, so I didn't," Naoko confessed. "When I asked, she said she sensed nothing and saw nobody, but her senses are still ragged and might not be working to full strength. I don't want her to think someone or something is stalking her, but given Tenichi's abduction and what happened in the Spiritless Zone, it worried me."

"If that's the case, then it probably is best Mitsuki goes to Sixth Division for a while," Juushirou said heavily. "You were right to tell me, Naoko, even if you had no real basis for your fears. If there is a former Onmitsukidou in the shadows, and if they are involved in abductions like Tenichi's, it's far better to be safe than sorry. Kidnapping someone like Mitsuki would create a political incident. The Kuchiki have stayed quiet so far, but Guren-sama still acknowledges Mitsuki as one of his Clan. If she was to be specifically targeted, it could prove troublesome for a lot of people."

"We won't let anything happen to her in Sixth, you have my word," Ryuu said grimly. "We will protect her however we can."

"I was going to ask permission to try to go trace this reiatsu," Naoko added, "but I suppose if you're going out yourself, Taichou, I ought to stay here with Hou... Fukutaichou, shouldn't I?"

"I'd rather you did, for now," Juushirou agreed. "I'd feel happier knowing that you were both here and on your guard, just in case there

is danger abroad tonight. If some entity did break into Thirteenth Division, I'm concerned that I didn't sense it sooner — but if you and Dokusou Houshi recognised it, you'd doubtless pick it up more quickly. Even if Mitsuki leaves Thirteenth tonight, there are vulnerable young ones here who could easily get hurt if we were inattentive. I'd prefer to have you stay behind for now, I'm afraid — tonight, leave the investigations to me."

"Yes, sir," Naoko bowed her head. "If it comes back — whatever it is — I'll be sure to nail it this time around."

"Then we'll leave it at that," Juushirou decided, getting to his feet. "It's late, but that can't be helped. Night is often the best time to go hunting ne'er-do-wells, so I'd better go ready Kirio and Tsunemori to leave!"

The moon was riding high over Seireitei as Souja crossed over the District boundary, stepping onto the winding chalkstone pathway that led from the outer reaches of his family's District to the white walls that divided Inner Seireitei from the surrounding land. The air was cool and gentle, deceptively so, Souja decided, his senses alert and aware as he navigated the uneven track. Joumei and Izumi's findings had troubled him, but, though he had spent the walk back pondering over them, he could not see how to take them forward.

Aizen Keitarou... huh.

Souja's eyes narrowed as he remembered the last time he had heard that name come up before his Father. It had been an Endou Clan council meeting, some ten years before, when he had been just a teenager and attending the gathering for the first time. Sat up high in the stalls with Misashi as his companion and guide, he had watched proceedings with big, eager eyes, feeling important to be included in such a formal group.

"Everything this family does, it begins here, Souja-kun," his grandfather had murmured to him as they had taken their seats among the rest. "Your father is a very powerful and important man to this family, and as you'll see, his decisions allow us to move forward and continue to grow. You must learn to be as he is, my boy — for the sake of the Endou, you must understand as soon as you can how control over the Clan means peace for the District and everyone living here."

"Everyone, including Joumei and Izumi?" he had asked with innocent eyes, and Misashi had nodded, putting a gentle finger to his

lips.

“Those are names you must not speak anywhere, not even to me,” he warned. “That too is a burden only an Endou leader can carry — when you grow older, you will understand.”

The room had been full that day, Souja remembered, the rows of red and brown clad kinsman adorned with the individual crests of Endou strains gathered in their usual places around the room. Souja had marvelled on how many different family emblems he could see, yet every one of those present had their gazes turned towards the centre of the room where his father, calm and quiet, stood waiting for the time for the meeting to begin. Souja had always had a close bond with his father, and so had never seen the bird of prey hunter that he had heard people talk about in the manor grounds, yet that day, the subject had turned to the hunt for a missing fugitive, and, as his name had been mentioned, Souja had seen Hirata’s pale eyes change from the gentle, pensive gaze he was used to to the sharp, ruthless glitter of a predator whose prey had somehow slipped away.

He shivered now, recalling how the wind had suddenly whipped around the chamber and, most significantly of all, how many of the men at the front had drawn back, fear in their eyes as though they thought their leader might draw his deadly blade from its sheath and strike at them in his frustration and his anger. It had not come to that, for Hirata had caught Misashi’s gaze for the briefest of instants, taking a breath and forcing his spirit power to settle. Yet in that moment Souja had understood how his father had kept such a tight hand on the Endou Clan since he had taken the helm... and more, that whoever this fugitive was, he was someone Hirata hated above any other.

“It’s a difficult circumstance, Souja,” when he had asked his grandfather, later, Misashi had looked troubled, resting a gentle hand on his shoulder and letting out a sigh. “I suppose it’s right that you should know of it, being that one day the fight and the hunt may become yours.”

“What kind of fight, Grandfather?” Souja had asked curiously, and Misashi had paused for a moment, pressing his lips together as he had pondered how best to continue.

“Aizen Keitarou is an exile — a wanted man who has caused pain in many Districts and harm to many Clans,” he had said at length. “He hid here for a good many years, and in that time he brought about the death of my father, your great Grandfather, who once ruled this Clan. He killed a good many individuals in the Districts during his time

here, but he escaped our justice. Worse... he stole something from us that was precious, and that could not be replaced.”

“Stole something?” Souja’s eyes had become big, imagining powerful weapons or valuable jewellery, but Misashi had not answered at first. Instead he had taken the young boy by the arm, leading him to the Gallery where portraits of the Clan’s forefathers hung in splendour, gazing down on their descendants and kinsfolk with a sense of lofty pride. As they walked between the mounted images, Souja had glanced along them, recognising each from his lessons, but, as they passed the portraits of Shouichi and his wife Yayoi, his grandfather stopped, gesturing to a covered canvas that hung on the wall between Misashi’s own portrait and that of Hirata.

“Grandfather?” Souja had frowned, furrowing his brow as he sought to understand.

Misashi’s eyes had reflected genuine pain that day, as he had lifted his staff, using the jewelled end to push back the flap of the covering to reveal a portrait of a young girl, no more than in her teens. She had been about the same age as Souja himself had been at that time, sitting in a composed, demure position with her dark hair tied back in customary Clan style and her blue eyes so vivid Souja had almost thought that they were looking right at him. She was dressed in the same reds and browns as he was, and, with a jolt, he had recognised the emblem at her throat as bearing the identical crest he himself wore beneath the folds of his Clan robes.

“Grandfather, who is that?” he had whispered, and Misashi had let out a sigh that had seemed heavy enough to blow the whole room away. He had allowed the cover to fall back over the image, and for a moment, he did not speak. Then, at length, his lips had twitched, forming words.

“That is your aunt, Souja,” he had said softly. “Your aunt Eiraki, who was your father’s sister, and who was as dear a treasure to us as anyone could ever wish. This treasure, Aizen stole from us. It is a wound that cannot be filled and a sin that cannot be forgiven — and your father and I will never forgive it.”

Souja had swallowed hard.

“Did he... kill her?” he had asked, half dreading the answer, but Misashi had shaken his head.

“No, he stole her,” he had said simply, touching Souja on the shoulder and gesturing back towards the way they had come. “He stole her and made her his, until the blood that stained his hands

stained hers as well. He took and destroyed her, Souja — but I believe she still lives. I know Hirata believes it too. Somewhere out there, they still are. You're old enough now to understand the shadows of your family's past... but it might be best not to discuss it too much with your father unless he raises the subject. It is not a happy recollection... and sometimes those are best left to lie."

Eiraki-basama.

Souja's brows knitted together.

If Joumei and Izumi are right, and Keitarou is involved in this, then so is Eiraki-basama, without question. And, if Eiraki-basama did flee with him while pregnant, then it explains what Grandfather meant when he said that Keitarou 'made her his'. I dread to think what Father might do if he was to know they might be involved... and without any proof, I can't risk unleashing his Wind Hawk on innocent people. More, if it is Rukongai they're hiding, a release of Father's zanpakutou there would put paid to any chance of re-establishing the Spiritless Zone and would do untold damage to anyone else living in the vicinity. If there are individuals beyond the Spiritless Zone limits... it doesn't necessarily follow that all of them are evil. Is that why Tenichi's keeping quiet? Maybe he's not working with Keitarou, but perhaps... something else? But if he won't talk to me... I don't see any way of making him open up.

A rustle of tree leaves made him falter, pushing aside his musings for the time being and reaching for his sword as he tried to work out where the sound had come from. To begin with he thought someone must be following him but, as he drew more deeply into the shadow of a nearby elm, he saw a figure dart between gaps in the moonlight, the black and white of a *shihakushou* briefly visible before the image had gone once more into the black. Souja's eyes narrowed, processing this.

Nobody should be patrolling here at this time, and certainly not alone, not given recent events. I wonder...

Keeping his hand on his *zanpakutou* hilt, he moved carefully between the trees, scanning the landscape for any sign of the mysterious figure. At first he saw nothing, but then, as he crossed away from the path to Inner Seireitei and more deeply into the wood, he caught sight of the individual again, stood before the trunk of a dead tree. Souja pressed his body into the shadows, suppressing his spirit power down to its lowest level and cloaking himself instinctively in the *Kyokkoku* his father had taught him to cast when he had still been a small boy, then slipped out of his hiding place, moving slowly and cautiously towards where the shinigami stood.

As he drew closer, however, Souja had the definite feeling something was amiss. The man was young, maybe his own age, with messy dark hair and no sword at his waist. His *shihakushou* was torn in places, the white *obi* trailing carelessly behind him and, as he caught the moonlight, Souja was sure he could see specks of blood against the pale cloth. Apparently oblivious to the fact he was being tracked, the youngster spread out his hands, something small and glittering clutched against the dusty fabric of his gloves, and, as Souja watched, he released it into the air, where it hovered for a brief moment before disappearing into nothing. Souja was about to step forward and confront the individual when to his surprise and dismay, the air rippled and ripped across, parting the tree trunk into a yawning hole of black that, to the Vice Captain, could only be a type of *Senkaimon*.

But without a sword... to open such a thing... and here, so close to Inner Seireitei... a gate to where?

Souja's thoughts flew to Tenichi's abduction, and he frowned, gripping his weapon tightly as he watched the young man step into the black and disappear.

If someone has the power to open gates without zanpakutou, then the Council needs to know about it. I can't let this opportunity slip by. Whoever this person is and wherever he's going, I can't just let him go there.

To think was to act and, as the gaping stretch of darkness began to close up behind its controller, Souja leapt forward, ducking into the blackness before it could seal up completely behind him. Instinctively brushing his fingers together to form a Hell Butterfly, he watched the feeble creature flutter around in a circle for a moment before darting off in a particular direction.

That way, huh? All right. That's the way we'll go, too.

Souja released his hold on his weapon, setting off after the butterfly with resolution.

Father will just have to wait a little longer for my report. This is too important a chance to waste!

So, the fool had slipped up again.

Masaya drew his body more closely into the trunk of the tree, his eyes slits of contempt as he watched the *Senkaimon* close up behind the black clad figure of the Gotei Vice Captain.

It seems that he's determined to bring disgrace down on his family. Whether I had spoken up or not, that idiot boy would have created chaos

all the same. That's why trusting people based on family bonds is pointless. Keitarou-sama, your son is an idiot and he will be the death of your whole scheme if you continue to allow him to get away with such carelessness. If I were you...

He ran his fingers beneath his cloak, brushing them against the hard hilt of the dagger that was concealed there. Slowly he brought the tip of his index finger down so that it touched against the sharp, cold blade of the weapon, and a humourless smile touched his pale lips.

Still, I was instructed to ensure that he returned to Rukongai. He has clearly done so, his mission unfinished and who knows what he accomplished within the grounds of the Thirteenth Division? I couldn't get close enough to hear their words, but it looked very much like the boy was colluding with the woman, rather than threatening to take her life. How Keitarou-sama could bring up such a naive, soft-hearted youth is beyond me — but the truth this time will speak for itself.

Derisive pleasure glittered briefly in the empty golden eyes as he pictured Koku's expression, the resolution burning in his dark eyes as he had given Masaya his commission.

You can try and protect him all you like, but you can't protect a fool from himself. You ordered me to make sure he returned to Rukongai in one piece, and since he's done so, I need attend your instructions no longer. Your threats may be real or they may be empty ones, but even you wouldn't try and kill me in front of Keitarou-sama's eyes, now would you?

He turned his back on the Senkaimon's location, sweeping his cloak around his shoulders more purposefully as he melted into the night.

Meantime, since I'm here, I think I'll create a little trouble of my own. That shinigami boy, he concerns me. I brought him to Rukongai because I thought that Keitarou-sama had a purpose for him, but then, for whatever reason, he let the captive go. The shinigami that followed Katsura-sama will pose no danger to Keitarou-sama, not at the level of his sword, so no doubt he will be quickly silenced — but it is almost certainly not a coincidence that he belongs to the Endou division. The Kotetsu boy must have told him something... and I can't have that. If he can tell one officer, he can tell others... and that could mean danger for Keitarou-sama and his work. I think it best I have a little word with him... just in case he's thinking of sharing his secrets with those who surround him.

He let out a soft, silent chuckle.

Keitarou-sama doesn't like betrayal. It would be far better for the Kotetsu boy to learn that early on — else the time may come when I have to silence him as well.

Author's Note: Arigatou

Hi all ;)

My apologies for the AN last chapter –I was still in shock following 494. Now I'm just confused about what actually happened and if it happened and... all kinds of other things.

I want to finish this story, and I want to be able to do it positively and productively. The main concern I had after last week's chapter was that, if I kept reading, I was going to see similar things happen to other characters such as the two who are most prominent here. I don't want to follow a series which discards characters without a second thought, but to finish Sukuse I need to know what else Juu and Shun's swords can do. That being the case, I felt caught in a quandary and really questioned my wanting to keep with Bleach for the first time.

Maybe it was a touch melodramatic... but really, the chapter shook me up. This arc has been so messy so far, and is moving so fast and in strange and worrying directions. This week's chapter is no exception — though seeing Rose took the edge off it a bit. I don't really know how I feel about Bleach right now — wary and cautious, perhaps — but the responses to my freakout AN made me realise that Sukuse is an obligation and I've begun it, so I want to try and finish it. You people have supported me through Meifu and to this point through all the changes in my RL too, and it would be rude and ungrateful to run away and leave you hanging. Your comments and reviews drive me to do better and work harder and come up with plotlines or scenes that I really look forward to sharing with you. I needed to refind that a bit this week, and I hope now I've begun to do so. You guys helped me put it in context and with my exams now done I will do my best to keep it going.

Some not so nice stuff will happen in the next couple of chapters, though. Please be prewarned and prepared. I feel the need to say that, though I think some of you know what's coming.

Thank you all for your support and I'm sorry if I scared you. Even if Kubo-sensei is doing his best to drive me crazy of late, I still think you guys are the best and I'll do my best not to let you down.

Additionally: Mitsuki & Juu (review reply)

An anon reviewer last chapter asked about Mitsuki and Juu and since I can't reply to anon reviewers via PM, I felt I should do so here. I've never formulated in my mind what happened in the long run with Juu and Mitsuki. The events referenced in the very last chapter of the very last Meifu Omake happened approximately 300 years before canon, which I earmarked in my mind as an important date because it predated both the

Quincy crisis and the Pendulum. Since I wrote about the Quincy crisis sans-Mitsuki in Rain Dragon, and would like to kind of tie that in to the Meifu timeline if possible (with the whole idea of ancient Third doing science and so on), it makes sense that those things occurred before that. However, the reason I chose that date was something else, relating to a story I only ever wrote a few chapterlets for and which I might never finish. Mitsuki was to play a role in that story, as VC of the Fourth Division.

In terms of Rukia, I never thought that that history would be a happy one, and even that Juushirou might not have known anything about it. Since I imagine Mitsuki spent a lot of her early career in and out of Rukongai, the potential for keeping secrets were quite high. I dunno. Even if he did know, with Rukia and Hisana dumped in Rukongai, somewhere along the line something terrible must've occurred and I don't know that I want to spend too long figuring it out. Somehow I think it's a story best not written? All I will say about Mitsuki and Juu, therefore, is that, in my interpretation of Kubo's Bleachverse, they were soulmates up until those events 300 years Before Canon, and in Juushirou's heart, maybe still are. Whatever else might have occurred... is up to you?

24. Crimson Dawn

Chapter Twenty Three: Crimson Dawn

“Hey, Kotetsu, are you going to sleep till Shougatsu?”

Tenichi opened his eyes sleepily, blinking and staring up blearily at the blurry figure bending over him. There was a laugh, then someone slapped him on the shoulder, grabbing his thin blanket and pulling it back with a sharp tug.

“You’re back on normal duties from today, right? Kikyue-dono said as much last night, so no extra sleep for you that the rest of us can’t have!”

“Nakata-san?” Tenichi dragged himself into a sitting position, rubbing his eyes and blinking at the substantial frame of his broad Endou bunkmate. Seventh Division’s seventh seated officer, Nakata Yusuke was fifteen years Tenichi’s senior, and, since the District boy’s transfer into the Endou division had taken it upon himself to make sure that his new subordinate knew the ropes. He was a bluff, friendly individual, though Tenichi knew from training sessions that he showed his enemies no mercy in a battle of swords, and, despite the humour and patience with which he had inducted his companion, the District boy had seen the rough side of his division-mate’s temper during drill with the recruits on a couple of occasions. Nakata was an Endou through and through, the son of a fourth degree Lord who had served in a senior position on Hirata’s family council for many years and, both as a result of this and his own dedicated attitude towards his work, he was well respected both by his junior and senior officers. Tenichi was not foolish enough to believe that his arrival in Seventh Division would have been as easy or as smooth had it not been for Nakata’s taking a liking to him in the mess hall on his first night, and he had learned to cultivate the friendship, ingratiating himself with several other members of Kikyue’s patrol at the same time. Despite the clear benefits of Nakata’s society, however, Tenichi was genuinely fond of his bunkmate. When he had returned to the barracks following his abduction, Nakata had been the first behind Kikyue to greet him with a cuff to the ear and a gruff comment about careless idiocy, but there had been no harshness in the gesture, and thanks to Nakata’s force of character, Tenichi had found himself largely unmolested by the inquisitive juniors, all of whom had wanted to know what had happened to him in his several day absence.

Nakata himself had asked no questions, and Tenichi had been especially grateful for that. Unlike Kirio, whose concerned probing had put him on edge, Nakata had said nothing about it, simply going on with his daily routine as if nothing had happened. That morning too, he reflected, as he pulled his aching body up and out of the thin pallet that comprised his bed, it was business as usual, and the normality of it had helped more than anything to settle his unease at what had transpired in Rukongai.

"No time to be sitting around like that, else you'll miss inspection and you'll find yourself on cleaning duty," Nakata told him briskly, ruffling his fingers briefly through the younger man's tousled hair before returning to his own bunk to retrieve his long white *obi*. "Nobody's going to let you slack, not when you've got juniors watching and expecting you to lead by example. Get yourself together, Kotetsu — I'm heading down to the mess, but I'll see you there in a few minutes."

He tied his *obi* with a flourish, then,

"If you're not quick, you'll have to go on an empty stomach. Kikyue-dono said we were to assemble promptly, and you've given her enough headaches already."

With that he was gone, the door sliding shut behind him with a click, and Tenichi sighed, getting reluctantly to his feet and padding over to the small window to gaze down on the cobbled yard that belonged to the Seventh Division. There were already signs of activity despite the early hour, and with a grimace he realised that there was truth in Nakata's words. Whatever special favours he had received in the days since his return would no longer count — it was now back to normality with a vengeance.

It's probably better that way, though.

He slipped his robe off, dropping it on the end of his bed and reaching for his own clean, freshly pressed *shihakushou*.

All I've done is think about Keitarou-san and Father and the things I learned in Rukongai. How I can help... what I can do... if I can trust anyone with this secret, and most of all, that Shikiki confirmed everything Keitarou-san told me about Father's death. That was the place he was buried, and Keitarou-san did bury him. Shikiki has no reason to lie to me, and it upset her to remember, but I'm sure what she said was true. That means that Keitarou-san didn't lie to me either.

He pulled on the dark *hakama*, sliding the *hakamashita* over his upper body and wrapping the thin fabric carefully around his chest.

Fukutaichou didn't want me going back to that place, though. It makes me wonder, was that simply because of everything that happened to me, or was it because it was where Father was buried? Fukutaichou's great-grandfather was the one who killed Father, that's almost for sure. Hirata-sama and Fukutaichou, they're not like Shouichi-sama was — everyone's said that. Shouichi-sama and Seimaru-sama were the ones who caused our family to be uprooted and everything else, so I can't blame them for the things that others did. Still, Father was killed by an Endou... maybe there's enough shame in that knowledge for Fukutaichou to want to keep me away from his grave. Perhaps the Endou know more about it than I realised — probably there's something at the main house that relates to the purge of the Urahara, and maybe Father's name is included.

His eyes narrowed as he reached for his obi.

Misashi-sama would've been there at the time, too. He might not have known about it, of course, but he may have. Trouble is, with Fukutaichou warning me off, there's not a lot I can do to pursue it. The best I can do is follow Nakata-san's instructions, rejoin my patrol and wait and see what transpires. Nobody here seems to suspect anything extreme happened to me while I was away. They've accepted my amnesia story almost without question, so waiting is probably the best option. No sense in doing something rash and drawing attention to myself.

He tied the white fabric in a tight knot, testing it and then scooping up his sheathed *zanpakutou* from its place propped up against the wall, thrusting the scabbard through the sash and sliding his feet into his sandals, making for the door. His comrades would already be gathered around their favourite table in the mess hall, probably bemoaning the early start and envying the members of Souja's patrol who, by habit, carried out more night missions and were therefore less often dispatched at dawn. Kikyue would descend on them mid-meal, tapping her feet in impatience to be off, and causing the younger recruits to wolf down the remains of their food in fear of having it whipped out from under their noses unfinished, whilst the older and more experienced ones would already be piling their plates ready for collection, one or two of them watching the juniors with an eagle eye for any wasted rations they could steal. For Clansmen, Tenichi reflected ruefully, they could behave like starving children with the best of the Districts, and this thought brought a smile to his pale features. Everything had been turned topsy turvy in his world since Keitarou had summoned him, but today he had the chance to return to his normal routine, and, he realised, he was looking forward to it.

"You seem extraordinarily happy this morning, Kotetsu Tenichikun."

The voice came from nowhere, and Tenichi, whose hand had been halfway to the door froze, the smile fading from his features at its sound. There was a soft laugh, then the sound of someone — or something — slipping across the floor towards him, the gentle sweep of a cloak brushing against the boards towards him.

“Well? Don’t you have somewhere important you need to be? Isn’t there inspection this morning? I would hate you to be late for your squad duties.”

The voice was slick and mocking, no warmth in its smooth tones, and Tenichi’s brows knitted together as he realised where he had heard it before.

“Kurotsuchi?”

“You are cleverer than you look. We’ve only met the once, yet you recall my voice so well you don’t even need to see my face to know who I am? Impressive. Very impressive. Perhaps I can understand a little more why Keitarou-sama is so interested in you... although I don’t suppose you had much opportunity to see my face the last time we met, did you?”

“Get out of my room!” Tenichi wheeled around at the sound of Keitarou’s name, fingers covering the hilt of his weapon. The memory of the night of his abduction burned fresh in his thoughts, and he half expected to see some deformed monster standing before him, but instead he met the glittering gaze of a man about his own height and half his weight, wrapped in a heavy cloak and with the cowl pulled so far over his head that, other than the feline gold eyes, he could not make out any distinguishing features. “Get out, and don’t come back here! If you want to talk to me, talk to me away from here — but not here, not in my barracks, not...”

“Not on Seventh Division land?” The cowed figure chuckled, reaching up to push back the hood of his cloak, and for the first time Tenichi saw his abductor face to face. A thin, pinched appearance faced him, a nondescript face with a neutrality that bordered on the surreal. Crisscross marks across his cheeks indicated that he had been in fights in the past, but, looking at him, Tenichi could not imagine how this skinny wraith of a man had managed to so easily overpower him.

“Oh, I’m stronger than I look,” Masaya seemed to guess his companion’s thoughts, because he grinned, an unpleasant grimace that revealed a row of uneven teeth. He took another shuffling step forwards, reaching out a hand to rest it lightly on Tenichi’s shoulder,

and the shinigami cursed, pushing the arm away and taking a hurried step back.

“No, no you don’t. I’m not going back, so don’t think you can pull the same trick twice. I’m not going anywhere with you.”

“You mistake me,” Masaya said flatly, lowering his hand slowly. “I have no desire to take you anywhere. On the contrary, your existence brings me no pleasure whatsoever. So long as Keitarou-sama sees value in you, I will not harm you, but you really interest me not at all.”

“Then why are you here?” Tenichi’s eyes narrowed suspiciously. “Are you trying to get me into trouble? Surely you know that that wouldn’t do *that person* any good, so stop saying his name so freely as though it was the most normal thing in the world.”

“Are you afraid?” Masaya mocked him, and Tenichi grimaced.

“I have things to lose, here,” he snapped, “and if I lose them, I won’t be able to do anything to help *that person’s* cause or the people he’s trying to protect. I gave my word that I’d help and I will, but that doesn’t mean you can slip in and out of my quarters and stalk me like an uninvited ghost.”

“I like to call it insurance, rather than stalking,” Masaya’s golden eyes narrowed to slits, and Tenichi saw the glitter of a sword tip penetrate briefly from beneath the heavy folds of cloth. It was gone as soon as it had appeared, but Tenichi knew he had not imagined that it was there. “You see, whilst my orders are not to hurt you, I don’t really trust people on this side of the divide. I have no reason to trust anyone in shinigami colours, and so I like to make sure that... the understanding between you and my master... is a solid and unambiguous one.”

“Meaning?” Tenichi demanded, and Masaya leaned forward until Tenichi could feel the warmth of the other man’s breath against his cheek.

“Talking about anything you saw in Rukongai would be a very bad idea,” he said, his voice becoming menacing. “It would be a very, very bad idea, and I wanted to remind you of that fact. Just because he let you go... just because he allowed you to return here, it doesn’t mean that you’re free to return to your life as it was before. You have a secret and you belong to him now, whatever you think. If anyone were ever to find out where you’d gone, Kotetsu Tenichi, and who you had treated with... do you think it would be overlooked and ignored?”

A cold smile touched his lips.

“If you betray Keitarou-sama, I will kill you with my bare hands,” he added frankly, extending his arm once more and Tenichi watched with horrified dismay as the digits began to extend towards him, stretching and bending out of their normal shape until they became like tendrils reaching for his throat. “As you see, I have some unusual abilities and I can be watching you, even when you don’t think that I am. If you decide to tell anyone what happened over the divide, I will come for you... and I will come for anyone you choose to tell.”

“Don’t be stupid, who would I tell?” Tenichi gathered his wits, slapping the tentacle-like fingers away, and Masaya took a hop-step back, amusement clear in his golden eyes. “I haven’t and I won’t. It wouldn’t do me any good to share with anyone, now would it?”

“Hrm,” Masaya tilted his head on one side, then, “I suppose, then, it’s coincidence that one of your hallowed squad headed towards Rukongai early this morning?”

“*What?*” Tenichi paled, and Masaya laughed.

“If you didn’t tell them anything, you should relax,” he said airily. “They’re unlikely to leave the place alive. They have no idea what kind of power they’re dealing with over the divide... if they’re fool enough to fall into danger by themselves, then so be it. However... if they should happen to have gone there because of you... or if they were likely to discover that you weren’t kept confined but walked free around Rukongai, the honoured guest of my master, how do you suppose that would be received back here?”

“You’re joking. You’re trying to bait me!” Tenichi grabbed Masaya by the collar of his cloak, giving him a little shake, but the elusive spy slipped his hold, stepping back against the wall of the room and shaking his head.

“I don’t joke,” he said sagely. “There’s no profit in it. But you’ll find out soon enough. One of your comrades is coming this way. Listen to him, if you don’t believe me — you’d better hope that they’re not coming to arraign you under suspicion of treason and collusion, hadn’t you?”

“If they see you here, what do you think will happen?” Tenichi exclaimed, and Masaya rolled his eyes.

“Don’t be so simple,” he said disparagingly. “I told you, I have ways and means. You deal with your own troubles, Kotetsu Tenichi — leave me to handle mine.”

Even as he spoke, the spy's body began to fade and merge into the wooden beam walls, and Tenichi watched in wary disbelief as the space where, a moment before his tormentor had stood clear as day now appeared empty. Although he appeared to be alone, somehow Tenichi knew the man was still there, watching and listening to every word, but before he could do anything, there was the sound of pounding steps and the door of the bedchamber was flung back to reveal an anxious looking Nakata, red-faced and out of breath from his run up the stairs.

"Look lively, Kotetsu!" he exclaimed, hurrying forward to grab his companion by the arm. "We're wanted at once. There's a fuss going on downstairs. Nobody can find the Fuku... it's like he's gone into thin air."

"Fuku... taichou?" Tenichi blanched, glancing fearfully at the stretch of wall where he knew Masaya had concealed himself. Was it his imagination, or had the seam of wood moved slightly, the shift of a golden eyeball boring its gaze into him as if to say 'I told you so'?

"Nobody's got a damn clue where he is," Nakata agreed briskly. "At least you're dressed. Kikyue-dono sent me to find you. Even the Captain hasn't an idea where he's gone, so it's serious business. Last time he was out late evening, it's when he brought you back, but this time..."

He shook his head briefly, a serious look in his eyes.

"The Fuku's not one to duck his duties, nor take off without the Captain's say, so everyone's worried," he added. "Given what's happened of late, they're saying... maybe someone abducted him."

"Abducted... him?" Tenichi swallowed hard. "Like... me?"

"We've no time to reason on it, either way," Nakata responded with a shrug. "Kikyue-dono's scrapped inspection and we're heading out at once in search of him. You too. She wanted you in particular, in case you remembered anything that he said or did the night you came back, anything that might help you find him. She's tearing hair and spitting feathers, boy, so if you remember anything at all..."

Tenichi's gaze flitted back to the wall, and he sighed, rubbing his temples.

"Go tell her I'll be right down," he said at length. "I'm right behind you, Nakata-san, I promise — tell Kikyue-dono I won't tarry."

"Will do," Nakata glanced at him, but nodded. "Don't be long, though, I'm serious. The last thing Seventh wants is another incident,

and the Taichou looked like he might get involved if we lingered too long about base.”

“Message understood,” Tenichi said shortly, and Nakata clapped him on the back before disappearing back down the stairs to convey the message.

“You did this,” Tenichi’s words were a statement, not a question, and a soft, disembodied chuckle came from the darkness.

“I did nothing,” Masaya said simply. “On the contrary, I came to warn you.”

“You didn’t say that it was Souja-dono who had gone exploring,” Tenichi snapped. “You didn’t say that! He was the one who brought me back here, and the one who told me not to go back to Seventh, he, of all people...”

He froze, the memory of the silver-haired strangers suddenly blazing through his thoughts.

Isumi... that was her name, wasn't it? The girl from the people Souja-dono said were servants of the Endou.

Out loud he said,

“The people with silver hair... who are they?”

“Ah, so you have made the connection?” Masaya’s form became gradually more visible, a thoughtful look in his golden gaze. “Well, well, it seems you are intelligent, beyond my expectations. Yes, you’re right. Those people are the real culprits in this. They have long been hunting my master, and they are spies for the Endou in places and ways that even I don’t completely understand. They are traitor Urahara, boy. Underground spies, people whose lives have been bought and sold by the Endou Clan for some generations.”

“The man said they were cursed... that knowing about them was a curse,” Tenichi’s voice shook slightly. “He asked me a lot of questions about why I was there, at Father’s grave. What did they say to Souja-dono, to make him hare off to Rukongai? What if he finds out I was there, Kurotsuchi? What if he finds Keitarou-san? What if...”

“You had better pray he does not, but in case he does, you can be sure a welcome will be awaiting him,” Masaya said dismissively.

“You don’t mean...” Tenichi blanched again, and Masaya shrugged.

“You were an exception. Most shinigami who cross into that place don’t leave it so easily,” he reflected. “I said it before... if he was fool

enough to step into danger on his own, then he'll find he's taken on more than he asked for."

"But..."

"You would do best hoping that he gets the reception such a nosy intrusion deserves," Masaya cut across his companion's words cruelly, extending a long, pale finger to brush briefly against Tenichi's cheek. "The best enemies are dead ones. Remember that — you'll go far with it."

"But Souja-dono is my superior officer, not my enemy!"

"He was your superior officer. Now he's your enemy," Masaya shook his head. "If he discovers Keitarou-sama's Rukongai, you and everyone who has ever connected to it are as good as executed. And don't you have a brother?"

He clicked his tongue against his teeth.

"What would he think, I wonder, if he saw you fall from grace? What kind of emotions would he feel, seeing his brother stripped of rank and paraded before the Council before being put to death for treason? Or more, what if they think him a part of it too — would you like to see your younger brother put in chains?"

"Stop it! Leave Ketsui out of it!" Tenichi exclaimed, pushing Masaya away and reaching for the door. "There's no guarantee that Souja-dono's gone anywhere near Keitarou-san, nor that there's any danger. I'm going to go and I'm going to do my duty — so don't try to twist my thoughts around! Keitarou-san hasn't asked me to turn against what I believe in doing and that's still being a shinigami for the Gotei! That means supporting my Vice Captain — and making sure he's all right!"

"Well, we'll see," Masaya said speculatively. "We'll talk again, Kotetsu Tenichi... maybe when you've realised for yourself that there's no going back. You've made your choices — everything that happens now is a result of those decisions, and you'll learn soon enough how firm the path is you've chosen to walk."

Tenichi did not respond, flinging the door back and hurrying down the steep curl of steps, taking them two at a time as he hastened to join the rest of his patrol. They were already massed in the courtyard, an impatient Kikyue at their head and Tenichi's heart flip-flopped in his chest as he registered the white-haired figure of the Captain among his comrades. Nakata had not been joking, he mused grimly, for Hirata's expression was as dark and stormy as he had ever seen it

and he could not help but wonder if the bitter, chill wind that whipped around the barracks was nature or the Endou Clan Leader's spirit sword exhibiting its displeasure.

"Tenichi!" At the sight of him, Kikyue let out a yell, speeding towards him and grabbing him by the flaps of his hakamashita, glaring at him with intense, anxious eyes. "How long were you planning to take? We've got an important mission to attend — Nakata told you?"

"Yes, ma'am," Tenichi's body stiffened, and he bowed his head in apology. "I'm sorry, I overslept a little... I didn't mean to..."

"Kotetsu Tenichi," Hirata's voice cut across his excuses, and Tenichi gulped, turning to face his Captain as Hirata crossed the cobbles towards them. "Kikyue, stand back. Tenichi, I want to ask you something, and I want you to answer me as honestly and as clearly as you remember how to — do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," Tenichi spoke quickly, unease pulsing through his veins even as he jerked his head forward in a nod. "If I can, sir, please, ask anything."

"You reported to both Souja and I on your return to Seireitei, correct, before being discharged to Kikyue's authority?"

"Y... yes, sir."

"Tell me, was there anything you reported to Souja — anything at all, no matter how small it might have been, that you may have omitted to report to me when you stood before my desk?"

"Sir?" Tenichi swallowed hard, then, "Taichou, I'm sorry, but... I didn't... I don't think there was anything that I said to Fukutaichou that I wouldn't have reported to... you're my Captain, and so... and if I had forgotten, surely Fukutaichou would've... would've spoken to you as well?"

"One would think so, yes," Hirata looked suddenly weary, but he turned away from Tenichi, glancing at his daughter.

"Take them and go. Spread out over a wide area and ask questions," he said quietly. "I'll rouse Souja's usual second in command and send a second patrol after yours, so keep in contact. If you can't send a butterfly, send a runner back if you find anything. Keep looking until you do — if he returns in the meantime, I'll summon you back to base."

"Yes, sir," Kikyue saluted her father sharply, no hint of the close

father-daughter relationship they possessed in her demeanour. ‘Well, you heard that, didn’t you?’ this last to the division members. “We’re going after Fukutaichou, and we’re going to find him, no matter where we have to search or how long we have to do it. Tenichi, I want you here with me in particular — just in case you remember something that proves to be important.”

“Yes... yes, ma’am,” Tenichi reddened, but hurried to the front of the group and, with another salute, they hastened out of the courtyard, following Kikyue’s own brisk pace before slipping into shunpo and crossing through the gate to the land beyond.

As they re-materialised in woodland near the Seventh District border, Kikyue grabbed Tenichi by the arm, pulling him towards her.

“Where did you go, that night he came out to find you?” she demanded, and Tenichi stared at her, taken aback by the suddenness of her demand.

“Kikyue-dono?”

“Father didn’t tell me, but I know that my brother came to find you. Father sent him on an errand and he came back with you, so he knew where you were,” Kikyue said blackly. “Maybe he’s gone there again, or maybe because he went there, someone took him like they took you. We have to check it out.”

Tenichi was silent for a moment, and Kikyue’s brows drew together.

“Answer me! That’s an order!” she demanded, giving him a short, sharp shake. “Have you forgotten already who your superior officer and patrol leader is? Obey my orders, Kotetsu, or...”

“Fukutaichou told me that I wasn’t to speak of it.” Tenichi said slowly. “He said I wasn’t to talk about it and I wasn’t to go back there. I... I don’t know if... even if Kikyue-dono is the one asking me...”

“Niisama said that?” Kikyue blinked, the wind suddenly taken out of her sails. “Why? Did he tell you why?”

Tenichi shook his head.

“He just said I should not,” he said honestly. “He said it was better forgotten, and that I should not talk of it to anyone.”

“Kikyue-dono, do you think that, wherever this place is, that’s where the Fuku’s gone?” Nakata ambled up behind them, a question in his eyes. “If so, if he’d found something that he thought might put Kotetsu in danger to pursue, maybe that’s where he is.”

“In which case, we need to know,” Kikyue said decisively, turning back to Tenichi with fresh resolution in her gaze. “Tenichi, Father asked you whether there was anything you disclosed to Fukutaichou that you didn’t disclose to him. That was a lie, wasn’t it? Whatever Oniisama told you not to discuss, you didn’t talk to Father about it, did you? If you had... if you did, he’d know where Oniisama had gone, and he doesn’t. If Oniisama did leave of his own accord... if he wasn’t abducted... he could still be in trouble. He’d have come back by now, I’m sure of it... so we can’t just let it lie.”

“I...” Tenichi faltered, and Nakata clapped a hand down on his companion’s shoulders.

“Tell the lady, Kotetsu,” he said softly. “You saw the Taichou, he’s as worried as anyone about this business. You can consider this an order from him too, I expect — either way, the Fuku needs to be found, else the whole Division will be in chaos if they think another of their people has been snagged by unknown enemies. Best tell Kikyue-dono where the Fuku found you... if it’s wrong, well, I’m sure in the circumstances it’ll be overlooked.”

“Nakata, I don’t need you to authorise my orders for me,” Kikyue snapped, colour rising in her cheeks at the older man’s casual appraisal. “Tenichi, I’m ordering you to tell me where it was Fukutaichou came to find you. If anything more comes of it, I’ll take responsibility, because I’m patrol leader, but I demand you tell me what you know. Tell me what you didn’t tell Father — else I’ll tell him myself that you lied when he questioned you so directly back at base.”

Tenichi chewed his lip, remembering the silver-haired ghosts that had shadowed him, and Kurotsuchi’s words echoed through his thoughts.

They have long been hunting my master, and they are spies for the Endou in places and ways that even I don’t completely understand. They are traitor Urahara, boy. Underground spies, people whose lives have been bought and sold by the Endou Clan for some generations.

If Souja-dono spoke to them, if they know something... but if I lie to Kikyue-dono now, it will become even more suspicious. If Kurotsuchi was telling the truth, Souja-dono isn’t in Seireitei. If that’s the case, then he might be in serious danger, but if I was to tell Kikyue-dono that, then I’d have to tell her about Keitarou-san, and that would mean trouble, not just for me, but probably for Ketsui too. Kurotsuchi was right about that, damn him — if I’m implicated in something, even though my intentions aren’t what they’d think, nobody would believe that Ketsui wasn’t involved. We’re

too close... they'd never believe he was innocent, and then... but can I just abandon Souja-dono? He's not my enemy, he's my superior officer, and as a shinigami... my duty... but he made me promise not to talk about those silver-haired folk, and so surely that means he doesn't want me to...

"Kotetsu?" Kikyue's words held a demanding note, and Tenichi swallowed the bile that rose in his throat, letting out a heavy sigh and nodding his head.

"Seventh District," he said at length. "I was dumped by whoever had me hostage in Seventh District. In a forest... a thick forest... where Fukutaichou came for me. He knew the way, though — I didn't. My family came from Seventh originally, but it wasn't an area I was familiar with, and Fukutaichou guided me home. He told me not to talk about it and not to go back there, because it might be dangerous... and... and that was all."

"If we tried to follow the trail, do you think you could remember the direction?" Kikyue asked, and Tenichi nodded.

"In bits and pieces, I think, yes," he agreed reluctantly. "Kikyue-dono, Fukutaichou was adamant that it shouldn't be talked about, are you sure..."

"I'll deal with it," Kikyue cut across him, raising her hand to indicate to the rest of the group that they were heading off. "You just focus on remembering the pathway... let those of us in command handle the rest. Our orders are to find the Fukutaichou — everything else can wait."

The tunnel had been an unstable one.

As Souja carved through the opening with his sword, he stepped cautiously down onto the ground, pausing to assess his position briefly for any sign of danger. The first glimmers of morning light were beginning to crest over the horizon, rendering his surroundings more and more visible with every passing moment, but as he straightened his body, scanning the landscape for any sign of the young man he had pursued here, the barren emptiness of the environment struck him with a sudden chill.

Where was he?

The gateway had opened up in a part of Seireitei Souja did not remember there ever having been a *Senkaimon*, and although the person he had seen disappearing into it had worn *shihakushou*, something about his demeanour had been wrong. Now, as he regained

his bearings, the young Endou realised with a jolt that his hunch had more than likely been correct. The scenery was completely unknown to him, empty, grey and lacklustre, and the dry wind that whipped dull flurries of dust across the ground gave no indication of meaningful life. Though he had seen some bad battle scars in the worst-hit heartland of District Seven, he had never seen a place like this, and deep in his gut he knew where the gateway had dropped him.

Rukongai.

That man was an interloper — a presence in a place he should not have been, opening divides between worlds that should — and that have — remained quite separate. If I could find him, maybe I could learn how, and more importantly, why.

He hesitated, checking the horizon for any sign of shinigami activity, but felt none. A hazy, indistinct cloud of something he could only describe as reiatsu pollution hung heavy in the air, telling him with a jolt that this was not the troubled Spiritless Zone he had stumbled into, but somewhere beyond the boundaries of the Council's precious project. Somehow he had crossed into forbidden land, and though he was not sure how he was going to get back, right now all thoughts of his absence from his squad or his family's concern for him were replaced by a deep rooted curiosity to find out more.

I can't waste the opportunity. This may be the place Izumi was referring to. At the very least I should find that much out — doing so might protect the Kitsune and resolve the Gotei's problems, so to turn back now without investigating would be unforgivable.

Souja stifled a shiver as the wind cut through his bones, half wishing he had brought a thicker cloak with him. Still, he reasoned, a Clan cloak would be harder to hide — if there were indeed people here, they were almost certainly poor and he had no way of knowing whether they might be so desperate they might try to rob him as he passed on through.

Better to sheath my sword, in case I'm taken for someone hostile and set upon.

He glanced at his *zanpakutou*, before returning it reluctantly to its scabbard.

*Rukongai people might or might not understand what *zanpakutou* are, but Iwanosuri is a valuable looking weapon and waving it around is more likely to make me a target.*

He began to walk, the rough signs of what might be called a village

coming slowly into view and, as he approached it, the dust from the central concourse rubbed against his sandals, marking his white *tabi* a dirty grey-brown. The vibrant colours that he had come to take for granted when walking through the villages of his District were completely absent here — what grass remained was a seedy yellow brown and the trunks of trees looked haggard and thin, the flaking bark more like carved stone than the framework of a living creature. There were no flowers, though the odd browned petal lay carelessly scattered around the tree roots, surrounded by decaying leaves that had fallen out of season to create a haven of mud and mulch for the insects squirming beneath. The air was brisk and chilly, its emptiness only adding to the distinct frigidity of the environment as a whole.

He glanced up at the sky, taking in the heavy cloud that concealed the weak Rukon sun from view.

Is the air here so polluted, then, that it doesn't even allow for the sun to shine through?

A shadow darted past out of the corner of his eye and he swung around, hand reaching for the hilt of his sword as he anticipated an attack. None came, though, and there was just the fleeting sense of something or someone in the vicinity, gone as soon as it had come. The cloth divides that hung across the gaping openings of some of the broken down properties twitched and twisted slightly in the wind, and Souja frowned, the hairs on the back of his neck pricking up as he contemplated whether their movements had been caused by the elements or by ghostly, unseen hands.

This part of Rukongai was supposedly abandoned, but the mingling of unclear spiritual residue on the air made him wonder if that was truly the case.

Are Joumei and Izumi right? In which case, the person I followed back here... is he... one of them?

He shivered. Just because he could not see anyone, it did not mean nobody was there.

I wonder how much the Council — even Father — know about this side of the Rukongai wall. If there really are people living in this hellhole... if there are, then... something ought to be done about it and soon. If there are living souls suffering in this kind of environment, that can only breed dissention, and if Joumei and Izumi are right about the enemy we're looking for, there's no better place to hide than wasteland full of downtrodden forgotten souls. If there are even half as many Plus souls who have fallen on this side of the divide by mistake, then they could pose a very real threat. If someone like Aizen Keitarou mobilised them, made

promises to them... sold his fanaticism to them as the hope of a better life... maybe then some of them might break through the Rukon divide and enter into the Spiritless Zone. Maybe the reason the girl who killed the members of the Fourth Division hasn't been found is that she belongs to this Rukongai... instead of that one.

He frowned, not liking the way his thoughts were heading. *And then there's the other thing Jousei mentioned. Eiraki-basama's child. About my age, he said — or thereabouts. Is that child here in this place too? Did it live? Grow up and learn to hate Seireitei and the people in it? More... is it a girl, or... is it a son?*

He reached the end of the path, pausing for a moment to eye the bent and skeletal tree that greeted his arrival. Though the rest of the area had been in a sorry state, in comparison to this stretch of land, it looked like an untouched paradise. The grass which struggled to grow everywhere else had withered and blackened here, the dead branches of bushes and trees bleached and leafless as they swayed sorrowfully in the wind. Crushed fragments of white — maybe chalk, maybe bone — littered the ground in place of the fallen leaves, and although dawn had broken, Souja had the distinct sensation that he had encroached on a place of eternal night. At the far end of what seemed to be a worn pathway there was a wooden hut and, with one careful glance around him to make sure he was not being followed, Souja slipped through the divide, trying to ignore the sensation of cracking bird skulls beneath his feet.

There was something here, and as he drew closer to the hut, he could feel it more keenly, resonating in waves that, although vivid in their presence, seemed unreal and twisted out of their normal shape. The closer he got to the hut, the more intense the sensation was, but this only doubled his determination and he pressed on, pulling his cloak more tightly around his body as if to protect him from what felt like an army of spirits teasing at him with long, spectral fingers. As he placed his hand against the roughly hewn door, he almost thought he could see them, eyes reflected in the knots of the uneven wooden planks that stared at him accusingly for trespassing into their territory.

He frowned, pulling himself together. There were no ghosts in Rukongai, and even if there were, it would not be them that posed the greatest danger. The atmosphere was oppressive and unpleasant, but he could rationalise it, and he put his hand over the biggest knot in the wood, covering the eye from view and giving the door a hefty push. It did not move, and for the first time he was aware of a small silverish notch to the lower right, rusted in places but still clearly a functioning keyhole that told of recent use.

Well, and that wasn't put here by spirits.

Souja's eyebrows drew together thoughtfully, and he crouched down, pressing his finger to the lock and focusing his spiritual energy on a short, sharp burst of kidou, just strong enough to melt and dislodge the fastening from its rest. The door juddered and then swung open, revealing a yawning hole of fetid blackness beyond.

The sun, had it been visible, would have already moved to behind the hut, casting it in shadow, but despite Souja's understanding of such phenomenon, the inky darkness did nothing to reassure him about what he was about to find. Despite the waves of energy, he had not detected a person's living presence within the shelter, and he steeled himself, half wondering if he was about to find a stash of murdered bodies or worse, dissected body parts. Souja had heard in graphic detail from retainers and family alike about the experiments Keitarou had allegedly carried out on residents of Seventh District during his Great Grandfather's time, and he was under no illusions about the levels of base cruelty to which their enemy had previously stooped.

Nonetheless, it was his duty to go inside. He had to view everything, good and bad, and report it back to his father and the Council at once. If this was where Tenichi had been held... if Joumei had been right and this was Keitarou's base of operations, then it was his responsibility to find the truth, no matter how traumatic it proved to be. He gritted his teeth, clapping his hands together to produce a burst of blue kidou light to illuminate his path ahead. He was an Endou, he reminded himself. Endou did not flinch from death, and he would not do so, either.

He dipped his head slightly, stepping over the threshold and into the hut proper, glancing warily around him for any sign of immediate danger. To his relief, he could not see anything resembling human remains, and, as he moved deeper into the room, he noticed small notches dug into the walls on each side — crude but unmistakeable evidence of basic kidou lamps.

Shinigami are using this place, then. That makes the whole business more and more suspicious. I have to give Izumi credit. It looks like her hypothesis has some basis in fact.

Dispersing his own spell, Souja touched his index finger lightly to the nearest lamp, watching it flicker uncertainly into life. It cast the hut's interior in an eerie glow, but it was enough light by which to see and investigate his find, and Souja turned back to survey his surroundings once more, glad to have his hands free.

The room was plainly furnished, with a rumpled blanket and a moth-eaten pillow suggesting that from time to time the hut was inhabited. In one corner stood a wooden box, the lid held down with a heavy metal catch and, as Souja crossed the room towards it, he caught sight of ropes and spirit cuffs lying discarded to one side of the blanket. His heart chilled as he read the scene anew — not a place of sleeping, but a place of confinement, then? Was this a prison — somewhere where Tenichi and others had been held, their wits befuddled with unknown soporifics?

He bent to touch the blanket, and, as his skin touched the rough fibres, a flood of broken images rushed through his skull, piecemeal and incoherent and leaving him breathless. He drew his hand back hurriedly, struggling to regain his composure, but the hut around him remained silent as a tomb, uncaring of his distress.

Beyond the blanket and the restraints there hung a curtain and Souja moved towards it cautiously, this time pulling his sword from its sheath and turning it hilt first to push back the heavy folds of cloth. Beyond the fabric were thick lengths of wood constructed in a criss cross formation as if to resemble a prison, and, peering into the gloom, Souja could make out a small, square cell, the floor clean and covered in rushes but with no further sign of furnishment. The cell was empty, and to Souja's eyes it did not look as though it had been used for some time, so he allowed the cloth to fall back, returning his gaze to the main chamber itself. This, he reflected, had seen activity far more recently, but although nothing looked out of the ordinary, the air was thick with something indecipherable that made him want to turn tail and flee back the way he'd come.

Nothing was there now, but something had been. Something dark, something broken, something so filled with death and despair that it had soaked through the very walls and floor of the hut itself and dyed its malevolent presence into the wood's grain.

A sputter of the kidou lamp caused the light to flicker slightly, and, as it did so, something in the far corner of the room glinted. Souja frowned, turning to examine the object which, in a chamber full of wooden objects seemed oddly out of place. As he reached it, he realised that it was a sword, unsheathed and mounted on a rough bracket on the wall, thick straps holding it to its mooring as though whoever had put it there had feared it might escape on its own. Something about the sword made Souja wary to touch it — but as he peered at it, he detected a familiar sensation, and he frowned, squinting at the hilt more carefully to confirm his suspicions.

Sekkiseki? Why would anyone use Sekkiseki to hilt their weapon?

Especially since this... isn't a dead blade. This is Rukongai, but this sword... has a life force. Is it a zanpakutou? How can it be, with a hilt coated in something so poisonous? But whatever it is... whatever spawned it... this thing is alive.

Something was engraved deeply into the soft metal of the Sekkiseki ore, though it was difficult to make out the characters in the flickering light of the flames. Still, Souja persevered, allowing a faint glow of his own Kidou to brighten his surrounds. As he did so, for the first time the words became clear, and the sight of two of them cast a chill down his spine.

Aizen. Aizen something. Ko... haku? Does that say... Ko... haku?
He moved his finger to touch it, then faltered, reminding himself of the unpleasant sensation the Kitsune's Sekkiseki had left against his skin.

The first two characters are definitely Aizen. The second two are river willow, and white. I think that would be read 'Kohaku'...so is it someone's name?

His heart stilled in his chest for a moment as he put the pieces together.

Maybe the name of... Eiraki-basama's child? Does this weapon belong to them, then? Kohaku could be a girl's name or it could be a boy's — even if that's so, I'm still no closer to discovering anything of use.

He shivered, glancing at the weapon once again. Though it hung still and silent from the splintering wall, he almost thought he could hear a beating pulse, and though it was only a sword, he could not shake the sensation that it was watching him as intently as he was watching it.

But that sword gives me chills. Coated in Sekkiseki and strapped to the wall, almost as if by confining it one might confine a person's very soul within it. And, given the alleged nature of Aizen Keitarou's zanpakutou, maybe that's exactly what he's done.

He took a sudden step back, unnerved by this thought, and as he did so, something crunched beneath his feet. He glanced down, moving his sandalled foot back to reveal a crumpled sheet of worn parchment paper lying discarded on the floor. He bent to pick it up, smoothing it out to examine it, and as he did so, he realised that someone had written on it in dark, slashing ink, a desperate, slanted hand whose characters showed more haste than calligraphic grace. The paper was covered with spots of ink as though the writer's hand had shaken as he or she had cast down their words, but despite Souja's best efforts, their meaning eluded him. The top part had been torn away,

rendering the first word cut in two. The text was divided into two separate paragraphs, though, both written by the same hand;...*rdian of the silver treasure sleeps on a carpet of red. Sacred branches hang heavy with crimson rain, the shadow cast by the hunter's passing form their shroud.*

Bonds of life severed by a bitter blade, the wrong tree falls in a foreign forest, once uprooted, it is gone.

The first word is probably guardian, but even if that's true, it doesn't seem to mean anything.

Souja ran his finger absently alongside the first column.

A coded message for someone, perhaps?

He frowned, slipping the document into his obi.

I'll take it back anyway. At the very least someone can examine it as a match for Keitarou's writing and spiritual aura. Having never met him, that's not something I can do on my own.

He turned to leave, then froze, for standing in the doorway of the hut was a figure, watching him in impassive silence. He was a young man, and clean-shaven, though the dark hair scattered around his shoulders was tousled and untidy, as though it had not been properly brushed in some time. He was robed in rough, peasant clothing that had clearly seen better days, for in places the colours were faded and more than one seam had been patched with clumsy lengths of thread. His eyes were dark — brown, Souja thought, a muddy, clouded colour watching him from beneath hooded lids that seemed to conceal any kind of real emotion. At first glance, the newcomer appeared much the same as any of the common individuals Souja had encountered on progresses through District Seven. This wasn't a Seireitei individual, though, nor was it the youth he had pursued through the *Senkaimon* and as Souja processed those thoughts, the hairs pricked up once more on the back of his neck.

People are here, then, in wasteland Rukongai. Just as Joumei said.

There was a lengthy silence, then the man spoke.

"You shouldn't be here," he said softly, his voice neither accusatory nor confrontational, and Souja had the distinct impression that, despite his shinigami uniform and glittering weapon, this Rukon stray was not in the least bit afraid of him. "This isn't a place for people like you. You should leave here, while you still can."

"Who are you?" Souja's fingers inched towards the hilt of his sword, and at his movement, a faint, hollow smile touched the

stranger's lips.

"That's rich," he observed off-handedly, though there was a slight edge to his tones. "You invade someone else's land, and then demand them to identify themselves. This isn't Shinigami territory, Souja-dono. I'll say it again. You shouldn't be here. Leave, now, and don't come back. Don't ever come back — you can't be here."

"You know my name!" Souja's eyes widened in dismay, his hand claspng more firmly around the sword hilt now, and the young man raised his hands as if to indicate he had no weapon.

"Will you attack an unarmed peasant?" he asked lightly, and Souja had the feeling he was being mocked. "I came to warn you, not to hurt you. This land isn't safe for shinigami, and you shouldn't come here. Go back to your Seireitei — leave us alone."

"This land is meant to be empty. Nobody should be living here." Souja said firmly, grasping at the threads of his composure under the young man's level stare. He was not far from his own age, the Vice Captain realised with a jolt, Joumei's words about his estranged aunt once more ringing through his mind. "I'm here because it's my duty to be here. You're wrong when you say this isn't Shinigami land. All of Rukongai is the province of the Gotei. You are the one who shouldn't be here."

"Then tell me where else we are to go?" The youth was unflustered. "There is no place in Rukongai for people like us. Your Gotei made sure of that. If you take this place from us too, where else are we to go? Leave us be and go home, Souja-dono. Please, I won't tell you again. If you stay here, you won't ever leave. I promise you... you never will."

"Was that a threat?"

"It was a warning," the youth said flatly. 'A warning that forces more powerful than you work in ways you can't understand. You came here,' he gestured to the hut, "so you ought to realise that not everything is as it seems. Only foolish people step over that threshold and expect to walk away unscathed. It's a poisoned, tainted place full of evil pictures and dark thoughts. Stay too long and you might lose your mind... that is, if you don't lose your life here first."

"You *are* threatening me!" Souja drew his sword, but the young man merely laughed.

"I told you, I came to warn you," he repeated. "This place is dangerous. People have died here. You could die here too. It's no joke.

You've felt it, haven't you? The vibes in this shelter. This is a place of death. Leave it and go home."

Souja's gaze flitted to the sword on the wall, noting once again the tight straps that bound it in its place. His eyes narrowed.

"This is something to do with Aizen Keitarou, isn't it?" he asked quietly, and despite himself, the young man's eyes flickered slightly, as if in consternation. "This place is his domain. You're sheltering him. Maybe he's made promises to you... I don't know what he's said, or what he's done, but he's a dangerous man, and..."

"If you know that, you'll stay away," his companion interrupted him, and Souja's brows knitted together.

"I'm not afraid of danger. I'm trained to uphold Council justice and Aizen is an enemy of that justice," he said matter-of-factly. "I won't attack an unarmed man, of course not, but if you're colluding with or protecting him, you put yourself at risk of sanctions. Your best course of action is to tell me where he is — then I can go back to Seireitei, get help, and return. If I do that..."

"...Everyone here will die," the youth cut across him again. "I don't like death, Souja-dono. I don't like it at all. I don't want to see people suffer any more than they already are. That's why I'm asking you to go."

He stepped aside, gesturing to the entrance of the hut.

"I'll lock this door, and you'll go, and nobody need ever know you were here," he added simply. "I won't report it, and you'll leave us be. It's the best way for both of us."

Souja took a few steps towards the opening, then, as he drew almost parallel with the young man, he paused, turning to eye him carefully. The stranger met his gaze once more, his brown eyes giving nothing away, and Souja chewed on his lip thoughtfully.

"If you know who I am, you'll understand the dishonour Keitarou did to my family when he took my aunt and made her his wife," he said softly. "I have heard a child was born to that union, not long after they fled from the Council's gaze. He or she would be the same age as I, or thereabouts. If you know Keitarou, you will know if that child lives."

"Perhaps I know, perhaps I don't."

"Perhaps you *are* that child."

"Ah," the young man's lips twitched into a rueful smile, and he

shook his head. "Is that what you think? Then I've disappointed you. Maybe such a child was born, and perhaps it lives — but I am not it. I've heard tell that twenty five years have passed since your aunt went into exile and left her Clan behind. I am only twenty one summers — so you see, I'm far too young to be the one you seek."

"Then I don't suppose you can help me any further," Souja inclined his head slightly, half in apology to his companion. "Perhaps you did come to warn me, but even if you did, I have a duty that overrides the words of a Rukongai soul. I'm sorry, but I can't listen to your advice. If Keitarou is here, and my aunt, then finding them is paramount. The child, too, if it lives. For the sake of justice..."

"The child won't ever inherit the Endou Clan, Souja-dono," the words came like an ice cold blade out of the blue, cutting through the atmosphere and making Souja stop dead, staring at the young man as if seeing him for the first time. Though up till that moment he had not picked up on more than the slightest flicker of reiatsu from his companion, in that instant he felt something more, suppressed but unmistakably there.

"But you're..."

"Maybe you came from duty, but it's Clan pride that will destroy you," the young man's eyes bored into Souja's with a sudden intensity that made the Vice Captain take a step back. "The child, even if it lives, won't ever inherit your Father's title. It's not them who pose you a threat right now, but your own Clan foolishness in coming to find out the truth for yourself. Once you cross the divide, Souja-dono, you can't ever go back. Once you've seen what's on the other side, you can't go back to a time before you knew. Coming here... changed things for you. Even if you leave now... maybe it's too late, I don't know, but please..."

He reached out his hand suddenly, grasping Souja around the wrist and making the other man jump.

"Please, leave," now the words were soft, the eyes beseeching as though trying to convey something of greater importance than the stranger knew how to put into words. "If you do, perhaps it can be stopped. If you go now, maybe there's still a chance..."

He faltered, rubbing his temples with his other hand, and Souja gently prised himself free of the man's grip, shaking his head.

"You have me wrong," he said quietly. "I came here out of duty for the Seventh Division, not out of Endou pride. As a shinigami of the Gotei, I can't simply walk away when I know an enemy is here.

Whatever you say, whoever you are, however you know my name... I have higher orders. Keitarou is a wanted fugitive. If he is here, I must find proof of it."

With that he slipped into shunpo before his companion could stop him, darting through the streams of light until he found himself well away from the hut and its odd, eerie ambience. Setting down on the grass, he let out a sigh, bending to touch the yellowed blades with his fingers.

Here there is little life, there there was none. He was right about one thing — that hut, whatever it's significance, was a place of death, as though that sword's presence had choked the very life out of it. I felt it when I walked in — I can't pretend I'm not glad to be away from it.

He turned to glance around him, gauging where he was. The land was barren for miles around, slopes and curves masking dips and shallow streams, and from this position he could make out the clusters of ramshackle housing he had observed earlier on. The *Senkaimon* had brought him to this place originally, he realised, and, in trying to find a landmark he recognised as an anchor for his shunpo, he had returned here.

Whoever that young man was, I believed him when he said he wasn't that child. Perhaps he did have reiryoku, but even if he did, I doubt he could follow me through shunpo. There may be something in the stories about Plus souls being tainted by reiatsu and not completely Hollowfied by the experience — but I can tackle that when I get back. For now, I need more conclusive evidence of Keitarou's being here. Having seen that sword, I can't just walk away and pretend that I did not. If Father's going to be livid with me, I should at least have something to show for it. He's almost certainly noticed my absence by now — so I need to make my story good for when I return. If I have proof, then I can tell him Joumei's fears, too. So long as there's something tangible connecting Keitarou with this place...

The sudden shifting of the air around his body made him draw instinctively to his left and something whistled past his ear, embedding itself in a thud in the dead trunk of a nearby tree. Souja swallowed hard, taking in the short-bladed dagger that now adorned the wood with a deep-rooted sense of unease.

That young stray warned me of danger, and then this. Was I wrong about him following me? Is this his work, or something else?

"Tsch,"

The sound of a voice caused him to tense, hand grasping his sword and pulling it once more from its sheath as he searched for any sign of the speaker. He could see nobody, picking up not even the slightest

trace of foreign reiatsu but there was no doubt somebody was there, someone who had been watching him and who, if he had not moved as quickly as he did, would have struck a direct hit through his throat with the finely polished blade.

“I guess I should expect shinigami to have better reactions than common folk, though that hasn’t always been my experience.”

This time the voice was closer, as though whoever was speaking was stalking him and out of the corner of his eye he caught sight of a shadow as something slipped nimbly down the side of an old, half-demolished building, using the curves and crumbling piles of stone and wood to conceal themselves from his gaze.

It had been a woman’s voice.

Not the same person then. Worse and worse — that means there are more of them — whoever they are. I need to be careful — if the other one chooses to follow me, I’ll be outnumbered. And, more to the point...

Souja’s grip on his sword tightened, remembering all too clearly the report from the Spiritless Zone of the unknown female assassin.

But here? Maybe my idea was right. Perhaps they didn’t find her in the Spiritless Zone because she was already hiding out beyond its walls.

“Show yourself!” he commanded, his voice echoing strangely in the dry, empty atmosphere. “Hiding is a coward’s game — only weak folk attack from behind!”

“Oh, and you’d know all about that, wouldn’t you?” The woman’s voice was cold and cutting, but a rustle came from the shadows behind the building and, slowly, a figure emerged, stepping forward just enough that she was clearly visible in the brightening atmosphere of the Rukongai dawn. At the sight of her, Souja drew breath sharply into his lungs, taking out her slim form and her obvious youth with surprise and consternation.

I heard a report that she was young, but... surely not as young as this? She’s still just a child... maybe I’m mistaken.

His eyes flitted briefly to the dagger embedded in the wood, taking in how deeply it had pierced through the dead tree, and his gaze darkened.

No. That throw was meant to kill. Maybe this girl is still just in her teens, but that doesn’t mean I should let down my guard. Several people in the Spiritless Zone were killed by a girl wielding a dead blade. I can see her, but I can’t sense her... it’s too much of a coincidence not to be the same person.

“Well?” at his lack of response, the girl put her hands on her hips, her eyes glittering with contempt. “I thought shinigami had an answer for everything, but I guess that’s not always the case, is it?”

“I don’t have to answer to you for anything,” Souja said calmly, though inwardly he felt his spirit power gather and settle, readying himself to release his weapon if needed. “This is Rukongai, and the Gotei hold sovereignty here. I am the Vice Captain of the Seventh Division, and therefore...”

“Seventh...?” The girl’s expression underwent a transformation, then she snorted, letting out a derisive chuckle. “Oh, it gets better. So when you ran out of prey in your own world, you decided to come here hunting us instead, did you?”

“What are you talking about?”

“You’re an Endou,” the girl’s humour was gone in an instant, replaced by a look of pure hatred, the intensity of which on such a young face took Souja aback. “If that’s the case, I won’t go easy on you at all. Shinigami aren’t welcome here, but Endou especially... you’re scum, and I’ll enjoy gutting you.”

“You seem to know an awful lot about Seireitei, for someone who lives in the Rukon,” Souja kept his hand on his temper, despite the insult to his family’s pride. “The other lad called me by name, and now you, putting together Seventh and the name Endou without even a heartbeat to think it over. Who are you and what is your connection to the Gotei? Don’t tell me you don’t have one — someone must be feeding you this information, because otherwise...”

“You think Rukon people aren’t smart enough to know things by themselves?” The girl’s words dropped from her lips like ice, and she took a step towards him. At her side, her fingers twitched slightly, and Souja was unnerved to see a long, sharp-edged *katana* appear in her grip. “You think we’re stupid, mindless creatures who potter around waiting for important folk like you to decide how we should live our lives? You must be completely stupid. We don’t need outside help — we don’t need people like you. Not everything important happens in Seireitei.”

“I see,” Souja’s eyes became slits, and he lifted his left hand, resting his palm against the curled fingers of his right. “Then I was right. This does have connections to Aizen Keitarou. He’s here, isn’t he? He’s here, and...”

“You leave him out of it!”

As if he had lit a fire beneath her, suddenly the girl's stalking demeanour changed, her expression twisting into a visage of hate as she launched herself at him, her weapon primed to pierce him straight through the chest. Souja cursed, all thought of releasing his weapon forgotten as he shifted his weight to deflect the force of her blow, but no sooner had he done so than she had twisted and turned herself against him again, the *katana* blade glittering coldly in the pale morning light as it searched for a chink in his armour. Despite the lack of spirit power resonating from either the weapon or its wielder, Souja found himself hard-pressed to keep up with her speed or the ruthless stabs and thrusts of her weapon, and as he struggled to put space between them, he found himself thinking of the Rukongai dead, understanding what kind of assault they must have faced in their last, terrifying moments.

None of them were trained like I was to hold a sword. None of them would have been able to defend themselves, and so they died. A dead blade, Kai-dono said — but there's nothing dead about the one wielding it. The true weapon is the girl, not the sword.

He slipped into shunpo, appearing across the other side of the stretch of land and drawing a deep breath into his lungs, steadying his stance. The girl cursed, wheeling on him again, but this time he was ready for her, and his superior physical strength told, pushing her back until he had her safely at arm's length.

"Concealing a wanted felon is a crime against Soul Society punishable by death," he told her, his voice hoarse but steady despite the unexpected exercise. "Attacking a Vice Captain without due cause is also a serious offence. Either one of them could have you taken to Seireitei and held before the Council of Elders. If you don't want to be indicted for either thing, tell me the truth. Keitarou is here, isn't he? You know where he is and you're protecting him. You and that other boy — you're both shielding him. Tell me where he is."

The girl's eyes narrowed, and she glared at him coldly, before spitting in his direction.

"I wouldn't tell you if you were the last person in the world," she said blackly, her voice shaking with genuine hatred. "I have nothing to say to shinigami, and especially not one belonging to your people."

"By which you mean the Endou?"

Souja's eyes narrowed, taking in the girl's appearance more carefully. Though her face was twisted into an ugly mask of aggression, at this range he could clearly make out the curve of her

features and the eyes that sparked with indignant fire were a paler imitation of those he had seen staring down at him that day from the portrait of his aunt in the Gallery at the Endou family home. Despite himself, he took a step back, keeping a blade's length between them as he digested what he was seeing.

"But you're one too, aren't you? You're an Endou, too," he murmured, and at this, the girl's eyes widened with pure fury.

"Don't you ever call me such a thing again, you shinigami scum!" she shrieked, launching her blade at him afresh, and Souja's feet slid on the dry dirt as he repelled her, hurriedly drawing on and discarding spells as he worked out the best way to subdue her. "I'm no part of that family, not now and not ever!"

"But you fight like one," Souja pushed her back, taking a leap away from her and the two of them circled each other for a moment, each awaiting the next one's move. "You hunt to kill. You're a predator — I can see it in your eyes. You might be here, and you might revile the Endou Clan, but you're blood to it all the same. Keitarou is here, and you're protecting him — because you're kin to him, aren't you? You're an Endou too — you're Eiraki-hime's get, and that's why you're so keen to kill me. I can't explain why I can't sense your reiatsu — maybe you're suppressing it, maybe it's Rukongai's atmosphere, or maybe it's some other trick completely, but only an Endou can look at their prey with such a cold, calculating ruthlessness. You can't hide it from me — you're no Plus soul at all. The reports are wrong — the killer in the Spiritless Zone is an Endou, just as much as I."

"You don't know anything at all," The girl spat out, shaking her head.

"On the contrary, I think I do," Souja's eyes narrowed. "*You* were the one who went there and slaughtered them as though they were no more significant than invading mice. That was your handiwork — your blade. I thought it at the time, that whoever killed those people must've had the killer instinct of a predator, and I was right. It was Endou blood that killed them, and for that I should kill you. Fortunately for you, I've been raised to believe in the Council's justice — but I'll take you back to answer for it all the same, and if you value your life, you'll talk to the right people about Keitarou-san and what exactly is going on in this godforsaken stretch of Rukongai."

"You won't take me anywhere," the girl hissed, her eyes glittering with ice. "You won't tell anyone anything about me. I'm not like my brother. I don't let loose ends slip away from the sharp end of my sword."

“Your brother?” Souja’s eyes widened, his mind flitting back to the encounter in the hut. “You mean... the young lad? The one with brown hair, who tried to stop me back in the forest?”

“Brown hair?” The girl snorted, derision crossing her features, and she shook her head, spitting once more onto the ground as if something that Souja had said had offended her. “Don’t be stupid. That idiot’s no kin of mine — if he was, I’d slit his throat myself. Believe me, I’d like to, only I’m not allowed. Believe me, there are a lot of people I’d like to kill, if I was able — but you’re here, and you’re in front of me, and I’m allowed to kill you. Shinigami are my prey -and you know too much to be allowed to leave here, which gives me *carte blanche*.”

A dark glint entered her gaze.

“Even if you are kin to my mother, you’re no kin to me,” she added softly. “Your life is mine, shinigami... your bones can bleach here for all I care, because you’re never going home.”

“I’m sorry to disappoint you,” Souja shook his head, bring his sword firmly and cleanly across the flat of his opponent’s blade and striking it from her grip, sending it spinning into the air before it dropped like a stone to the ground. The girl froze, staring at her weapon in undisguised dismay, and, in the moment of her hesitation, Souja was on her, using his free arm to pin her to the ground whilst leveling Iwanosuri’s blade at her throat.

“I don’t like fighting blades with women, especially not kinsfolk, but I’ve been taught that anything connecting to my aunt is dangerous and needs to be stopped on sight,” he said quietly, regret in his pale eyes. “I’m not a killer by nature, and I take no pride in causing death, but if you fight against me again, I’ll have to hurt you. You’re just a child — do you even understand what you’re involved in?”

The girl’s eyes became stormy, and she glowered at him, but made no attempt to speak.

“You admitted that you were my aunt’s child, didn’t you?” Souja continued. “Not only that, but that you have a brother — an older brother, I suppose, about the same age as me?”

“Do you really think I’d tell you anything about my family, shinigami?” the girl spat at him, wriggling slightly beneath his grip. “You really do think I’m an idiot, don’t you? You’re the real fool, though. You call yourself an Endou? Endou are meant to kill people, not sit and talk to them like they want to win them over. They’re not people who stop and consider, they’re folk who hunt and kill. If you

think I'm like one of them..."

She trailed off, wriggling once more, but before Souja could open his mouth to speak, he felt a vicious, stabbing pain burrow through his gut and up into his chest, causing him to gasp and fall back in dismay. His free hand went instinctively to his chest, coming away coated in red, and he stared at the girl in disbelief, making out for the first time the short-bladed dagger clutched in her left grip. He blinked, his gaze darting to the tree trunk where, a few moments earlier, the dagger had been safely out of harm's reach, but to his horror there was nothing now but a hole in the wood where the weapon had been. In the struggle, she had retrieved it, and, like the hunter she was, she had allowed him to take her off balance, putting his guard down enough to strike a dangerous blow through his body.

"You..." he gasped, and the girl scrambled to her feet, amusement dancing in her blue eyes.

"I told you, you're the foolish one," she said quietly, taking a step towards him and tossing the blooded dagger aside, twitching the katana so that it caught the light. "If you know I'm a hunter, you shouldn't assume that I have only the one way to hunt. I told you I was going to kill you — and unlike you, I don't have mercy towards anyone who trespasses on my family's business. You should've killed me when you had the chance, but I knew you wouldn't."

"How..." Souja's grasp on his injured body tightened, the blood soaking through his *shihakushou* and staining the *obi* a bright, dazzling scarlet. He scrambled back a few inches, but she merely drew closer again, the excitement and anticipation of the kill glittering in her young gaze.

"You told me you'd seen that useless fool Koku, but you didn't kill him," she said simply. "He's too weak and sissy to kill anyone, so he wouldn't have given you much of a fight if you'd wanted to finish him. You're covered in blood now, but when we met, you weren't. If you'd killed him, I'd have known you meant to do the same to me — but you let him go, and now you've let me take you off guard, too. The Endou have fallen, haven't they... when a hunter becomes the hunted? I wonder what your family will say when you don't come home — or how much shame there is for an Endou prince who dies on Rukongai land..?"

She reached his side, her feet less than an inch from his ribcage.

"You won't need to worry about it, though," she continued brightly, raising the sword up over his throat and Souja swallowed, knowing

that she fully intended to strike him through. “That, or me, or anything else you think you learned here. That’s why I kill shinigami, Endou-dono... because that way, they’re no longer able to talk about things that might prove troublesome for people here.”

She lifted her right foot, placing it very purposefully against Souja’s wrist and, with a decidedly triumphant smile, she shifted her weight from her left, slowly pressing the Vice Captain’s limb into the earth. Souja let out a yell of pain, hearing the sound of his bones crunching beneath her weight, but the girl just laughed, bending to pick up his discarded weapon and tossing it away from his reach.

“I think it will be better without that getting in the way,” she said, and there was no concealing the predatorial edge in her words as she bent over him, apparently pleased by the tears of pain that had sprung into his pale eyes. “Well, Endou-dono, let’s see how much fun killing you is going to prove to be.”

25. Choking Darkness

Chapter Twenty Four: Choking Darkness

The sky was already beginning to lighten over Inner Seireitei as Masaya cloaked himself in darkness, scuttling between patches of shrinking shadow as he hastened away from the Seventh Division barracks and the unfortunate subject of his baiting. Tenichi's reaction had both amused and disgusted him, and again he found himself wondering why Keitarou had chosen to waste time and energy having the older Kotetsu brother brought to Rukongai in the first place.

I shouldn't question Keitarou-sama, but sometimes I wonder what this fascination is he has with those who share his blood.

The spy grimaced, pulling himself up into the branches of a sturdy elm tree and using the mottled shade of its branches to conceal himself, slipping into shunpo and speeding more quickly through the spiritual streams of energy towards the main gate. Even in his days as an Onmitsukidou, he reflected, they had scarcely ever noticed his entrances or exits, but these days, with his skills so honed and his focus so unwavering, he could slip in and out of the most secure region of Seireitei without even leaving a spiritual trace. Yes, Keitarou had certainly delivered on his promise to make him a new person, and, as he rippled past the unsuspecting guard on duty, he allowed himself a smirk of derisive triumph.

Had he ever been so stupid as to care about this place? Perhaps he had, but if so, he did not remember. His recollections of Seireitei were patchy and grey, covered beneath layers of mental dust at the back of his thoughts and he preferred it that way. To have ties and concerns like the Kotetsu boy was to have weaknesses, and without them he was unshackled and free to serve Keitarou's cause.

He spread his hands beneath his cloak, reaching out his senses for the nearest Gotei gate through which he could conceal his tracks and disappear from the heart of the shinigami's territory. He would go to Haruna, he decided absently. He had no intention of returning to Rukongai so long as Katsura and his unwanted follower had headed back there, for he had no wish to provoke Koku into carrying out his threat, but nor could he risk lingering too long in dangerous Gotei territory. No, Haruna was the best place for him to lurk, for Minami was still tied enough to him to protect him, even if he gave her

nothing in return. She had been a useful pawn in Keitarou's schemes and, when he had discussed it with the scientist, Keitarou himself had agreed that keeping Minami on side would prove beneficial. Masaya did not really understand why his former wife was so tied to the past, locked onto his former name and the person he had long since discarded, but he had gleaned enough from her behaviour to realise that her love for him meant she would not betray him, even if it meant her life. That kind of loyalty was hard to find in a place as treacherous as Seireitei, and so, when it came to finding a place to lie low, Haruna was the first place that sprang into his thoughts.

The land he currently stood on belonged to the Fourth Division, but although his emotional recollections had been dulled and splintered by his near-death experience, Masaya's geography of Seireitei and the gates that linked the regions together was still as ruthlessly clear as it had ever been. Here, he knew, the Districts came together like spokes of a wheel feeding into the nucleus that was Inner Seireitei and, as a consequence, it was the one area where transference between land holdings was both quick and simplistic. Some two *ri* beyond the borders of Inner Seireitei were a series of linked *Senkaimon* set up fifteen years before by the Urahara to connect these frequently patrolled stretches of land and facilitate ease of shinigami movement between the Gotei's base and the peasant settlements that covered the hills beyond. Masaya remembered with complete clarity where each gate was and how each could be opened without leaving a trace and so, without a moment of hesitation he drew the nearest gate open, stepping into it and focusing his energy on emerging near the village which he had once called his home.

It was not quite fully sunrise, and the market and village was quiet, with only the odd individual moving about, going to the well to collect water, or preparing their wares for the day ahead. Masaya pulled his cloak more tightly around his thin frame to conceal his features from anyone who might pay him any attention, walking along the dusty main street towards the cluster of houses that were the most familiar. Haruna was a wealthy town in comparison to some other District settlements, with proper dwellings built of stone and trees from the nearby forest and Minami still lived in the house that had once belonged to Masaya and his mother, many years ago. Masaya did not really remember those days clearly, nor did he have more than a couple of fleeting recollections of his mother's face, but the shape of the home itself he remembered vividly, including each and every escape hole that he had ever had cause to use when operating as a petty thief. That had been before he had made the ultimate mistake in joining the Onmitsukidou, he ruminated absently — but those days

were long gone and there was no changing them now, even if he had cared to do so.

“What are you doing here?” As he approached the house, someone yanked on his arm, pulling him into the cracks between buildings and hissing in his ear. Masaya’s body tensed, ready for combat, but as he wheeled to face his opponent, he realised it was Minami herself, dressed for market and with an indignant, anxious look on her handsome features. “I thought I told you that coming around here so often was dangerous, and now you’re walking openly down the main street when anyone might see you?”

“Nobody pays me any attention,” Masaya said dismissively, detaching his arm from her grip and facing her impassively. “I came to see you. I need somewhere to stay for a little while, and here seemed the most logical.”

“Oh, so now you use me as board and lodgings?” Minami was indignant. “Never mind what damage it might do to me or my reputation if people thought I had a strange man suddenly staying here? You’re the one who keeps telling me that my husband is dead and I have to manage without him — what do you suppose my neighbours would say if they thought I’d taken a lover?”

“You needn’t concern yourself with that,” Masaya’s lip curled derisively over sharp, white teeth. “I have no interest in creating village scandal.”

“No interest...” Minami’s brow creased briefly, as though his words had somehow hurt her, then she seemed to pull herself out of it, grasping him by the wrists. “Listen. It would be bad enough if folk saw you and thought I’d lost my moral values, but even worse if they saw you and recognised you. You say you look different, and yes, you do, but not so much that I don’t recognise you. True, I’m your wife, and that’s how it should be but... if people saw you too much in my company, they might put the pieces together and realise. If that happened...”

“You worry too much about ties to the past,” Masaya said levelly. “Those are all severed. Suzuki Naoto died. Why would anyone believe they saw him here?”

“You might have severed those ties, but not everyone is that cold or clinical,” Minami snapped, a bitter edge to her tones. “You had friends here who grieved for you when you disappeared. People who supported me — people who still do. People who believed you’d died — what would those people think? I’ve told you that I’ll do what your

Keitarou-sama says, but if you keep coming back here...”

“Has someone been here?” Masaya asked sharply, and Minami shook her head impatiently.

“Of course not. What do you take me for?” she demanded. “The only folk that have been in these parts are traders, and they come and go every day. Nobody’s asked any strange questions, nor have there been any shinigami patrols. I’d like to keep it that way, if you don’t mind. If they knew that those stupid junior officers had been kept locked and bound in my cellar...”

“If nobody is asking questions, nobody will find answers, will they?” Masaya sank back against the wall with a grimace. “You worry about the wrong things. If you’re loyal to Keitarou-sama, then protecting me should come automatically... or is it too much to expect a woman to understand that level of loyalty?”

“Shut up!” Anger flared in Minami’s eyes, and she brought her hand sharply across his cheek, causing him to stumble in surprise. “You have no idea what loyalty is, Suzuki Naoto, damn you! What kind of foolish person clings on to the walking corpse of their husband, even when he no longer cares for her, just because seeing him occasionally makes her believe she has a reason to keep living? Do you know how much I still hope that, one day, I’ll find the person I married inside that shapeshifting cadaver? You abandoned me, and you say I don’t understand loyalty?”

She gazed at her hand, then sighed, rubbing her brow.

“If you said you loved me, I’d still take you back,” she whispered, tears glittering on her lashes. “That’s a woman’s loyalty, Naoto. Maybe once you would’ve understood that... but now... I don’t think you can.”

“My loyalty is to Keitarou-sama,” Masaya said quietly, touching his cheek briefly, then lowering his hand. “Yours should be too — any other kind of distraction is unnecessary and you should discard it. I have.”

“I know,” Minami’s voice shook. “I know you have, damn you, but we’re not all like you.”

She folded her arms across her chest.

“Well? Why do you need to hide out here, anyway? Why not go back to Rukongai? I assume something’s happened in Inner Seireitei, but you don’t usually come here to me like this... and I’m not so stupid to believe for one moment it had anything to do with wanting

to see me.”

“A Vice Captain’s gone missing from Inner Seireitei,” Masaya said simply, and Minami’s eyes became wide.

“Did you...?”

“No, of course not. Keitarou-sama said no more abductions, and I obey his orders,” Masaya snorted, shaking his head. “No, it’s nothing to do with me. He’s a busybody who’s prying into things he should not. But he’ll be dealt with, and I’d sooner be away from the centre of chaos when that happens.”

“I don’t suppose I’ll get any more, even if I ask for it,” Minami rolled her eyes. “Fine, then I suppose, since my basement’s free, I could lock you in it for a while. Nobody goes down there, not since I told my neighbours that it was infested with rats and better left alone.”

She smiled bitterly.

“There are rats, as it happens, so if you get hungry, you’ll be able to feed yourself,” she added acidly. “I’m sure, given your current attitude towards the world, that you’d not have any qualms about slaying a few rats, and it would make you useful to me in one way, at the very least.”

“I’m not afraid of rats,” Masaya said disparagingly, and Minami nodded.

“Then you and they will be well matched,” she returned neatly. “Come with me. There’s an entrance hidden around the back of the house and less people will see you if you go in that way.”

“Fine,” Masaya nodded his head. “You could have begun with that, though, and wasted less time with your unnecessary emotional outbursts.”

“I should slap you again,” Minami said blackly, “but for now I’ll just have to hope you get a few rat bites. I don’t have time to fuss over you — I have to be at market soon enough, and if I’m not there, people will know something is up.”

She took him by the hand, giving him a rough tug towards the rear passage that led to the back door of her home and Masaya did not resist, instead glancing around him to gauge the progress of the sun. It would be fully daylight before too long, he mused, but it should be possible to conceal himself fully in Minami’s basement long before the streets became busy with visitors from the surrounding area. Yes,

Haruna had been the best place to come to, given the number of strangers which flooded its streets on a daily basis. The flow of people was such that, when the time was right, he could melt away in the midst of a crowd of customers and nobody would ever be the wiser for his having been there.

As he stepped over the remains of the old boundary fence that had been knocked down in a recent storm, however, something faint flickered across Masaya's senses, causing him to pause. He frowned, turning in the direction of the sensation as he tried to work out what it was and where he had sensed it before.

"Naoto?" At his hesitation, Minami too paused, shooting him a quizzical look. "What is it — why are you hesitating? I thought I told you, I don't have time..."

"Shut up, you stupid woman," Masaya snapped, pushing her instinctively behind him as he extended his spiritual wits across the village space, unease growing with each and every passing moment. No, he had not imagined it. Though faint and clearly suppressed, he could make out the clear and distinct aura of a shinigami, and more, one of considerable rank. He muttered a curse, glancing at Minami, then taking a step away from her.

"Naoto?"

"Don't call me by that name," Masaya ordered, swiping her hands away as she reached once more for his wrist. "Get inside your house and stay there. Stay there, do you understand?"

"What do you... I have market to go to, and..."

"There are shinigami. You're too dull-witted to notice, but they're there and they're coming this way," Masaya cut across her, anger surging through his body, and at his words, Minami paled, her eyes widened as she followed the line of his gaze.

"Shinigami? Coming here? But why?"

"It may be a random patrol, but it may not," Masaya spoke in low tones. "Just do as I tell you, woman. If anyone comes asking you questions, you don't know anything about anything. Your husband died ten years ago and that's all — understand?"

"Are you just going to abandon me to deal with them?" Minami demanded, fear replaced by indignation in her eyes. "I knew you'd sunk, but not to that depth! You'll really sacrifice me and the people here in order to make a getaway? Your reaction tells me you don't think it's a random patrol, yet even so..."

“Shut up!” Masaya retorted. “I’m not staying here, not when it’s dangerous. I’m leaving Haruna, and you should do as I tell you. Shinigami won’t hurt innocent people — and you said there’s been nobody here asking questions.”

“No, nobody has,” Minami shook her head quickly. “Nobody has, but... what if that’s just because they didn’t need to? What if they know about you... what if they know about me? What if...”

She trailed off, and Masaya turned to glance at her, taking in the pallor in her cheeks and the wide, apprehensive eyes that stared at him with a mixture of hope and dismay. She was trembling, he realised with a sudden jolt, her strong, defiant facade suddenly shattered by the thought of a shinigami invasion, and, despite himself, something stirred deep inside of his heart.

She’s Keitarou-sama’s ally, too. I should protect her for that reason. This village is our land. I should protect it, else Keitarou-sama will be angry.

He clenched his fists, rationalising the feeling until it settled and calmed into resolve inside of him.

That’s right. Protecting allies of Keitarou-sama is my job, and Minami isn’t one who usurps his favour or takes advantage of his benevolence. She acts as he tells her and no more. Keitarou-sama finds her useful, so he’d want me to protect her. That’s my duty... so that’s what I’ll do.

“Go inside your house, and shut the door. Bar the windows, if need be,” he said softly, and Minami let out a little gasp as she met his gaze, as though seeing something there that she had not seen for a long time. “If anyone comes here, tell them what I said. Your husband is dead. Cry, if you like — you’re good at that, and it throws people off, when a woman cries over them. Do that, and don’t worry about anything else. They won’t linger here — they won’t need to, I promise.”

“What... are you going to do?” Minami asked shakily, and Masaya’s gaze darkened.

“I’m going to do what Keitarou-sama would expect and protect those who are loyal to him,” he said matter-of-factly. “It’s a nuisance, but it can’t be helped. This location is important to Keitarou-sama’s plans, and so I can’t let it fall into enemy hands.”

“You’re... going to protect me? Protect us?” Minami’s eyes almost fell out of her head, and Masaya snorted, pushing away the hand she had hesitantly begun to reach out towards him.

“Don’t mistake me, woman,” he said curtly. “Suzuki Naoto might have been that kind of fool, but I act out of duty to Keitarou-sama, not

to you or anyone else. Be grateful that he considers you useful — otherwise I'd simply leave you to die."

Minami's eyes glittered with tears, but Masaya did not hesitate to hear her response. Instead he slipped back into shunpo, heading towards the direction he had felt the encroaching reiatsu and inwardly cursing at having his day so summarily disrupted.

They're definitely heading to Haruna. Minami might have been mistaken — maybe there were spies here, and they covered their tracks better than she thought. That's what comes of trusting an amateur — but I won't let them reach the village. If they're looking for trouble, I'll have to give it to them myself.

He dropped out of shunpo, landing deftly on the branch of a nearby tree and scanning the land below him for any sign of the shinigami. There were two of them, he realised, both dressed in the identical black and white of a Gotei officer, swords hanging at their waists. One was a young man, scrawny and skinny, whilst the other was a young woman, slightly built. Masaya let out a sigh of relief as he realised that neither one of them looked particularly physically strong.

A coincidental patrol? Maybe it was. Either way...

Fumbling beneath his cloak for his own sleeping sword, Masaya prepared to launch himself from the branches, suppressing his *reiryoku* down to infinitesimal levels and blending and blurring his appearance in with the woodland so as to better camouflage his attack. As the shinigami paused to examine something on the ground, he took his opportunity, shooting down from the tree like a bullet from a gun and aiming the sharp end of his weapon directly for the young woman's jugular. As he did so, however, there was a sudden rush of air and spiritual energy and, with a resounding clang, his weapon met against another, stopping him in his tracks and causing him to step back.

He raised his gaze, horror and dismay glittering in his golden eyes as he met the grave hazel eyes of the Gotei's Thirteenth Captain, white *haori* flapping about his shoulders and long white hair tied in a tail at the nape of his neck. In the other man's right hand was the distinctive form of a gleaming *katana*, its sharp edge pressing against Masaya's own blade with just enough force to hold it at bay. For a moment he was frozen, and Juushirou pressed his lips together, running his gaze pensively over his sudden opponent.

"Well, well," he murmured, a look of troubled comprehension glittering on his features as he took in the spy's amber gaze. "Suzuki Naoto, I presume?"

For a moment, Sakaki allowed her full weight to crush the bones in the shinigami's wrist then, as his eyes began to cloud with pain she drew her foot back, lowering her sword to touch it pensively against his cheek. Far from the quick, deadly thrust that Souja had expected, now her victim was down, she had no desire to end the fun quickly. A shinigami infiltrating Rukongai was a rare event and, unlike the last one, this one she had no reason to hold back on.

The wound to his gut was serious, but it would not prove fatal. It had been enough to stun him, but, as she brought her weapon away from his skin, he struggled to pull himself into a more defensive position, his snapped wrist hanging uselessly from its socket as he pushed his elbow against the ground as a lever instead. His left hand was already reaching out for the discarded hilt of his sword, and despite her contempt for those who wore the *shihakushou*, Sakaki was grudgingly impressed by the resolution in her opponent's gaze. Although he had not made to kill her, he had not begged her for mercy, either, and for a moment she let him gather himself, waiting until he was within inches of grasping his *zanpakutou*'s hilt before jerking out her right foot to kick him bodily in the throat and send him flying two or three metres back along the ground. He fell with a crunch and a groan, and Sakaki half wondered if the fall had shattered his other arm but, once again, there was the sound of scrabbling fingers against the dying grass and, panting for breath and dripping with blood, the shinigami pulled his body around to face her, resting his entire weight on his uninjured left hand whilst using the damaged right to protect his injured torso. His eyes fixed on her face, unblinking and cold with anger, but the colour of his skin was already becoming pale and Sakaki knew from past experience that he would be getting weaker from both the loss of blood and the shock of her attacks.

"I take what I said back, though," she said coquettishly, skipping nimbly around him and bending to pick up his finely crafted sword. "You aren't as weak as I thought you were. Most souls would be begging for their lives right about now — but you won't do that, will you?"

"Endou... don't... beg," Souja managed to spit the words out hoarsely, and Sakaki let out an approving chuckle at the flash of blind hatred that flared up in his eyes. "You... don't... understand... what... you... unleash... when... you... declare... yourself... our... enemy."

"What, exactly, are you going to do to me?" Sakaki squatted a short distance away from him, lifting her arm and tossing his

zanpakutou across the grass so that she was between him and retrieving it. “You have no sword and I know that with an injury like that you won’t be able to use your demon magic.”

She tapped her head with the index finger of her hand.

“I learned young that, if I can’t use spells, I have to be able to stop anyone I fight using them,” she said confidentially. “You can threaten me all you like, Endou-dono, but it won’t make any difference. You’re down to my level now. Humbled by a Rukongai resident who has no spirit power and no magic sword. Don’t you feel ashamed of yourself? I’m sure your Clan would be ashamed of you.”

Her eyes narrowed, and she squinted at him thoughtfully.

“I haven’t met anyone from the Endou Clan before,” she admitted. “It’s kind of fun, to actually fight with one. I’d heard they were powerful and ruthless — you weren’t really, but at least you don’t die easily. I like that at least.”

“*Hadou... no... Yon... Byaku..rai!*”

A sudden blast of white electricity zig-zagged across the clearing, narrowly missing Sakaki’s leg and causing her to yelp, jumping to her feet with a cry of indignation.

“Hey, you’re not supposed to be able to...!”

“Maybe... you didn’t... hear me,” Souja’s eyes were like slits now, the normally pale, gentle gaze sparking with cold fire as he reached his shaking left hand out for a nearby shard of broken tree wood, using it to pull himself painfully and slowly to his feet. “I’m... the *Vice Captain*... of the Seventh... Division.”

“I don’t care if you’re the King of Soul Society, you’re not going to ruin my fun by escaping,” Sakaki pouted, tightening her grasp around her katana and preparing to launch herself at him once again. “Just because you got to your feet, it doesn’t mean I’m going to let you get away. I’m not an idiot and I’m not going to let a loose end like you slip out and bring trouble down on the people here.”

“Stop me,” Souja’s gaze was already roving across the grass behind her for the glint of his *zanpakutou*, and Sakaki let out a growl of annoyance, driving forward with her blade angled directly at his injured stomach. Souja’s movements were slow and shaky, but he managed to flare a feeble *bakudou* shield to deflect the weapon away from his vital organs, causing it to glance through his useless right arm instead. Fresh blood spurted from the wound and he let out an involuntary yelp of pain, but he did not fall back, and Sakaki cursed,

realising that he truly meant to keep fighting her until he literally dropped dead from loss of blood or exhaustion.

Mother always said that the Endou were hard to kill but professionals at killing. He didn't look like a killer before but now, covered in blood and with that look in his eye, maybe I see it. Perhaps it's there, even in this one — the predator looking for his prey. Probably that means my game is over — I ought to finish him off quickly, and save decorating his body till after he's dispatched.

As Souja made a desperate lunge past her, aiming to retrieve his sword with his one remaining good hand, Sakaki took her moment, barging her smaller body into his taller one and knocking him off balance. He stumbled, flailing his damaged arm helplessly to try and stabilise himself, but Sakaki was not about to let her opening pass and she drove him mercilessly to the ground, slashing her weapon towards his upper body without caring particularly where she cut. Her first swing ripped through the black *hakamashita*, but the second and third drew blood and Souja yelled out, bringing his left hand up instinctively to push her weapon away. His fingers slid against the sharp edge of the blade, smearing blood across it, but Sakaki was beyond reasoning with now, and she merely brought her weapon back only to attack again, driving the tip this time towards Souja's throat. The Vice Captain saw the attack coming, mustering the last of his strength to fire an even more feeble *Bakudouto* to deflect the sharp blade from slicing through his jugular, but Sakaki responded with a well-aimed kick to the ribcage, sending Souja once more sliding across grass which had been made slick by his spilled blood.

"Time to finish it off, Endou-dono," Sakaki's words had lost all humour, and she gripped the hilt of her weapon tightly in both hands, preparing to swing the blade one final time across his neck to sever his head from his body. Souja flinched, seeing the attack coming, but Sakaki knew he had exhausted his strength on trying to defend against her, and this time, he would not be making any kind of escape.

This time, he was hers for the taking.

This time...

"What have you done?"

The sound of Koku's voice, sharp and uncharacteristically cold cut through the morning air, and Sakaki swung around, blood still dripping from her katana as she faced her Rukongai rival. Defiance glittered in her blue eyes, and she moved to stand in front of the fallen body of her victim, as if claiming him as hers.

“This is nothing to do with you,” she hissed, her eyes narrowing to slits. “This is my business. My job. Go back to your books, Koku. You’re not wanted here. This is nothing to do with you.”

“I said, *what have you done?*” Koku’s brown eyes glimmered with something that Sakaki had never seen there before, and despite herself, she felt a chill run down her spine. Her fingers tightened on the hilt of the sword, and she thrust it out, spraying blood across the ground as she stretched the red-stained point between them, using it to keep her challenger at a safe distance.

“I’m killing a shinigami,” she snapped back. “That’s my job. I protect this place, and he came here when he shouldn’t.”

She cast the still Souja a cursive glance, as if to make sure he wasn’t using the interlude to wriggle away, but he had made no attempt to move, and she realised that he had either lost consciousness or expired.

“He asked about Father,” she added. “When he said that, do you think I was going to let him go?”

“You’re a damn idiot, just like always,” Koku retorted coldly. “Don’t you think that it will bring trouble raining down on our heads if you kill one of the Gotei’s senior officers? Do you know who that man is, Sakaki? Do you have any comprehension whatsoever of who you’ve just blooded with that godforsaken shard of metal?”

“Just because my sword doesn’t have a soul, it doesn’t mean it can’t slit your throat, so don’t insult it,” Sakaki exclaimed petulantly. “Besides, why should I care who he is? A dead enemy is a dead enemy. Dead enemies don’t talk. What does it matter what his name is? He won’t be using it any more — and if you let me finish my job, there’ll be nothing recognisable left of him anyway, even if someone should decide to come looking for him.”

“He’s Endou Souja, you moron,” Koku’s tones were impatient, but Sakaki felt certain she could hear a certain note of fear or urgency underpinning them, something she had never heard in Koku’s voice before. “Endou Souja, heir to the Endou Clan and son of Endou Hirata! Surely you can’t be dense enough not to know who he is, not when Eiraki-san is...”

“He did say something about an aunt,” Sakaki acknowledged, kicking absently at the black-fabric covered legs that sprawled at her feet, but there was no response, not even the faintest murmur of pain. “I told you, though, I don’t care what the shinigami think or what they do. I kill shinigami. If they come here, I’ll kill them, too. I’ll kill as

many as they send, so you needn't look so frightened. Just because you were a coward and let him escape, you shouldn't expect the same from me."

She offered him a mocking smirk.

"I won't even tell Father that you met him before he came here, but you let him go," she taunted. "I fixed your mess for you, and I won't even tell on you. You would've let him go back to Seireitei with all kinds of dangerous information... he even thought you were my brother, and he recognised me just by looking at me, that I was mother's child, and he knew I'd been in the Spiritless Zone, too. He was far too dangerous to let go, whoever he might've been. Besides, it's pointless to worry about now."

She kicked the still leg once more, but there was no reaction, and she snorted.

"He's already beyond anyone's help. If you want to make yourself useful, you can bury the corpse — I've lost interest in it now you've come along and ruined my fun. You can have it, if you like — I don't want it any more."

Koku's gaze flitted to the still form on the ground, and Sakaki saw his eyes darken until they glittered an ominous black.

"I see," he murmured, his words trembling with something that wasn't quite anger, but something else, a pent up emotion so deep and intangible that it made Sakaki ill at ease. All of a sudden, the entire clearing seemed to be filled with a choking, whispering energy, and the younger girl stumbled, almost tripping over her fallen victim in her hurry to put further space between her and her companion. All around Koku's body, the air seemed to distort and become suddenly more vivid, as though the gathered clouds of polluted spiritual energy had been forced apart, driven back by whatever strange energy had wrapped itself around Koku's aura. She took two or three steps back but, although Koku made no attempt to follow her, he turned his gaze suddenly on her and for the briefest instant Sakaki felt as though something savage was clawing at her throat, trying to drown her in an invisible sea of spiritual pressure.

"What the hell are you doing?" she demanded, no longer defiant, as fear gripped hold of her heart. "What are you... why... how... stop it! Stop it, Koku! Stop it and leave me alone!"

"You did something you should not have done," Koku's voice sounded foreign to Sakaki's ears, mired in the whispers and flashes of colour that fought to dominate her senses. Though she knew he could

not use shunpo, she did not see him move, yet in a moment he was beside her and, before she could react, he had grasped her by the rough collar of her *hakamashita*, pulling her towards him so that her face was less than an inch from his. His gaze bored into hers, seeming to see right through her to the soul beneath, and try as she might, she could not look away, although meeting the intensity of that stare made her dizzy and afraid.

“I should kill you now, but it’s not your time,” he whispered, and Sakaki gathered her courage, swinging her sword around towards him. There was the clash of metal on metal, the vibration running through Sakaki’s whole frame, and her eyes widened in consternation as she realised that from beneath the folds of his robe Koku had produced a weapon of his own.

In all the years she had known him, never once had she seen Koku wield a sword. In fact, as she stared in dull disbelief at the ugly greyish weapon clasped between his dusty, pale fingers, she could distinctly remember him telling Keitarou that he did not want to learn to fight with blades, because he didn’t want to cause anyone to get hurt. She had mocked him for so many years for what she had interpreted as weak-willed cowardice, yet then, as their swords had met, she had felt the intent behind her companion’s swing and it had unnerved her.

“Wh... where did you get that?” she demanded, as Koku pushed her blooded weapon away as though it were nothing more than a flower petal that had fluttered into his line of vision. “You don’t use a sword! You said...”

“It wasn’t time, then,” Koku said softly. “It’s not time now, but you do things that make me angry, and this time, it’s not something I can ignore.”

He gestured to the crumpled form of her victim on the ground with the sharp end of his weapon, which glinted strangely in the pale Rukongai light, giving it an eerie appearance that once more chilled Sakaki to the core of her being.

“You should not have killed him,” he said softly. “It was badly done, and you will pay for it.”

“Are you going to kill me, then?” From somewhere Sakaki found bravado, though inwardly she was trembling like a leaf at this sudden, unexpectedly aggressive onslaught. “Take your stupid, ugly weapon and kill me because you’ve suddenly developed an attachment to the Endou Clan and you’re scared that I spilled a little bit of their blood?”

My blood is Endou, too, and Endou kill each other. You're such a coward, Koku... especially when I did you a favour, silencing him on your behalf."

"You really are an idiot, sometimes," Koku said bleakly, and the frustration and despair in his tones pierced through Sakaki's body, taking root in her thoughts as though it were her own. "I *should* kill you here and now, and put an end to it. That would be the sensible thing — but if I do that, people would cry, and I'm not you."

His eyes narrowed, the dark orbs sparking a strange, uncharacteristic fire from beneath hooded lids, and he reached out his free hand, plucking the blooded weapon from her grip blade-first as though it were nothing more dangerous than a stick she had picked up from the ground. He tossed it aside, pushing his own sword towards her throat until it scratched lightly against her skin. Frozen by the look in his eyes, Sakaki was unable to do more than drag air into frightened lungs, and for a moment, she felt sure he was going to swing the weapon through her jugular, so strong was the killer instinct that pulsed from the normally quiet boy's body. There was a pause that seemed to last forever, then, with a sigh, Koku pulled the sword back.

"It's not your time yet," he repeated, and Sakaki was sure she could hear a mingling of regret and resignation in his tones. "I won't kill until there's no other option but to. Get out of here, and don't come back. Leave the shinigami with me — and pray it's not too late to resolve this, else it won't be me you need to fear."

"Koku..."

"I said go," Koku's words ripped through her like a sudden clap of thunder, the whole clearing seeming to spark suddenly with dangerous energy that even her dead spirit senses could not help but pick up and she swallowed hard, cowed despite her usual defiance. Pausing only to grab up her sword from the ground, she spat at him, then scuttled into the woods as fast as she could manage. Only when she was sure she was out of sight did she stop, scaling the trunk of the nearest tree that would bear her weight, and sinking down into the branches, struggling to catch her breath. She was physically trembling, she realised, dismay filling her heart. Her hands were shaking so hard that she could not even sheath her sword, and, at length she gave up, shoving it down on the branch beside her and burying her head in her arms as she struggled to comprehend what had just happened. Tears that were usually so foreign to her glittered on her lashes and she dashed them away, but more came, mortifying

her even further as she realised they too were signs of fear and confusion.

Koku... with a sword. Koku who doesn't use weapons, and who doesn't fight people, coming at me as though he meant to kill me, and... and turning the whole world into... something strange.

Sakaki swallowed hard, processing this with difficulty.

I've never seen him like that before. Is that why Father took him in? Did he know Koku had spirit power? I can't sense reiatsu, so I wouldn't have realised till he came at me like that, but... but whatever he did, it wasn't normal. Those voices..the whispers, the colour... like he was forcing himself into me, making me see... making me feel... what?

She screwed up her eyes, trying to make the memories disappear, but they sank deeper into her consciousness, replaying over and over again. The blurry, half-words that had slipped teasingly into her ears began to form into proper sounds and syllables, and she covered her ears with her hands, as if by doing so she could force them back.

I have to tell Father. I have to tell him... tell him everything. I have to tell him... that Koku threatened to kill me. He took that sword, and he put it to my throat... when all I was doing was protecting my family and covering his back too! It was a shinigami, and I have carte blanche to kill those, if they come here. That one wasn't a Kotetsu, so he was fair game. So what if he was an Endou? Mother wouldn't care if I killed her kin, so why should someone like him? I didn't do anything wrong. It was Koku. Koku was the one who was out of line and if he's betraying us, I ought to go slit his throat. But... I don't... want to go back there. I don't want to fight him... because...

She swallowed hard, gazing down at her blood-spattered fingers.
I don't think that I can.

The admission pained her, but she knew it was true. In that instant, the bookish, unassuming Rukongai citizen that she had all but dismissed had flown at her with a steel resolve she had not known he possessed and, try as she might to tell herself she was not afraid, she knew that she was.

I need to tell Father, before he hurts someone. Now, before it's too late — before Koku can get there and sweet-talk his way around it. I have to warn them... I have to warn everyone what he's really like. I have to go... now.

She had gone.

Koku took a deep breath, trying to calm the rising waves of angry reiatsu that threatened to engulf his whole body in their tempest. For a moment, all he could see was white hot energy, sounds and images blurring together and making no impression on his senses, but then a low moan came from the figure on the ground, and something in the weak sound cut through his delirium, giving him an anchor back to the present.

He's still alive.

Tossing the sword aside as though it was no more than a trinket he had picked up by accident, Koku hurried down at the shinigami's side, sliding an awkward hand beneath the man's head and supporting it as a cough racked through the broken body. There was a fair amount of blood, he realised, bile rising in his throat at the sweet stench that covered the body, and the front of the stranger's black *shihakushou* had been all but shredded, indicating a frenzied attack that had not abated until he had come onto the scene.

"You..." the man wetted his lips, managing to croak a single word, and Koku shook his head.

"Don't speak. Don't say anything. You'll only hurt yourself more," he said, panic rising in his heart as he realised how badly the man was cut apart. "I told you this was a bad place to come. You shouldn't have come here. You should have gone back."

The man grimaced, coughing again, then flailing out a weak arm to support his body a little, pulling himself up just enough that he could see Koku's features clearly.

"I didn't listen," he murmured. "You... tried to warn..."

"I didn't suppose you would, but I had to try anyway," Koku said regretfully.

"She... didn't... expect you... to fight her... did she?"

"You were listening to that?" Koku bit his lip, and Souja offered him a feeble smile.

"Playing... dead... is sometimes... advantageous," he admitted, "if your physical position... is a weak one."

"Mm," Koku could not dispute the shinigami's words, and Souja cocked his head slightly to get a better look at his would-be rescuer.

"She... her name... was Sakaki... and you... Koku?"

"That's neither here nor there, not right now," Koku responded briskly. "There are far more pressing things than my name for you to

bother about. She's messed you up pretty badly — even for her, this is extreme. I'm sorry. I got here as quickly as I could, but I can't use shunpo like you can."

"But... you... stopped her," Souja managed, and Koku snorted.

"Not in time. Not quickly enough, and nobody here will help to fix you," he muttered, glancing around him for any sign of inspiration, but there was none.

"Why... did you? Isn't... she... your... ally?"

"My ally?" Koku pulled a graphic face. "She's a damn nuisance, and that's all. I told you, I don't like death. She does, so we don't get along. Besides, I already told you, forget about me and forget about her for now."

"But..."

"You need your strength, since knowing all about me won't do you any good if you die right after I tell you," Koku said succinctly, pushing back the shinigami's *shihakushou* and examining the bloody mess with growing dismay. "I can't heal you. I don't know any spells that would, and there aren't any healers here. You know that, though, right? You knew when you came here that you were entering No-Man's land."

"You... are here," Souja objected, clearly ignoring the instruction not to talk. "You... and that girl... she... the one who... killed... in the Spiritless Zone... yes?"

"I've never left this part of Rukongai," Koku avoided the question, pulling the rough sash from his waist and using it to create a rough, clumsy tourniquet around the worst of Souja's bleeding wounds. "I can't answer questions about what happens in other places, so don't ask me to. I'm trying to help you — you could repay me by helping me, too."

"Helping... you?"

"You shinigami have a way to get back to Seireitei," Koku said categorically. "I know you do — you must have had one to come here. You did, right? A... a *Senkaimon*, or something like that?"

"Yes, but... I didn't... wasn't my..."

"Can you open it up again?" Koku eyed his companion urgently. "There, they can help you. Heal you. Fix your wounds. You might live. I can't do it here, but there..."

"I... I can't reach... my sword." Souja coughed again, blood dribbling down the side of his mouth. "Without it... I can't... it needs... my sword... and... *reiryoku*. Even then... its not... Gotei gate. Maybe... it won't... open... but I need... my sword... to try."

"Your sword?" Koku's gaze strayed to the discarded weapon that lay across the grass, then back to the crumpled form that lay huddled against him. "You need a sword to open something like that?"

"You really... haven't... ever left here, have you?" Souja's eyes became pensive for a moment, before pain creased his brow once more. "Funny. You... don't seem... like you come... from Rukongai. Your reiatsu... felt..."

"I guess people aren't always what they seem," Koku said brusquely, not letting his wounded companion complete his sentence. "Anyhow, your sword. If I get it, do you promise not to try and hurt me with it?"

"You're... helping me," Souja snorted. "If I... killed you... how... would I get back?"

He flapped the fingers of his right hand uselessly, and Koku realised the limb had been shattered at the wrist, the distinctive dust-marks of a footprint across the black *shihakushou* telling him exactly how it had come to be broken. He muttered a string of curses, fumbling on the ground for Souja's sealed *zanpakutou*, the glittering blade somehow dulled in the hazy light of the Rukon Valley. Gently, he slid the hilt into Souja's damaged right hand, curling the fingers around it and ignoring his companion's visible flinch of pain as he disturbed the fractured bones.

"Now, can you?" he asked anxiously, and Souja gasped, drawing a pained gulp of air into his lungs. He closed his eyes, apparently bracing himself, then he nodded.

"Help... me... up," he instructed, moving his shaking left hand to cover his right, tightening his grip on the weapon. "I... need... to stand... to... open... the gate... properly."

"Like this? You'll drop dead before you do," Koku objected, but nonetheless he did as he was bidden. Souja let out a low, pained chuckle, shooting his companion a resigned look.

"I... know... my injuries... are bad ones," he said matter-of-factly. "I... thought I was... dead... till you appeared. I don't... know who you really are... but..that girl... knew you. She'll... come back. With others. If... you want to... help me, I..will help you. You... take me

back... where I belong. In... return... I promise you... shelter. They... will protect you... in return... for you... protecting... m... me.”

He coughed violently again, doubling up and it was all Koku could do to keep the man on his feet.

“You should worry about yourself first, and let me alone,” he said bluntly. “You need a healer, first and foremost, and anything else can...”

“No,” Souja shook his head decisively, the blade of his weapon glimmering unevenly with faint light as he focused his spiritual strength one last time. “Most... important is... reporting to my... Captain. Then... they can stop this. People... like her... for everyone... need to... stop. Endou... responsibility... more important than... patching my... wounds.”

“Souja-dono...”

“She... was my... cousin,” Souja said grimly, pain creasing his brow, and he drew a heavy, laboured breath into his lungs. “My aunt... my family must... redress... I must... warn them. Must... go back... more important than... my life... everyone... in... Seireitei.”

“I see,” Koku’s eyes became grave, and he let out a sigh. “Even if I take you back, you won’t let it rest, will you? Whatever happens to you, I won’t convince you to let this place alone, will I?”

“Old... wounds... need... reparation. If not... new... wounds... form,” Souja gasped out. “But... I promise... you will... be safe. I promise... I give... my word...”

“I told you already, worry more about yourself right now,” As the shinigami stumbled, Koku let out an exclamation, hurrying to steady his wobbling form. “If you’re going to open it, open it, before you fall down and can’t get up. I don’t know how these Gate things work, and even if I’m not all that keen on the idea of Seireitei, I don’t want to have you drop dead at my feet.”

Souja nodded grimly, and, through gasps of breath, he lifted the hilt of his weapon, thrusting it forward with resolve into the air beyond.

Immediately, the sky itself split apart, revealing a gaping tunnel of darkness beyond, and, as Souja parted his bloodstained fingers, Koku saw the iridescent, stunted form of a butterfly begin to take shape, fluttering feebly and drunkenly before them both before heading towards the tunnel.

“Follow... it... and... take me... back,” Souja murmured, his words faint now as every syllable became an effort. “I need... to tell... Father... everything. Take... me... home... and I promise... they... will... shield you.”

I can't protect you, even if I take you back. I can't save you, even if I step into that abyss with you. Worse, returning there with you may mean betraying everything here... and once I step into that chasm, there's no going back.

Fear clutched at Koku's heart as he regarded the yawning hole, knowing that, on the other side, lay the alien world of Seireitei and the shinigami that he knew so much and yet so little about.

I can't do anything for you, but if I leave you here, I let you die. If I abandon you, I killed you — that makes me like Sakaki. I know... that if there's even the faintest chance of saving your life, I have to take it. Whatever faces me on the other side... I have to go. If someone's life is there in front of me, I can't discard it... no matter what the cost.

Slowly and jerkily he nodded his head, tightening his hold on Souja's failing body and taking a step and then another one towards the *Senkaimon*.

Besides, whatever I do, it hardly matters anyway. It's already written... all I can do is obey.

Murmuring a prayer under his breath for help, he crossed the threshold into the tunnel, watching as the sky closed up behind him, engulfing him in black.

26. Kestrel's Strike

Chapter Twenty Five: Kestrel's Strike

A deadly silence fell over the clearing, as Captain and former Onmitsukidou faced one another, their gazes locked together in the silence that threatened to grow oppressive. Then, as if woken from a spell, the dark clad shadow sprang back with a hiss, light glittering from his left palm as he prepared to weave some kind of Kidou attack.

“Get out of my way, Taichou-san!” he warned, the gleam of a cornered animal in his strange, amber gaze. “If you don’t, I won’t be responsible for picking up the pieces of you or your underlings, so step back and let me pass.”

“Who are you calling underlings?” Kirio’s hand was on her own sword now, indignation surging into her gaze, but before she could draw it fully, Juushirou held up his hand, indicating for her to stop.

“Fall back, Kirio. You too, Tsunemori,” he said quietly. “We came out looking for something in particular and I think it’s safe to say we’ve found it. Until we know the exact nature of *it*, though, I want you both to stand back.”

“But Taichou!” Kirio’s voice bubbled over with frustration, but Juushirou shook his head, his gaze never leaving the shadowy figure who crouched before them, ready to spring forward again at a split-second’s notice.

“That’s an order, Hikifune,” he said quietly. “Stand back and wait for further instructions. This is a populated area... the more *reiryoku* that gets released here, the more likelihood there is of drawing trouble onto unsuspecting villagers. Our job is to capture this individual, not start an all out sword fight. I believe we should be able to accomplish our goal without the need for that.”

“You’re very cocky,” The dark-clad figure’s strange golden eyes narrowed to slits, “not to mention delusional. You call me by the name of a man who you must know is dead, yet you do so without fear that I’m a ghost here to curse you or poison your *reiryoku* with my decay. Do the Gotei teach shinigami how to fight battles with spectres now, then?”

He spread his fingers, sparks of silver electricity shooting out across the woodland, singing through the branches of trees and causing them

to splinter and fall to the ground. "If so, I'd like to see you try."

"I don't believe in ghosts," Juushirou said evenly, glancing briefly at the charcoal stubs of wood before turning his attention back to his opponent. "I do believe, however, that you are the person I came looking for. Most individuals would not know the name 'Suzuki Naoto' — my companions have surely never heard of him. You, on the other hand, showed no surprise at all that I would use such a name — more, you claim to know that person's fate, even though his former commanding officer remains uncertain as to what became of him."

"Ah, well, we District people have our ways," the shadow leered mockingly out from beneath the hood of his cloak, his eyes blurred slightly by the heavy fall of the fabric. "Maybe I'm the one who killed him — you never know. District people will do anything for money, so I hear, when times are tough... oh, but you'd know that, wouldn't you?"

He let out an amused peal of laughter, but it was lacking in humour and ran like ice rain through Juushirou's senses.

"Yes, of course. How silly of me, lecturing you on the ways of the Districts. You must know those just as well as I do, Juusanbantai-Taichou-san. I know of you. We all do, you see — the Thirteenth Division Captain from the seaside hovel in Sixth, and his wild strays robed in the corpse dress of the Gotei."

"These wild strays are perfectly capable of separating you from your limbs if need be," Kirio snapped out, and Juushirou could feel the ripple of her *reiryoku* rising as if to meet the challenge. Tsunemori remained silent, but his spirit power rippled too as if in protest, and the Captain sighed, slowly shaking his head.

"Words are only that. Words," he said matter-of-factly, keeping his tones calm despite his own indignation, for he knew that it was the only way to keep his subordinates from reacting to the shadow's taunts. "You can say as many of them as you like, but it won't make me fly into a rage and release my *zanpakutou* in a mad frenzy. I don't know why you're here or what your intention is — to bait me, to distract me, to draw me into a confrontation that would bring Hollows to this place and make the Gotei look bad — but I'm not interested in the vulgarities of your vocabulary. What I am interested in is Suzuki Naoto — and unless you have a way of proving to me that you're not him... I'm going to persist in believing that you are."

A faint flicker of spiritual energy glittered down Sougyo no Kotowari's blade.

“Now, if you’re quite done with the trash-talking, I’d quite like you to come back to Soul Society with me,” he continued pleasantly. “I suppose it’s useless for me to invite you and expect you to come with me cordially and by your own choice, so I suppose that means using force.”

“I already told you not to talk down to me,” The shadow’s eyes slitted again, and he drove his body forward, more kidou glittering from his left hand whilst his right lurked beneath the cloth of his robe, the angle of it’s movement telling Juushirou from which direction the blade he held would next come his way. Sure enough, as his opponent came within striking distance, the silver metal of the sword glittered in the early morning light, and once again Juushirou met it with the flat of his own weapon, parrying it back before swinging Sougyo no Kotowari around to deflect the flare of Shakkahou that came blazing towards his upper body. The spell scorched across the metal of the blade, but although the *zanpakutou*’s spirits cried out to be allowed to join in the conflict, he ignored their call.

There are too many innocent people living nearby, In’you. Whether there is or isn’t underhand business going on in the Districts, without any proof I won’t put people at risk. I’m not a child any more, and I won’t respond to childish provocations. My sword is dangerous enough these days just by releasing it — who knows what a proper fight might attract given the strangeness of the Hollows in recent weeks.

“You’re not taking me seriously, are you?” the cloaked figure let out a hiss of mocking disappointment, twitching his blade into a more upright position and launching himself at Juushirou a third time, yet this time, as the Captain moved his weapon to counter, the arm that bore the enemy’s blade twisted and flexed out of its normal alignment, elongating and bending to avoid the swing of Sougyo no Kotowari’s blade. Letting out a muttered curse, Juushirou took a step back to avoid the swing, watching in disbelief as the shadow-figure’s limb bent back on itself as though hinged at the elbow in both directions before swinging like a length of vine towards him, casting the weapon’s sharp edge in the direction of Juushirou’s throat.

“Taichou!” Now it was Tsunemori who cried out, and Juushirou could tell his subordinate was on the verge of releasing a spell.

“Stand down, Tsunemori!” he warned, adjusting his stance to avoid the fresh swing and sliding his weapon swiftly from his right hand to his left to meet the assailant’s swing. Though not as naturally ambidextrous as Shunsui, Juushirou had trained long and hard to raise the standard of his left arm in a battle situation, and as a result he was able to deflect the shadow’s attack with some force, almost knocking

the weapon clean out of his opponent's grip. The stranger cursed, hopping back and glaring at Juushirou from under hooded lids.

"I suppose nobody told you that I fight with both hands," Juushirou said evenly, flexing his fingers and passing the sealed weapon between right and left grasp as he contemplated his opponent's likely next move. "Whatever it was you did with your arms, I'm not as open to attack as you seem to think. Even without releasing my sword, I've trained for a long time in kenjutsu and I'm not easy to disarm. If I were you, I'd cut my losses and surrender now... or do you think that if you laid your blade on me, my companions would stand back and let you escape?"

"It's a coward's game, to rely on the protection of underlings," the shadow snapped back coldly, and Juushirou's eyes narrowed, the hazel gaze becoming cold as flint as he tightened his hold on Sougyo no Kotowari's hilt, taking a step towards his opponent, then another, and another.

"You mistake me," he said coldly, the ice this time in his tones. "I'm not asking them to protect me. I'm warning you that your position is an unenviable one. Drop your sword, surrender and come quietly — otherwise I'll be forced to use this to draw blood, and that will make a nice mess all through the Gotei halls. I'd rather avoid that — but I'm trained to take down an enemy in whatever way is necessary, so don't think that my need to take you alive will stop me from incapacitating you physically with Sougyo's blade."

He raised his *zanpakutou* as if to emphasise his point, and the shadow leapt back, stretching his snake-like arms upwards to grab hold of a tree branch and swinging his body up towards the shelter of a heavy bough of thick wood and leaves. Juushirou had pre-empted him, however, for a glittering white bolt of *Byakurai* seared through the chill morning air, slicing through the branch in a similar way to the ones the shadow himself had cut down only moments earlier. As the stranger lost his grasp, a thin weave of gold energy darted out from the tips of Juushirou's sword hand, wrapping itself around the cloaked figure's torso and looping itself determinedly through his arms and legs, binding them together until he fell to the ground, unable to do more than wriggle helplessly against the tightness of the bonds.

"I did try to warn you," Juushirou sighed, sheathing his sword and moving to stand over his captive, gazing down at the golden eyes that sparked up at him with hate and anger. "It would've been easier if you'd surrendered, but somehow I didn't think you'd do that.

Onmitsukidou are trained not to submit to anyone, aren't they? Death first, captivity last — isn't that right?"

The man's lips pressed firmly together, an unpleasant expression crossing his odd features, but he did not speak, and Juushirou nudged the *Hainawa* rope tentatively with his foot, nodding in satisfaction as he realised it was strong enough to hold for the time being.

"Tsunemori," he turned to his subordinate, who stepped forward, glancing at his Captain quizzically.

"For now, the *Hainawa* will keep him quiet, but I'd like you to keep a watch over him, just in case. The slightest movement, I want you to use binding kidou — as strong as you need to to hold him, understand?"

"Yes, sir," Tsunemori's gaze burned with curiosity, but he nodded his head, obediently settling himself down on the ground a short distance from the prisoner. "What will you do, sir? Are we not taking this prisoner back to camp?"

"We will, but I want to be sure there aren't any accomplices lurking in the shadows," Juushirou replied. "Kirio, you come with me. Tsunemori should be more than enough for one bound rebel — and we'll cover more ground together."

"Yes, sir," Kirio nodded immediately, hurrying to her Captain's side. With a glance behind them, Juushirou turned towards the forest at large, gesturing for her to follow him into the thicket of trees that lay beyond, and Kirio did so, skipping over the fallen, singed remains of the branches that marked the scene of the confrontation.

"Taichou, that man... who was he?" Once out of earshot, the young shinigami voiced her question, and Juushirou grimaced, rubbing his temples.

"That will be a matter for Second Division to determine," he said at length. "We'll get him safely back there and hand him over to Kai as soon as we can... I'd rather let them handle the investigation if possible."

"You said... did you say... he was an Onmitsukidou?" Kirio asked, and Juushirou shrugged.

"That's a difficult question to answer," he admitted unwillingly. "I'd rather you didn't go back to Seireitei and begin discussing this idea with all and sundry, if you don't mind. His identity isn't yet confirmed... and it's not for us to speculate."

“I wouldn’t say anything, not if Taichou told me not to,” Kirio said frankly, “and nor will Tsukabishi-san, but we were both there and well, you said some odd things. It was like... you knew all about him, even though I don’t understand how you could. His arms... they bent right out of their sockets, and...”

She shivered involuntarily.

“Something about him seemed off,” she admitted. “Something creepy. When he said that the person you were hunting was dead, I felt like... maybe he *was* a dead man, standing there in the forest before us, even though I know that’s not possible. He... isn’t a ghost, is he? He’s not...”

“Don’t be foolish,” despite himself, Juushirou grinned, sending her a sidelong glance and receiving her sheepish one in return. “You know that there are no ghosts in Soul Society, and in the Real World there are only Plus souls which sometimes a spiritually attuned human misidentifies as something else. What we fought then was not a dead man — though I agree, he had an unpleasant aura, make no mistake. You’re not wrong, either — I was looking for a specific individual, and that individual was, indeed, once an Onmitsukidou. More than that, though, I can’t say. Suffice it to say that the person I think he is was meant to have died ten years ago, but there’s some doubts as to whether that was the case.”

“Well, if he wasn’t dead... what *was* he?” Kirio murmured. “I never saw... anyone do the things he did with his body.”

“Suzuki Naoto had certain abilities relating to camouflage and concealment,” Juushirou reflected absently. “You’re right, though, what we saw was beyond the normal realm of explanation. Still... he was in his own mind. I admit... in that respect, he wasn’t quite what I expected to find.”

“Taichou?”

“Never mind,” Juushirou patted her lightly on the shoulder. “Leave him to Tsunemori, now he’s tied down, and focus your reiatsu on picking up other signals, all right? I don’t know of any accomplices, but then I don’t not know of any, either. A creature like that raises more questions than answers, and it’s better to be thorough.”

“Yes, sir,” Kirio reddened, nodding her head. “I’m sorry, I’ll concentrate.”

“He said some offensive things, didn’t he?” Juushirou looked sympathetic, and Kirio grimaced.

“People do, sometimes, but the way he said them was what I hated most of all,” she admitted. “I don’t think he was a Clan person, either... which is what made it even worse. If it’s a Clan person who’s been miseducated, well, that can be fixed. It has been fixed, in fact, numerous times since I went to the Academy and since people like Tenichi-kun were able to transfer into Seventh without creating a revolt. But... to hear it from someone who’s probably as District as you or I are, sir... that rankled a lot. It’s as if he thought that he... was superior to all other District people, and that we... we were just...”

“Gotei slaves, perhaps?” Juushirou mused. “Yes, I felt it that way, too. Well, I suppose that’s one opinion, isn’t it? The Gotei are originally a Clan institution — we can’t escape from the thought that some District people might believe us to be Clan whipping boys who have betrayed our roots in search of power and status.”

“But that’s...”

“You and I know it’s not true, but the whole world isn’t within Inner Seireitei, nor the Academy,” Juushirou chided gently. “It’s hard to accept, I know, but I’m sure there are District people who hate us even more than the Clan elite who struggle to accept us.”

He smiled ruefully.

“Nobody ever said this life would be an easy one,” he concluded contemplatively, “but that’s what makes it important, all the same. Keep that in mind, Kirio — no matter how much of a family Thirteenth Division might be, it doesn’t mean that all of the Districts think the way we do.”

“Do you think there are people in the Districts with spirit power who would try to work against us, then?” Kirio looked hesitant. “People like that person we just caught... people who resent us?”

“I think we’d be foolish to rule it out,” Juushirou said honestly. “For now, though, the coast here looks clear, which makes me glad. Let’s go back to Tsunemori and take our prisoner back to base. I’ll be happiest when he’s in Kai’s hands and out of ours — captive interrogation isn’t my speciality and I’d rather not be involved in it if at all possible.”

“Yes, sir,” Kirio looked relieved, nodding her head. “Maybe at least, if Second Division can find out something from him, we’ll know what kind of people he’s working with and whether he was involved in Tenichi-kun’s abduction.”

“You made that connection too, huh?” As they made their way back

to Tsunemori, Juushirou cast his companion a keen glance, and Kirio nodded.

“Someone took him right in front of our eyes, pretty much,” she said frankly, “and that someone had the power to hide even from the Gotei’s senior figures. Someone like that... that shadow... I think he could do it.”

“Well, perhaps Tenichi himself will be able to clear up that mystery, too.” Juushirou reflected. “For now, mission accomplished. Perhaps in this regard we’re one step closer to putting a stop to these random abductions.”

There was no report yet.

Hirata paced across his office, pausing momentarily to gaze out of the window of his barracks at the empty courtyard outside. Kikyue had left with her patrol some time earlier, and he had quickly readied and dispatched Souja’s usual squad unit, keeping only a skeleton team of shinigami at Seventh’s base in case of urgent need. He had done everything he could think of doing, and now all there was to do was wait. Much as he longed to head out into the field himself, he knew that if he were to let his heart rule his head, he would cause further panic to spread through his division, and the shackles of leadership had made him curse and rail under his breath more than once since he had secluded himself in his administrative haven, wearing a hole in the tatami mat floor with his restlessness.

It was not like Souja to disappear without any form of communication, but even the straggling residue of a Hell Butterfly had not made it to the Seventh Division’s gates and, when he had sent officers to inspect his eldest child’s quarters, they had been neat and tidy, as though they had not been touched since the previous day. *You went somewhere, and didn’t come back, and somehow we managed not to notice.*

Hirata’s eyes narrowed behind his glasses, the predatorial spirit surging up within him as he considered this.

I didn’t notice your absence. Well, why would I have? You often work late, and conduct patrols into the night hours. Why would this be considered different? You’ve never taken decisions into your own hands, not before, and...

He faltered, clenching his fists together as he remembered their conversation not so very many days before.

That day, you would have defied me. You wanted my consent, but if I’d

not given it, you would have gone to Joumei anyway. Is that what's happened now? Did you go to meet him...? Is that where you are... but why would you not at least send me some kind of communication?

"You could cut the air in this place with a knife."

A voice from the doorway made him jump, swinging around to meet the concerned brown eyes of his former classmate, pink *haori* billowing around his shoulders and his long wavy dark hair tied in its usual lazy tail behind his head. "What's this about, Hirata-kun? I got your message — cryptic as it was — and I come here to find that half the division's missing and those that are here are scuttling around as if afraid you might swoop down and eat them at a moment's notice. What's happened?"

"Considering you live next door, you took your time," Hirata muttered, turning back towards the window, and Shunsui tut-tutted, moving to stand beside his friend.

"You really need to work on your manners," he scolded. "Last time you couldn't wait to be rid of me, this time I'm not here fast enough — it's enough to make someone stop coming to call, if this is the kind of welcome you lay out."

"This isn't a joke, Shunsui!" Hirata snapped, wheeling on his companion, and Shunsui caught sight of the expression in his friend's eyes, his own gaze becoming sombre.

"Something serious has happened, hasn't it?" he asked softly, and Hirata shrugged, helplessness in his gesture.

"I wish I knew," he said frustratedly. "What about Juushirou? I sent to Thirteenth as well — is he coming too?"

"I haven't been by there, but I think he was on another errand last night — not sure what time he got back, if he did, yet." Shunsui admitted. "I came as soon as Sora let me go, but I can't speak for another division. In his absence, though, if it's urgent, can I do anything?"

"I don't know," Hirata admitted. "Shunsui, tell me — have you happened to see Souja at all since yesterday?"

"Souja?" Shock glittered across Shunsui's dark eyes, and he shook his head. "No, I haven't. Wait... don't tell me that he's... like Tenichi..."

"Like I said, I don't know!" It was all Hirata could do to keep his voice from rising and, at the tremor in his tones, Shunsui rested a

gentle hand on his shoulder.

"I'm sorry," he said contritely. "If I'd realised... I would've saved the annoying guest routine for later. When did he go missing?"

"I last saw him at breakfast yesterday," Hirata murmured. "I didn't join the squad for lunch, but I think he was there then, overseeing the mess hall. Then he had some errands of his own... and... nobody saw him around curfew or since. This morning, his room hasn't been slept in. I sent Kikyue out to scout for signs, but I've heard nothing from the patrol yet. I've spared as many men as possible to look, but if it's like Tenichi, I don't even know where to begin."

"I see," Shunsui scratched his chin, leaning up against one of the firm stone pillars that acted as a support for the bamboo panel walls. "There's not a chance he went off after some whim of his own and hasn't come back yet?"

"It's not in his character to defy me or slip around behind my back," Hirata responded wearily, "but in this case, I can't rule it out. We had one conversation recently when we disagreed... he came to me for consent, and I was reluctant to give it. In the end, I gave in — but he showed every indication of going against my wishes if need be. It was the night he went to fetch Tenichi... the night he went to meet with the Kitsune."

"Those foxes again, huh," Shunsui's eyes narrowed. "You trust them, though, not to hurt your son?"

"I trust them," Hirata nodded. "It's not for sure, though, that their location is secure or that they won't be attacked. If he did go there, and something was to go after them... he'd feel the need to become involved. He's far too soft-hearted for an Endou, sometimes, my son... it's his weakness, and it's easily played to."

"It might be that he just decided to pass the night there and is coming back to face your anger now," Shunsui suggested, and Hirata shrugged.

"Maybe, but I think he'd send me some kind of notice to let me know," he replied. "A Hell Butterfly, or some such thing."

"In order to make you over the worst of your angry outburst by the time he returns? I suppose that makes sense, given the atmosphere in this chamber," Shunsui sighed, rubbing his temples. "All right. Is there anything Eighth can do in the meantime? Send out patrols of our own — or do you want to keep this discreet?"

"I want to find my son," Hirata said flatly. "That's my priority —

I'm not concerned with anything else."

"Did you send a message to these Kitsune of yours, then?"

"Mm..." Hirata hesitated, then, slowly, he shook his head.

"If you think that's where he went, why not?" Shunsui was startled. "Surely that would be the first thing to do?"

Hirata didn't answer, and Shunsui sighed.

"I see," he murmured. "You're protecting them, too. Your position demands it — that's the nature of the arrangement you have with them, isn't it?"

"Yes," Hirata's response was no more than a whisper.

"So much so that you would risk your only son's life to keep that vow?"

"If I can't keep the promises I made as Head of the Clan — whether they were ones I made openly at the Endou court or ones I did not, I have no right to call myself Clan Leader," Hirata said grimly. "My family aren't like yours, and besides, like I told you before, there are still warrants out for members of those fallen clans. If it were to be discovered by the Urahara that we were shielding them and had done so continuously knowing what their alleged crimes were... it could at the very least provoke difficult diplomatic relations with District Three. Father's been negotiating certain trade agreements with Nagesu-sama's people for a while now on my request — a reestablishment of old trade links that were broken by Grandfather and allowed to fester."

"But Souja..?"

"He knows not to go there. I told him I didn't want him to," Hirata replied bleakly. "I let him go the last time only because he pointed out to me that retrieving Tenichi was his duty to Seventh Division and there was no other clear way to get my officer brought back here. This time, though, if that's what he's done... he's gone without a word to anyone. He's never done that before... and it makes me fear the worst."

"So either he slipped out without asking you first, knowing you'd refuse him, or he's met with some unknown calamity and it's prevented him from coming back," Shunsui ran his fingers absently through his messy hair. "Right, well, the first is the better option, even if it means you have to discipline him in classic Endou style when he finally shows his face. Meantime, though, there must be another way

to get a message to these foxes of yours without creating suspicion around the barracks. If you can't send a Hell Butterfly, can I send one on your behalf?"

"I can't tell you where they are."

"Juushirou, then, when he returns?"

"Even he doesn't know precisely where to find them."

"Then what other options are open to us?" Shunsui looked helpless. "You've sent Kikyue and the others — you'll have to rely on them."

"Mm," Hirata's face became sombre, and he nodded.

"Waiting is a Captain's duty, but it's one I've grown to hate," he murmured. "Maybe that's the real reason I called you here... pathetic it might be, but I didn't like the thought of waiting on my own."

"I see," Shunsui's expression softened. "Well, if that's the case, I'll stick around, at least till the kid returns. And, speaking of returns, I think the cavalry just arrived. Juu's here — I guess he's come back from his trip to the back of beyond."

"Taichou, Ukitake-taichou has come!" The reedy voice of one of the Seventh Division recruits came piping through the door at that moment to confirm Shunsui's words, effectively preventing Hirata from making any kind of morose comment. Instead he sighed, turning his head towards the divide.

"Show him in," he raised his voice, weariness in his tones, "then return to your post. Report to me if anything new arises."

"Yes, sir!" the recruit responded quickly, half from eagerness, half from fear, and there was the sound of padding footsteps along the matted corridor before the door slid back to reveal the white-haired Captain of the thirteenth, the edges of his haori smudged with dirt and a tired look in his hazel eyes. He stifled a yawn, stepping into the chamber and pulling the divide shut behind him.

"You haven't slept, yet, have you?" Shunsui asked sharply, and Juushirou shook his head, running his fingers through his lank white hair and fumbling at his obi for a fresh tie to fasten it back.

"Just got back to find Hirata's message waiting for me," he admitted, turning a concerned gaze on his younger friend. "Naoko said it sounded urgent, so I came at once. What's happened? Why is Seventh so quiet — what's going on?"

"Souja is missing," Shunsui answered succinctly, as Hirata struggled

to put the words together into a coherent sentence, and Juushirou's eyes widened with alarm.

"Missing?" he echoed. "How? Why? Since when? Hirata, what are you doing about it?"

"Kikyue's taken men and gone to search," Hirata said slowly, as his friend crossed the room towards him. "More than that I don't know. He's not here, and there's been no word... he didn't sleep here last night. That's all."

"Hirata thinks he might've gone off chasing foxes on his own whim," Shunsui added darkly. "He hasn't sent a message there, though, because he's afraid of the wider ramifications. I don't suppose you saw or heard anything of any use on your travels?"

"Mm," Juushirou's eyes narrowed slightly, and he shrugged his shoulders. "Not about Souja, and I'm sorry to delay my arrival here by so much, Hirata, I really didn't know that you were waiting for me. Kirio and Tsunemori and I went out to snare a shadow and we succeeded — he's currently enjoying Thirteenth penal hospitality and I left Enishi and Naoko to deal with the proper procedures."

"A shadow?" Shunsui chewed on his lip. "Let me guess — Kai's missing Onmitsukidou?"

"My best guess, yes — though I can't be totally sure," Juushirou admitted, stifling another yawn. "He wasn't quite like I expected, to be honest. I'm not sure if I should be glad or otherwise. We were expecting a dancing corpse — a puppet of some kind, maybe even of the scale of Onoe Tomoyuki, but this was... a strange individual fighting on his own impulses. He came after us and had plenty to say, particularly unpleasant things about District shinigami that got Kirio and Tsunemori both hot under the collar. We snared him, though — and I plan on sending him to Second so that Kai can decide for himself whether this is or isn't the missing Suzuki Naoto. Either way, the person we caught knows who Suzuki is, and that he's meant to be dead. Those are two facts not widely circulated, so I'd say that it's a pretty good guess he's it."

"Convenient, isn't it," Shunsui said thoughtfully.

"Convenient?" Hirata shot his friend a startled look, and Shunsui nodded.

"This Suzuki disappears for ten years," he agreed, "and then, suddenly, on the night that Hirata's son goes missing, he reappears. More, it sounds like he intended you to find him, Juu. Did you think

that maybe he was there to distract you from something else?”

“Something involving Souja?” Hirata’s eyes widened in alarm, and Juushirou sighed.

“I did think it, and we combed the nearby area, but I’d have noticed if Souja’s reiatsu was anywhere around there,” he replied. “It’s not Seventh, there are no Sekkiseki caves on the Second/Third border and we went there to investigate the disappearances of Tenichi and the lower ranking officers. If this shadow-man did take them, he wasn’t involved in doing so tonight — meaning that if he was involved in that, and he was a decoy... he probably has accomplices who are operating elsewhere.”

“Such as in the area where the Kitsune are,” Shunsui shot Hirata a meaningful look. “I think you need to tell us where that is, Hirata-chan. Not to undermine your authority or anything, but it sounds possible to me that this Suzuki showed himself, maybe even let himself get caught for the sake of concealing some other happening and, if I’m right, that happening is somewhere in your District. Your son may already be there as the vanguard — I think it’s time you sent in the cavalry.”

“Meaning?” Hirata bristled, but before a dispute could begin, Juushirou put a hand on Hirata’s shoulder.

“I’ll go,” he said softly. “I know Seventh better than Shunsui, and even if I don’t know specifically where the Kitsune are, I have a good idea of the rough direction.”

“You haven’t slept yet,” Shunsui objected. “Not to be a nagging friend, or anything, but I’m sure that nobody wants you to push yourself and get another fever.”

“I’m fine,” Juushirou assured him. “A little tired, that’s all. I didn’t release my sword in the little skirmish earlier and I can always sleep when I get back. I’ll worry about Souja’s whereabouts if I don’t go, and Hirata’s already worried, so it makes sense. He can’t go without risking panicking the remainder of Seventh Division — but I can. I’ll follow the direction of Kikyue’s reiatsu and I’ll see what help I can be in keeping her from the Kitsune whilst tracking down her brother’s location.”

“You don’t mind?” Hirata looked doubtful, and Juushirou shook his head.

“I’ve known Souja almost as long as you have, considering,” he said with a rueful grin. “In the absence of my own kids, Hirata, I have no

choice but to foist my fussing on other people's. I'll go, and I'll do what I can. You have my word — I'll do everything in my power to bring your son back home."

"If you're going, then, take someone with you," Shunsui sighed, but nodded, as if resigned to Juushirou's words. "If you're set on going then fine, I won't talk you out of it, but just in case you need it, take someone with you as backup. You don't know what you're going into — and you can always foist a junior off on Kikyue if the situation demands."

"I suppose that's true," Juushirou grimaced. "Not that I imagine there'll be any problem, but it's better to be safe than sorry. I'll go back to Thirteenth and reclaim Tsunemori or Kirio. It'll give them some good experience — and you have my word, Hirata, I won't let either of them near the Kitsune."

"I want to find my son," Hirata said simply. "Besides, the Hikifune girl flits around here sometimes. I sent Tenichi with Kikyue in the hope he'd remember something from his abduction that might help, but although he swore faithfully that he hadn't kept anything from me, I got the feeling it wasn't the whole truth. It was the Kitsune who returned him to us, and Souja almost certainly told Tenichi not to talk about it to anyone, which he's interpreted to mean me as well. I don't know how long that promise will hold out, though, under these conditions — that being the case, take Hikifune, if you can. She's a friend of his, if I'm not mistaken, and ample distraction if you need to make a detour into more restricted space."

"All right," Juushirou inclined his head. "I'll tell Tsunemori to go with the prisoner to Second and report on the details of the mission to Kai. He's conscientious and perfectly capable of defending himself if a problem should arise, so he won't question it. I already charged him with sentry duty once — he'll see it as a continuation of that duty, if I send him to Kai to debrief."

"Thank you," Hirata's eyes flickered slightly with gratitude, and Juushirou squeezed his friend briefly by the shoulders.

"I'll do my best," he said solemnly. "If it's like Tenichi, there may be no obvious clues but... if it's in my power... I'll bring him — and Kikyue — back to Inner Seireitei."

"The water's running dry in the stream again."

Eiraki pushed back the flap of Keitarou's small dwelling, pausing to gaze around the document-cluttered chamber before letting the divide

fall back behind her. “Kei-sama, something needs to be done. Kurotsuchi’s brought no new supplies in the last few days, and try as I might to eke things out, it’s getting difficult. Some of the children are getting sick from lack of food, and all I can say is that I don’t know when there’ll next be supplies.”

“I’m sorry,” Keitarou set down his worn brush, offering his wife a weary smile. “It’s my fault, I haven’t been as attentive to those things in light of other information. Tenichi being here created a minor ripple, but you’re right — the people here rely on us and it’s negligent of me to overlook it. I’ll make arrangements as soon as possible — tonight, if I can, you have my word.”

“Thank you,” Eiraki smiled, padding across the dusty floor and pushing aside a couple of old volumes to make space for her to sit down. “I know you have other things to think of, but the people here are important too. We owe them a debt — and I promised that we wouldn’t abandon them.”

“I know, and we won’t,” Keitarou assured her. “I’ve been thinking about a clearer long-term solution to that problem, in fact — one we’ll have to discuss for the logistics between ourselves when the time is right. For now, though, tell me which children are sick? It’s not much, but I have some rice grain and dried seaweed in a chest in storage which hasn’t been opened yet. If you let me know which homes are the worst affected, I’ll send Koku with provisions to them before the sun goes down tonight. It will tide them over — and if it’s water they need, I understand Tenichi cracked open a new spring not far from Kohaku’s hut.”

“The villagers are mostly afraid of going near there,” Eiraki said sadly, “even though there’s water, only a few have braved it.”

“Then perhaps if you gathered it and took it to them, they’d drink it then?” Keitarou suggested. “They trust you more than everyone, and they know you wouldn’t give them something dangerous.”

“I could...” Eiraki paused for a moment, then, “providing you’re sure there is no risk of it being polluted? It’s far enough from the hut, true enough, but...”

“You believe Kohaku is poisoning the water supply?” Keitarou arched an eyebrow, and Eiraki snorted, shaking her head.

“Don’t be foolish, of course not,” she snapped. “What do you take me for? I wasn’t thinking of that or of him. I was thinking of other things kept inside that hut.”

“Such as the sword?” Keitarou’s eyes narrowed, and Eiraki nodded.

“Yes. That.”

“I don’t see that as being a problem,” Keitarou shook his head. “It’s tightly locked away, and besides, most of the village folk don’t know anything about it. Even Sakaki hasn’t been told... and though if the spring was closer to the hut, there might be problems, I think it’s outside the boundary hedge and therefore safe. Things aren’t as dangerous there as they used to be — thanks to Kohaku himself, in fact.”

“Mm,” Eiraki frowned, but made no further comment, and Keitarou reached for his brush once more, then paused, his gaze flitting to the entranceway of the hut.

“How long are you going to lurk in the shadows?” he asked softly, and Eiraki started, staring at her husband in confusion.

“Kei-sama?”

“Katsura, I know you’re there,” Keitarou held up his hand to indicate for his wife to stay silent, his gaze still fixed on the entrance flap of the small hut. “You can’t hide your reiatsu from me so easily — come in and explain yourself.”

For a moment there was nothing, then the flap of the heavy cloth door twitched and parted to reveal an apprehensive figure, tousled head dusty and unkempt as he came reluctantly into the chamber.

“Katsu-kun!” Eiraki was on her feet in a moment, but Keitarou moved between mother and son, shaking his head at his wife before turning to face his eldest child full on.

“Well?”

It was one word, dropped calmly and pleasantly into the conversation, but there was a cold glitter in his eyes and Katsura swallowed hard, gazing up at his father in obvious apprehension.

“O... tousama?”

“Edogawa Mitsuki,” Keitarou murmured the six syllables softly, reaching out to rest a hand on the young man’s shoulder. “Report, please.”

“I...”

“Mitsuki-neesama?” Eiraki’s eyes glittered with surprise, and she frowned, moving across the room to her husband’s side and grasping his wrist loosely between her fingers, shooting him a confused glance.

“Kei-nii, what is this about? What did you send Katsura to do — what about Mitsuki-neesama?”

“Nee... sama?” Katsura blinked at his mother, clearly floored by this unexpectedly affectionate epithet, and Keitarou’s features twitched into a look of irritation, gently but firmly detaching Eiraki’s hold on his arm before reaching up a long, pale finger to touch her cheek.

“This is business between my son and I, Eiraki-chan,” he said evenly. “Please, I would prefer it if you remained out of it.”

“Since when have I ever been out of anything you’ve been involved in?” indignation sparked in Eiraki’s pale eyes, and she swiped his hand away, putting her hands on her hips. “I’m not your little woman who you can push away into a corner when you think I’m not smart enough to follow your line of thought. I’m an Endou *hime* and I’m more than capable of understanding every twisted idea that flits through that science-obsessed brain of yours, so don’t think I’m not.”

“Kaa... chan.” Katsura’s eyes could not get any bigger now, his mouth gaping open with shock at the sharp words, and there was a moment of silence, before Keitarou let out a rueful chuckle, running his fingers through his messy sandy hair.

“I apologise,” he said wryly. “I admit, that might have sounded condescending.”

“It did,” Eiraki snapped, her glare that of a predator eying up a particularly obstinate object of prey. “Now, answer my question. When I chose to come with you, marry you and live this life with you, it was on the understanding that I’d be as much a part of it as you were, and I have been. I won’t be pushed out of it now, just because you can send our son off into the wilderness to be your legs, your hands and your eyes on your behalf. It doesn’t change the fact that I’m your wife and his mother and I went through far more than either of you will ever understand to ensure both of you lived through that first year we were in Rukongai, so don’t you dare think of pushing me out of the conversation again, understand?”

“Kaa-chan, I think... it’s not... I’m sure that Father...” Katsura, ever the peacemaker, attempted to smooth the situation down, but Eiraki wheeled on him, her eyes narrowing as she took in his shabby appearance.

“And why on earth are you here dressed like that?” she demanded in a low voice, incredulity lacing her tones. “What harebrained scheme have you been playing about in, Katsura? Tell me, because I’m

sure your father won't — you've been to Seireitei again, haven't you? More, you've been to that place... where the Shinigami are."

Katsura hesitated, sending Keitarou a hesitant glance, and Keitarou sighed, burying his head in his hands.

"Eiraki-chan, while I understand that you're annoyed at being left in the dark, I would appreciate it if you would let me handle this," he said softly, no note of confrontation or blame in his tones. "I sent Katsura on a particular errand, and until I debrief him, I won't know whether or not he completed it."

"Dressed as a shinigami?" Eiraki arched an eyebrow. "That kind of mission only means one thing — that you've sent him into the heart of danger, where anyone might see him and raise the alarm! Kei-sama, I thought you and I had an agreement about things like that... things that might draw attention to us..."

"Your son was already seen by one of them," Keitarou cut across her, an unpleasant edge in his voice, and Katsura flinched back, hanging his head as he seemingly remembered the position he was in. "In the Spiritless Zone, he left a witness. I sent him to eradicate that witness... but from the timid way he skulked back here, I'm rather inclined to believe he failed to accomplish it."

He shot the unfortunate Katsura a suspicious look, and Katsura bit his lip, not even daring to try and raise his voice.

"He was seen?" Eiraki's face paled with alarm. "A shinigami went back to Seireitei having seen our son's face?"

"Yes, and so that's why..."

"And you sent him back there, where he could've been caught, dissected, or anything?" Eiraki's voice was raising now, and she grabbed Keitarou by the flaps of his worn hakamashita, giving him a little shake. "Sometimes I wonder what kind of a father you are, when you make decisions like that!"

"Okaasama, it's all right! Please... it was... it was my mistake!" Katsura's expression became one of horror, and he hurried to part his mother from his father, meeting her gaze with a beseeching one of his own. "Father was right to be cross with me — I slipped up and I let someone escape. Because of that... it was my mess to fix. That's why he sent me back."

"And the person you were sent to eradicate was Edogawa Mitsuki?" Eiraki asked, and Katsura lowered his head in a miserable nod.

“You didn’t succeed, though, did you?” Keitarou demanded, and, slowly, Katsura shook his head.

“I couldn’t find her,” he murmured. “Seireitei is full of security, and I was frightened of drawing attention to myself. I went to the Fourth, but she wasn’t there. And then... then people started... started making a fuss about sighting a former Onmitsukidou lurking around Seireitei the night Tenichi was abducted, and... I was afraid they might think it was... me. So... before they realised I was there... I left.”

“An Onmitsukidou?” Eiraki’s eyes became slits, and she glared at Keitarou accusingly. “It seems as though your pet corpse was a little more careless than usual. Sounds to me as though they’re more interested in Kurotsuchi than they are in our son — that is, if we believe they cared anything for his existence in the first place.”

“Kurotsuchi reported to me quite faithfully that he had overheard Gotei agents discussing Edogawa Mitsuki’s direct testimony from the Spiritless Zone,” Keitarou began patiently, but Eiraki snorted, shaking her head.

“A ruse — probably a lie — based on Kurotsuchi covering his own back at Katsura’s expense,” she said disparagingly. “What evidence have you other than his account to suggest that anyone is looking for Katsura? Maybe he was seen in the Spiritless Zone — but there are countless lost souls in that place. What makes you think anyone would consider him anything other than just another one? Perhaps Mitsuki-neesama did pick up specific reiatsu from him — it’s not impossible, she’s a sensitive healer. But even if she did, don’t you think sending our boy into enemy territory would be a confirmation of those suspicions, rather than a way of extinguishing them? Worse, killing a shinigami in their own territory — Kei-sama, are you trying to get Katsura killed?”

Keitarou’s brow creased, and he pursed his lips, considering his wife’s words carefully.

“Kurotsuchi is not a pleasant individual, but I believe what he told me,” he said quietly. “Katsura, also, is well aware that he was seen and he kept this information from me when first he reported back. However, there is also reason in what you say. Whilst I believe Kurotsuchi reported to me correctly, if someone saw him lurking around Seireitei and recognised him, it’s more than possible that the Gotei’s attention would swing towards him rather than a person with unknown characteristics about whom they can trace nothing.”

He shot Katsura a pensive look.

“You’re lucky your mother is so fond of you,” he said wearily. “It appears this time you’re off the hook — though I want you to tell me quite clearly what you heard and saw in Inner Seireitei. The clothes you wear belong to a shinigami, correct? Is he dead?”

“Yes, sir,” Katsura’s expression became troubled, but he nodded his head. “I... I kind of... set fire to him. I don’t know how... it just happened when I... was covering the body... but I don’t suppose he’ll be found or recognised quickly. They thought I was a squad shinigami at the gate and didn’t question me... but when... when there was such a fuss, I thought it better to leave. I know you told me not to come home without completing my mission, but... but in the circumstances...”

“So Edogawa Mitsuki still lives,” Keitarou clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth. “That’s unexpectedly unfortunate. I had hoped to seal the problem of Ukitake Juushirou’s potential interest in us and our activities by dealing him a hefty emotional blow, but I suppose I shall have to think along new lines.”

“You shouldn’t conceive of missions like that, anyway,” Eiraki said reprovingly. “If I’d have known you were going to attack Mitsuki-neesama, I’d have spoken up against it.”

“You’d have spoken in defence of a girl who turned on you and probably reported on you back to her superiors the last time you met? A girl who all but threatened you with her healing sword?” Keitarou demanded, and Eiraki sniffed, folding her arms across her chest in a gesture reminiscent of one of Sakaki’s teenage sulks.

“She was kind to me, when nobody else understood,” she said simply. “I killed someone who was family to her, and she didn’t like that. We have different ideas on things — but killing Clan shinigami is difficult and dangerous and we’ve already had enough of the Kuchiki. Or have you forgotten Kuchiki Kinnya and the battle that left you with that limp? You were lucky to survive — and heaven only knows what you did to your body, drinking that potion so that we could escape.”

“I will never forget Kuchiki Kinnya, my dear, of that you have my word,” Keitarou said grimly. “Unfortunately, though, I have no particular way to deal with Clan fossils who retain far too much of their original power. Besides, the matter of Mitsuki appears to be academic. If the Gotei are onto Kurotsuchi, I must think of a different plan of action.”

“Does that mean... I don’t have to go back?” Katsura asked hesitantly, and Keitarou sighed.

“You are a stupidly lucky individual,” he said tiredly. “Your mother spoils you far too much, but I suppose in this instance there is reason to her argument, too. No, you need not go back. You can consider the matter shelved — for now.”

He cast Eiraki a questioning look.

“Is Kurotsuchi with Koku? I haven’t seen either one of them today.”

“I wouldn’t know where that worm is,” Eiraki said expressively. “Here, there, six feet below the ground — it’s all the same to me. As for Koku...” she shrugged, “he’s never been the sociable kind, and he doesn’t generally come seeking my company. He’s probably in his shelter or by the river — those seem to be his favourite haunts.”

“He... hasn’t been so well, lately,” Katsura hazarded, and Keitarou rubbed his temples.

“You stay out of that,” he said frankly. “I might have let you off this particular task, but I’m still not entirely pleased with you. Instead of fussing over Koku, who does his duty and does it properly, I suggest you re-examine your position as my eldest son and work out how you can best become worthy of that position. I need you to be one hundred percent committed to this family and this project, Katsura — if that’s not the case, I don’t think you need me to spell out what the end result will be, for us and for you.”

“The boy understands, Kei-sama,” Eiraki put a reassuring hand on Katsura’s shoulder, shooting her husband a look. “He’s still young, and he’s been brought up in this godforsaken place. You can’t expect him to anticipate all the dangers we grew up with when to him visiting Seireitei is like a day at the park.”

“Maybe,” Keitarou acknowledged reluctantly, “but loopholes can sometimes become big enough for someone to fall through — as well you know. If... and it’s a slim chance, but if Kurotsuchi were to be connected back to here... if that were to happen... then it would become a serious situation for you and your waifs and strays just as much as it would be for us. We protect them, don’t forget... and...”

“Papa! Papa!”

Before Keitarou could finish his sentence, the flap of the hut was torn back to reveal a breathless Sakaki, her eyes wild and her cheeks stained with the traces of tears. At the sight of her, Keitarou stopped dead, staring at her in dismay, and she flung herself on him, hugging him tightly in an uncharacteristically frightened gesture of daughterly affection.

“Sakaki-chan?” Keitarou gently disentangled her grasp, gazing down at her with concerned eyes. “What’s wrong... what’s happened? This isn’t like you — what’s got you so upset?”

“She’s been fighting,” Katsura wrinkled up his nose, pulling a graphic face. “I can smell the blood on her from here, Otousama. Whatever it is, she’s been bleeding her blade on something or someone.”

“So I see,” Keitarou took Sakaki’s blood-splattered fingers gently in his, running his own worn hands over them before casting his youngest a quizzical look. “Sakaki-chan? Can you tell us what’s happened?”

“A shinigami, in the forest,” Sakaki swallowed hard, meeting her father’s gaze with a frightened, half-defiant look. “I killed him. I killed him, Papa. I had to kill him, didn’t I? That was what I was supposed to do, wasn’t it? It wasn’t like he was... he wasn’t that shinigami who was here before. He was a bad shinigami..he wanted to find you... hurt you...”

“A shinigami came here?” Keitarou’s gaze immediately shifted to Katsura, who put up his hands hurriedly in a gesture of surrender.

“I don’t know anything about it!” he protested. “I swear, Otousama, I didn’t bring anyone back with me! I just came... if there was a shinigami, it wasn’t... I didn’t...”

“He didn’t say anything about Katsu-nii,” Sakaki sniffed, shaking her head. “I don’t know why he was here, except he came l... looking for you, Papa.”

“I see.” Keitarou’s expression became grim. “Sakaki, have you seen Kurotsuchi at all of late?”

“No, sir,” Sakaki shook her head, looking confused. “I told you, he didn’t come about Kurotsuchi. He came... he came...”

“All right, I understand,” Keitarou rested a hand on her head, glancing at his wife, whose lips thinned in consternation. “Perhaps your fears were more grounded than I realised, Eiraki-chan. I apologise. If someone has already made a connection between a lost Onmitsukidou and the possibility of our being in Rukongai...”

“Maybe it was the Kotetsu boy,” Eiraki muttered. “I told you he shouldn’t have been brought back here.”

“I should have killed him when I had the chance,” Sakaki agreed tearfully. “I should have, but then Koku stopped me... and... and...”

Koku! Papa, Koku... he... he..."

"Koku?" Keitarou stared at the young girl in apprehension. "What about Koku, Sakaki? I know he stopped you from killing Tenichi — but... there's something else?"

"He attacked me, Papa!" fresh tears glittered on Sakaki's lashes. "He came at me and threatened me and talked a... about k... killing me, and I... I..."

"What did you do to Koku?" Suddenly Keitarou's tone had changed, grasping his daughter tightly by the shoulders and fixing her with an urgent look. "Tell me — what did you... with your blade... did you hurt him? Tell me the truth... what did you do to him?"

"Nothing!" Sakaki's expression became one of confusion and distress, and she shook her head, struggling to pull herself free of his hold. "Papa, stop it! Why are you cross with me? I didn't do anything wrong! It wasn't me! I killed the shinigami! It was Koku... Koku tried to stop me killing him. Koku drew a sword on me... and he said he... he ought to kill me... and he..."

"Koku..." Katsura's eyes clouded with consternation. "Sakaki, why would he attack you? Koku doesn't like violence, and he doesn't believe in fighting. Why would he do something like that?"

"I don't know!" Sakaki snapped back defiantly, wiping away her tears with the ragged hem of a bloody sleeve. "All I know is that he... he wasn't normal. He did things... the whole world seemed to go funny, and I... I couldn't fight back against him. All I did was kill a shinigami who invaded our territory, which was the right thing, wasn't it? But he came down on me like I'd done something awful, and the things he said... he wasn't normal. He wasn't normal!"

She buried her head in Keitarou's shoulder, and the scientist frowned, casting Katsura a glance.

"Go find Koku," he said softly. "Kurotsuchi too, if you can. Send them back to me at once. I'll hear this from them first-hand. First, though, there's the matter of the shinigami to deal with. If Sakaki did kill an intruder, we need to dispose of the body properly, before it's traced back here."

"I did, Papa," Sakaki raised her gaze at this, and Keitarou nodded.

"Can you take Katsura back to the scene and help him get rid of the evidence?" he asked softly, his tone still strained but more gentle than it had been moments before. Sakaki jerked her head into a hesitant nod, and Keitarou sighed.

“Koku won’t attack you again,” he promised. “Katsura will make sure of it — won’t you, Katsura?”

“Yes, sir,” Katsura’s expression was grave. “Come on, Saki-chan. Show me where you went, and we’ll fix the place up so nobody can find him.”

He held out a hand to his sister, who took it hesitantly, and Keitarou watched the siblings leave the small hut, the fabric flap falling folornly back behind them as if forming a divide between parent and child.

There was a long silence, then Eiraki spoke.

“Kei-sama, about Koku...”

“I know,” Keitarou pressed his lips together in displeasure. “I know, and I hope it’s not the case. I’ll deal with it though... so try not to worry.”

“Mm...” Eiraki frowned, “and the other thing? If a shinigami did come back here... what then?”

“If they did... I don’t think it was Tenichi who sent them.” Keitarou shook his head. “If he’d been inclined to betray us, it would’ve happened sooner... no, this is something else at work. Perhaps it’s to do with Kurotsuchi — now I think on it, it’s been several days together since I set eyes on him, and that’s unusual. Maybe he’s got himself into trouble somewhere, and perhaps this is the result. More likely, though...”

He rubbed his chin, then,

“You remember our conversation about the Kitsune?” he asked quietly. Eiraki started, then nodded, her eyes clouding.

“You think this relates to them?”

“I worry that it does, yes,” Keitarou admitted. “I may have taken a bigger risk than I thought, taking Tenichi back personally. I needed to establish the whereabouts of these people for myself — but maybe it allowed them to establish some awareness of me at the same time. Perhaps it runs in the family, Eiraki-chan — I’ve been chastising Katsura for being seen when perhaps there’s blame closer to home. If that’s the case, and a shinigami was sent here after us... his lack of return will soon spark further investigations. In which case...”

“We’re all in danger, aren’t we?” Eiraki’s voice was fearful. Keitarou rested his hands on his wife’s shoulders, gazing at her for a moment, then shaking his head.

“On the contrary, this could be seen as a positive situation,” he reflected. “I had been thinking along these lines already, but in light of the circumstances I think it better to act on them right away, especially if supplies are becoming problematic amongst your Rukon strays. There are no longer Shinigami spirits flitting around the Spiritless Zone, and if they’re hunting shadows, they won’t be paying it any particular attention. They’ve doubtless combed the entirety of that land for any sign of the killers of their shinigami, but to no avail. Since they’ve searched it, though, it’s the one place they won’t think to look for us, right under their noses in their own sacred space. There’s nowhere safer in the whole of Soul Society — and the resources there are far better than the ones here.”

“Meaning...” Eiraki’s eyes became huge, and Keitarou nodded.

“If Kurotsuchi’s in trouble, he’ll have to take care of himself,” he said matter-of-factly. “I don’t expect him to break his discipline and talk, even if he were to be captured — but he can’t leak what he doesn’t know. That being the case, you should gather the villagers together and explain that we’re relocating. When Katsura and Sakaki come back, I’ll deal with Koku and we’ll make preparations to move. Now there are no shinigami watching it, breaking the barrier should be easy. We’ll move into the Spiritless Zone, and we’ll coopt the people there to our cause, since the shinigami obviously can’t protect them any more. No, perhaps in the long run, this will prove a positive step.”

“Then you’ll stop picking on Katsura?” Eiraki demanded. “You’re just as much of an idiot as he was, so you’ll leave him alone?”

“I promise,” Keitarou kissed her gently on the forehead, offering her a smile. “He’s my son, too, don’t forget. I’m fond of him, even if he can be slow off the mark and naive at times. Since no harm seems to have come of his exploits, we’ll let it alone and move on.”

“And Koku?”

“Mm,” Keitarou’s eyes became clouded, and his gaze drifted towards the door.

“I’ll see what he has to say for himself,” he said at length. “That’s all I can do. Given his origins, given everything... I’ve done my best, but maybe it’s not been enough. I can’t work miracles, Eiraki, even though sometimes I try.”

He shrugged.

“I’ll talk to him, find out his side, and we’ll go from there,” he

added. "Katsura's not wrong when he says the lad's not been well of late — perhaps that's all it is, and if so, maybe I can do something about it. If not... if not..."

He shook his head.

"Enough of this," he said firmly, holding up his hands. "First things first. We need to gather up everyone and everything and prepare to lay waste to this village before we move out. There must be no trace left that we were ever here, whether spiritual or physical, and that'll take some effort, so we might as well begin now. I'm going to Kohaku's hut. If the Gotei come here, there are things they must not get their hands on, starting with the contents of that place!"

There was a chill wind whistling through the trees of the forest as Kikyue and her patrol crossed through the provinces of Seventh District, barely pausing to acknowledge the few stray residents who had risen early for market. As they crossed the central river, however, into the land beyond, Kikyue called them to a halt, turning her attention on Tenichi who stood silent to one side. He was tense, his eyes strained and his features pale, yet as she beckoned to him to come forward, he did so, lowering his head more from habit than from genuine acknowledgement of her status. In the circumstances, though, Kikyue barely even noticed, fixing him with a penetrating stare instead.

"We've come this far, but we need to go further," she said softly. "Tenichi, you must remember more from the night Anie brought you back. You didn't use shunpo, I know, because you were still cuffed, weren't you? Maybe it was Anie who knew the route, but you must remember... something."

"A dense forest with lots of trees," Tenichi said slowly. "That's really all I remember clearly, Kikyue-dono. We went through trees for what seemed like forever. Then we came to the outskirts of a village, crossed this bridge... and headed back towards Seireitei."

"Forest, huh," Kikyue fought to keep the frustration out of her voice, lifting her hand to gesture at the landscape before them. "There's nothing but trees for a good few ri in that direction — are you telling me that the place Anie came to get you was somewhere inside all of that?"

"Yes, ma'am," Tenichi lowered his head again, looking apologetic. "I'm sorry. This part of Seventh District... I don't know very well at all."

“I thought you grew up here?” Nakata demanded, giving him a nudge. “Surely you remember more than that — you’re a District kid, you must know District land?”

“I grew up mostly in District Eight,” Tenichi shook his head. “We were refugees, my mother and brother and I, and we left Seventh when I was eight years old. A lot has changed since then, and I wasn’t part of Seventh Division when it was still based within the Clan lands. I’m sorry, Nakata-san. I might be able to tell you more clearly if it was in the area of my old village — but all I know is that it was not. It was a dense forest, all right, but... not the same one.”

“Then we’ll have to split and search the old-fashioned way,” Kikyue decided with a sigh. She turned to the patrol, raising her hand above her head and spreading her fingers to indicate her command. Immediately the group of shinigami saluted, dividing automatically into familiar groups of three and four that they operated in during training sessions, and one by one they melted into the forest, none of them wanting to hesitate and risk the sharp edge of Kikyue’s tongue on a day like today. Only Tenichi and Nakata remained, Tenichi uncertain and Nakata troubled, and Kikyue glanced between the two of them with a frown.

“You two are coming with me,” she said matter-of-factly. “Nakata, your family has land in these parts too, I think — or not far beyond the rise. Maybe you’ll recognise a useful landmark that’ll jog Tenichi’s memory. And you...” she swiped fingers against the sleeve of Tenichi’s *hakamashita*, “I want close by at all times. If you see even the smallest thing that looks like something you saw that night, then I want...”

Her words cut off mid sentence as, from somewhere in the surrounding area a rush of strange, disjointed spirit power surged across her senses, sending her momentarily out of her train of thought. A quick glance at her companions told her that they had sensed it too, and as she hurriedly gathered her wits, she realised what the sensation had most likely been.

“A *Senkaimon*!” It was Nakata who put the thought into words, grabbing Tenichi by the arm and gesturing towards the west. “You felt it too, right, Kotetsu? A *Senkaimon*, from over there. Do you remember anything about a gate... wasn’t it one of those through which you were first snatched?”

“I was taken through a gate in Inner Seireitei, outside of Twelfth Division,” Tenichi’s voice trembled, his eyes huge as they gazed out across the forest. “It wasn’t here... I don’t... surely there isn’t...”

“There isn’t a *Senkaimon* that I know of in that direction, but nonetheless, that’s what it felt like,” Kikyue shivered involuntarily, wrapping her arms around her slender body. “It’s more than possible if you were taken that way, then whoever it was dumped you back in the same manner, even if you don’t remember. It would explain why you suddenly showed up in a remote part of Seventh that doesn’t look like it’s been inhabited for over a century.”

“In which case, we should investigate, shouldn’t we?” Nakata cast his leader a quizzical glance, and Kikyue nodded, opening her lips to answer him, but as she did so, she felt a second rush of spiritual energy and she let out a little gasp, her fingers going to the hilt of her sword.

“Aniue’s reiatsu!” she exclaimed. “Follow me! Follow me, both of you! Aniue’s there, at the gate, I can feel him! Wherever he’s been, that’s where he is now!”

Without waiting to see if her companions obeyed her, she slipped into shunpo, racing through the trees towards the place where she could feel the pulsing presence of Souja’s reiatsu emanating from the heart of the woodland. As she dropped out of her flash-step, kicking, clawing and slashing her way through the thick vines and overhanging branches to reach her target, she could tell that her brother was not alone, but as she pushed back the greenery and stepped into the lush stretch of grassland for the first time, she stopped dead, horror flooding her young gaze as she took in the scene in front of her.

Lying on the ground, his clothing slashed and soaked through with blood was the pale, crumpled form of her beloved older brother, dark hair straggled across the ground like a halo around his head. At his side lay the discarded shape of his *zanpakutou*, as though the fine, elegant fingers had not been able to keep their hold on it, but despite the obvious severity of Souja’s wounds, it was something else which drove terror and indignation through Kikyue’s heart, raising the hunter’s spirit inside of her.

Bending over Souja, his hand at the Vice Captain’s throat was another individual, shabbily dressed and ragged, apparently oblivious to her appearance on the scene. To Kikyue, it appeared as though this stranger was attempting to kill her brother, and she leapt forward with a scream of rage, swinging her blade down as though to cleave the unwelcome stranger’s body clean in two. Reiatsu bubbled from the tip of her weapon, and at the last minute the stranger turned, alarm in his dark eyes as he raised his hands in a futile attempt to defend

himself.

“Ki... ki...” The faint sound of Souja’s calling to her went unheeded, as, in a red rage now, Kikyue swung her sword again, slicing the silver tip savagely through the torso of the young man’s faded garments and through to the flesh and bone beneath. Blood spurted from the wound as the stranger gasped, dropping to the ground and grabbing at his midriff, but Kikyue was not done. All she could see in front of her was someone who had threatened her brother’s life, and that someone she would show no mercy. The soul of the hunting bird screamed through her blade, calling for her to release its power, and her lips parted, ready to shout the command which would release the sleek-winged kestrel from its bonds. On the ground, she was oblivious to the faint twitches of her brother’s fingers, or the strange expression that suddenly glittered in her victim’s eyes, half seeing her and half not as the unforgiving length of polished steel swept down to sever his body once and for all.

Within Kikyue’s heart, the sound of the kestrel’s beating wing span mirrored her heart beat, and the weapon glowed with energy as she bore down, hunter against prey, to strike out the stranger’s life.

27. Crossing Over

Chapter Twenty Six: Crossing Over

“Kikyue!”

As the young Endou shinigami raised her weapon to cast the fatal blow, someone was suddenly beside her, a hand grabbing at her wrist, and forcibly stopping her from moving her sword. Still half-crazed with anger, she struggled against the hold, but whoever it was held her fast, and, as a second arm wrapped itself around her middle, pulling her back from her victim, the first hand slid itself into her fist, removing the sword and setting it down out of her reach. Wrenching herself as much as she could from the firm hold, she swung her gaze around in frustration to meet the sombre, hazel gaze of the Thirteenth Division Captain and, as she read the seriousness in his expression, she felt the grip on her body tighten further.

“Whatever happened here, it’s for the Council to decide, not you and your sword,” he said reproachfully, though she saw his gaze flit momentarily towards the still form of her brother on the ground. “We came to find Souja and we succeeded. Now our job is to help him. Not begin individual battles of our own.”

“But... but that boy... he was...” Kikyue fought against the Captain’s hold, but again, it was to no avail, for though she managed to free her wrist, she was no longer in a position to attack. She had never encountered her father’s friend on the battlefield, but in that moment, she understood why Hirata respected him, for she realised that, no matter how much her hunting spirit screamed out for vengeance and blood, there was nothing she could do to shake Juushirou’s firm determination to hold her back.

“Where are your squad?” He continued to address her in soft tones, as though trying to soothe her, and Kikyue beat her fists frustratedly against his chest like a petulant child who had been deprived of completing some forbidden activity. “Hirata didn’t send you out alone, I know — where are the others?”

“We split to search,” Kikyue sank back against the man who had been an uncle figure to her and Souja growing up, letting out a sigh. “Tenichi and Nakata are behind me. I told them to follow me when we felt the gate open... Juushirou-dono, you felt it too?”

“I did,” Juushirou agreed, “in a place where there ought not be one, which sparked my curiosity. Kirio and I came to help with the search at Hirata’s behest — but it seems that another, more pressing need is upon us now. If I let you go, Kikyue, you must promise me not to try and attack that young man any more.”

“But he was standing over Anieue! He was hurting him! I had to!”

“If that’s true, then he needs to be properly questioned before the right authorities,” Juushirou shook his head, gently loosing his hold on her and getting to his feet. “If he’s guilty of hurting Souja, then we need to know how, why and where the assault took place. We need to know where he came from, and only some answers can be taken from a corpse.”

He moved down beside Souja’s pale body, putting a gentle finger to the man’s throat and, at the contact, Souja coughed, his body twitching slightly as if in acknowledgement of Juushirou’s presence. Juushirou hesitated for a moment, then, very gingerly, as though doing his best not to cause the young man more pain than was necessary, he slipped his arm behind Souja’s trembling shoulders, lifting him up so that it was easier for the Vice Captain to breathe. He mouthed something too quiet for Kikyue to make out, and Juushirou’s eyes clouded over.

“Kikyue, your brother’s conscious,” he murmured. “Come tend to him — I think he knows you’re here, and you can be more comfort to him than I can.”

“Anieue!” Vengeance on the fallen stray forgotten, Kikyue hurried down at her brother’s side, anxious blue eyes focused on his waxy, pale features as she reached out to brush his cheek. His lips were grey, but there was a smear of blood across one side of his mouth, indicating that his coughing had brought up blood from a deep internal injury, and fear raced through her like adrenaline. Only Juushirou’s grave presence prevented her from losing her wits and grabbing hold of his body to examine the severity of his wounds for herself. Even to her uneducated gaze, she could tell they were serious. As a young girl she had learned that skin that pale indicated a heavy loss of blood and for the first time she became aware that the ground where her brother lay was not as saturated with red as were his tattered robes. Was he bleeding inwardly? The smear at his lips suggested so, yet somehow she controlled her racing thoughts, forcing herself to turn her attention back to Souja himself.

Anieue is Anieue. He can't die. We'll get help. The healers will fix him — it will be all right. Endou are strong... Father's always said that. We're not

designed to be easy to kill. Anieue will be fine. It just looks bad... surely... there's not enough blood for it to be serious?

"Anieue, can you hear me?" She murmured softly. "Speak... say something... tell us what happened! Tell me what that vagrant did to you — tell me, so I can finish him once and for all!"

"Kikyue, I already told you..."

"Juushirou-dono, if he hurt my brother, the Endou will speak for him before the Council do," Kikyue's eyes would've flashed fire at the Thirteenth Captain if she had not known that within his sleeping sword dwelled a spirit capable of disarming her and rendering her helpless without even the slightest amount of effort. "This is a Clan matter, first and foremost. The Clan will handle it. Father would say so too."

"That's not how the Gotei works," Juushirou shook his head slowly. "Besides, we don't know, yet, what happened here. The District boy is a witness... whether guilty or innocent, we don't yet know, but when you attacked him, he didn't raise a weapon at you."

"Meaning?" Kikyue's gaze burned with frustration, and Juushirou patted her sword hand gently.

"If he'd been armed, he would have tried to fight back," he said softly. "The only sword I see here is your brother's, and it's not blooded. We don't know what happened here. I hope the young lad is still alive — I find it difficult to believe that a District boy could hurt your brother so badly with just his bare hands."

"Ki... ki..."

Before Kikyue could respond, a bloodsoaked hand stretched desperately out to grasp the edges of her *hakama*, the pale fingers trembling with the effort, yet at the sound of the affectionate nickname, Kikyue faltered, turning her gaze back on her fallen brother. He tugged again, unable to move any more than a few inches from Juushirou's supportive grasp, but that faint, feeble movement had been enough to break the hunter's rage in the young woman's aura and tears glittered on her lashes, grabbing his shaking hand in hers.

"Anieue?"

"Helped... me." Souja's words were faint, and Kikyue could not make out more than the bare syllables, but her face changed colour and she turned, casting a stricken glance at the strange youth.

“He... helped you? The vagrant boy... he helped you?”

Souja shifted his head forward slightly in a feeble but determined nod and, at this, the tension seeped out of Kikyue’s shoulders, a sick, dull feeling flooding through her gut as she realised she had attacked someone who had tried to save her brother, not end his life. The real assailant was still out there, yet in her frustration Kikyue could not pick out any other distinctive reiatsu from Souja’s damaged body, and she turned, casting a distressed look in the direction of the fallen stray.

“I... but I...”

The words stuck in her throat, refusing to form as the true gravity of the situation washed over her, and Juushirou squeezed her sword arm reassuringly.

“Kirio, see to the District boy,” he said softly, raising his head to meet Kirio’s gaze over the top of Kikyue’s despondent shoulders. “What he was doing here and what he knows about Souja-dono’s attack may yet be useful to us, and if nothing else, it seems we owe him reparation.”

“Me, sir?” Kirio, who had lingered uncertainly at the edge of the clearing stepped hesitantly forward, gazing at the crumpled, blooded form of the stranger, then back at her Captain doubtfully. “But I... don’t know any healing spells. I never learned any... even Shikiki hasn’t...”

“You know basic first aid, and it will have to suffice,” Juushirou interrupted her quietly. “Time is of the essence... whatever attacked Souja could still be in the vicinity, and the young lad is our responsibility now. Kikyue, you’d want it that way too, I think?”

He cast his companion a glance, and Kikyue nodded almost automatically, her heart still numb.

“I didn’t mean to...” she whispered, and Juushirou nodded.

“Then we’ll say no more about it,” he said matter of factly. “Kirio, if you please. See if the boy’s alive, and if he is, do what you can to reassure him. Whatever happened, it happened before we got here, and we need to know more. That boy may be the key to it — so do whatever you’re able and keep him alive.”

“You know, I can’t believe that Koku would attack you just like that,”

As they hurried through the twisting pathways and dying scrubland of the Rukongai wasteland, Katsura shot his sister a glance, taking in once more the blood that spattered across her clothing and the strange, unearthly pallor of her features, two bright blue eyes darting apprehensively around her at each and every turn. In their short lives, Katsura had never seen Sakaki properly frightened, yet from the way she scoured the landscape he knew that something had definitely upset her, and his heart lurched in his chest as he contemplated the potential reasons for her behaviour.

“Something must’ve happened, Saki-chan — are you sure you don’t remember anything else?”

“I told you, didn’t I?” Sakaki stopped dead, putting her hands on her hips and sending him a wary, defensive glare. “I found the shinigami, poking around in our business. I fought him. I killed him. Koku appeared and waved a sword at me. I don’t know what happened after, but he told me to go, and dammit, I went. I went straight to Papa and I told him everything — what else is there to remember?”

“I don’t know,” Katsura admitted, his expression frustrated. “I don’t know, but there must be something. Koku doesn’t fight, and doesn’t believe in violence. You said yourself that he stopped you attacking the shinigami Father brought back here, right? So why would he suddenly...”

“He’s betraying us is why,” Sakaki snapped back, indignation bristling across her features at the thought. “He must be, it’s the only thing that makes sense. First he defends that Tenichi person, now this time... he’s working with them! He’s a spy... he’s probably been sent by them, and that’s why... that’s why...”

“That’s not possible, Saki-chan,” Katsura shook his head, taking his companion gently by the arm and leading her forward once again. “Koku comes from Rukongai. He’s not been to Seireitei, not once. Not ever. How could he be a spy, if he’s never left the village?”

“You only have his word for that,” Sakaki said impatiently, pulling her hand free and gesturing to the land up ahead. “In any case, it was around here. He’s not still there, is he? I can’t tell... but I figure you can, since you’re so fond of reading people’s minds all of the time.”

There was a note of bitterness in her voice, and Katsura sighed, resting his hands on her shoulders and meeting her gaze head on.

“I’ve known Koku longer than you,” he said quietly. “We were kids when I first met him. Unless you think he’s been spying on us since he

was a tyke, your theory doesn't make sense. Besides, Koku's the one who never wants to go to Seireitei, or the Spiritless Zone, or anywhere else. He doesn't want to get involved in those things — and if he's not going to find out information, what kind of a spy would he make anyway? You're upset so you're jumping to conclusions, but there's no way he's a spy."

"I don't know about that," Sakaki kicked at the ground sullenly. "Katsu-nii, you didn't see how he was... and the way he spoke to me, too. I've never seen him that way, and I'm sure you haven't, either."

She brushed her fingers against her throat, then,

"For a moment he had a blade here. I really thought he would kill me... and I couldn't do a damn thing about it. I don't know what he did — whether it was that spirit power thing that people like you and Father have or some other kind of demonic power, but he wasn't normal. Maybe he was possessed by something — I dunno — but it was me he attacked."

"Did he tell you why?"

"I told you. Because of the shinigami."

"He actually said as much? He took the shinigami's side against you?" Katsura paused, looking confused. Sakaki nodded.

"Koku hates me. I hate him. It's how we've always been," she said frankly. "I never thought he had the guts to attack me, though... I only listened to him over that Tenichi because he threatened to get Papa involved and I knew he would, the little sneak. This time... the shinigami asked specifically about Papa. In that situation, wasn't I right to kill him? If he'd gone back with information about us..."

"Tell me exactly what happened," Katsura said softly. "Everything you remember, what he said, what the shinigami said, everything."

"Does it matter when he's dead?" Sakaki demanded, and Katsura nodded.

"If it explains Koku's behaviour, maybe," he said pensively. "Can you try, anyway? I know it shook you up, but if the shinigami asked specifically about Father, then..."

"He was an Endou," Sakaki said frankly, and Katsura faltered, staring at her in dismay.

"An Endou? As in...?"

"Mother's kin. Yes." Sakaki snorted in contempt. "He was full of it

— and when he saw me, he knew I was Mother's child. I look too much like her — I guess he's seen pictures or something, because he drew the line between us right away. He kept asking about Father and stuff, and it was too dangerous just to let him escape. He asked about you, too."

"Me?" Katsura whitened, and Sakaki nodded.

"He wanted to know if I had an older brother about his age," she said derisively. "He thought Koku was it, but I told him that I'd rather die than be related to that idiot. So then he wanted to know about you, but I didn't tell him anything — not about you, or about Father or Mother. He asked about the Spiritless Zone, too, but I wasn't about to let him leave with any information."

"So you think he came here by chance and stumbled onto something about us?" Katsura's heart skipped a beat, and Sakaki nodded.

"Something like that. I think he found the demon's hut, because he was asking a lot of questions," she agreed. "I don't know what a shinigami would feel if he came here, spiritually and so on — but maybe it made him suspicious? I don't know. Just when he asked about Father, there was no way I was going to let him live. I killed him to protect everyone, Katsu-nii — it wasn't wrong to do that."

"Protecting us? No, I guess not," Katsura let out his breath in a rush. "Okay, so he appeared here by coincidence — not because of me, or because of Kurotsuchi, but just by chance and happened to catch on to Father's being here somehow?"

"I think so. Yes," Sakaki agreed. "If he'd known better, he'd have been more prepared. He didn't just give up and die, he tried to beat me — I guess I should expect an Endou to fight — but I got the better of him. Then, just as I was finishing him off, Koku appeared on the scene and..."

She shrugged helplessly.

"It's kinda blurry after that. Whatever Koku did, it made me feel weird."

She grabbed hold of her brother's arm, pulling him towards the clearing where the fight had occurred.

"You spend more time talking to the creep. You should know if he's done anything like that before."

"I've never heard of him attacking anyone... especially not an ally."

Katsura chewed his lip, allowing himself to be dragged between the dead trunks of two splintered trees and into the clearing beyond. “The shinigami said nothing else?”

“Only that he’d seen Koku, and somehow got away from him,” Sakaki shrugged. “Koku knew who he was, though. The shinigami, I mean — his name and everything.”

“I see,” Katsura’s eyes clouded. “All right. More we’re not going to get without talking to the guy himself — though I don’t think he’s still here. I can sense wisps of reiatsu and I know he was here, just as you said, but... not now.”

“Then it’s safe to clear up the corpse,” relief flooded Sakaki’s features and she bounced forward, scouring the grass for a sign of her crumpled prize. As Katsura followed her at a more reluctant pace, he glanced casually around him, focusing his spiritual energy on trying to make contact with the missing Rukongai vagrant.

Koku? Koku, dammit, where are you? Come out and talk to me — tell me what’s happened since Father sent me to Seireitei.

There was no reply, and Katsura’s brow creased as he caught sight of something glinting on the grass. He bent to pick it up, then paused, consternation flooding his expression as he registered what it was.

That sword... why on earth would it be out here like this?

“Katsu-nii, it’s gone!” Sakaki’s cry of dismay alerted him to a fresh problem, and he glanced up, seeing his sister flying towards him, panic and anger on her young face. “The body, it’s gone! It was right here, I swear, but now... there’s just blood and nothing else!”

“Are you sure he was dead?” Katsura’s stomach began to knot up inside of him as he contemplated this, and Sakaki nodded impatiently.

“He was. He was cut to pieces — there’s no way he could’ve survived, let alone run away. I kicked him pretty hard when Koku was here, and he didn’t even flinch.”

“But now he’s gone...” Katsura got to his feet, brushing the dust and dirt from his stolen *hakama*. “Maybe he wasn’t quite dead. Maybe he recovered consciousness and managed to crawl a few feet away from here. Maybe he got into a shelter nearby — in which case, he’s probably died there. I can’t sense the reiatsu of any living shinigami in the local area, so he’s definitely not about to spring a surprise attack on us.”

“You can tell those things, too?” Sakaki looked surprised, and Katsura nodded, running his fingers absently through the air.

"I can tell there was a confrontation here," he agreed. "I can sense something foreign — and I can sense Koku. I believe you, Sakaki. What you said happened... I believe you."

"You should do anyway. I'm your sister." Sakaki pouted, and Katsura sighed, lowering his hand.

"But Koku's actions, I can't account for," he murmured. "And we need to find the body of your victim. He can't have gone far — can you see any blood trails leading in a particular direction? If he did try to get to shelter, from what you've said, I imagine he couldn't do it without leaving a path of red for us to follow."

"There's nothing like that," Sakaki hopped back to the scene of the crime, bending to touch the blood-stained, bent blades of grass with a tentative finger. "He was here, all curled up and messy, and Koku was here..."

She raised her gaze.

"Koku's taken him somewhere!" she exclaimed. "The idiot, he's taken the shinigami somewhere to try to fix him!"

"Why would he do that?" Katsura looked bewildered. "Even if this shinigami was an Endou, why would Koku care about him living or dying? I would've thought it does him and us no good to have Endou sniffing around here, more than any other shinigami, and it isn't as though he knows any healing tricks that could patch up someone once you'd gutted them. He might not like you killing, but in this instance, I don't see why he would've gotten involved. It doesn't make any sense... and then there's that..."

He glanced back towards the sword, and Sakaki frowned, moving to pick it up.

"This?" She gazed at it, turning it over in her hands, then holding it out to him, and Katsura shook his head.

"I can't touch it," he said quickly. "It's not that kind of sword."

"Really?" Sakaki frowned, casting it a fresh glance as if seeing it anew. "But it's just an ugly old sword, isn't it? I don't get it? It's not as well made as mine, I don't think, and the hilt is oddly carved, but..."

"The hilt is coated in metal that burns my skin," Katsura explained. "People with spirit power... they can't touch it without getting a shock from it at best. At worst, it can cause actual harm. Father told me that — and I can feel it, just standing this close to it."

"Doesn't do anything to me," Sakaki reflected. "I guess not having

spirit power means it can't hurt me, huh?"

She grinned faintly, swinging it half-heartedly in Katsura's direction, then pausing, a frown crossing her young features.

"Saki-chan?"

"This is the sword Koku was holding," the young girl murmured, brushing the index finger of her left hand over the hilt. "When he came at me, this is what he used. I'd never mistake such an ugly sword... it was this all right. But... if people with spirit power can't hold it, Katsu-nii — surely that means Koku doesn't have it, either? Otherwise, how could he hold it at all?"

"Koku attacked you with this?" Katsura's eyes widened with alarm, colour draining from his features. "*This* sword? You're absolutely sure? Koku came out here... wielding *this*?"

"I'm sure," Sakaki was taken aback. "Why? What about it?"

"Turn it over," Katsura instructed, and slowly Sakaki did, squinting at the characters embedded deep into the unwieldy hilt.

"Aizen... Kohaku?" she murmured, and Katsura nodded.

"Kohaku... as in... Father's pet demon? The one he locks in that hut?"

"It's not a demon," Katsura snapped. "But yes. That sword... came from that hut."

"The place nobody's allowed to go?" Sakaki's eyes became huge, her grip on the weapon tightening. "You're saying Koku broke into the hut, stole the sword, attacked me with it and then... what? Disappeared with the corpse of a shinigami to... what... practice some kind of voodoo to bring him back to life or something?"

"I don't know what I'm saying," Katsura swallowed hard, feeling the knot tighten in his stomach. "All I know is that I should've been here. If I had been... perhaps I would've been able to stop... maybe he would've told me whatever it was. It must've been something, but he didn't even tell Father, who he usually tells everything... and now..."

"Are people in Seireitei really hunting us, Katsu-nii?" Sakaki lowered the sword, and Katsura slowly nodded his head.

"They are," he said abruptly. "And if... if they found out about that..." he gestured to the weapon, "it would be even worse. If there's a demon locked in that hut, Sakaki, that sword is a big part of its existence. If there's a demon at all, it's what's locked inside *there*."

“A demon... inside the sword Koku used? A demon that possessed him, maybe?” Sakaki looked thoughtful. “Meaning that Father’s Kohaku is what’s in the sword, not a person at all? If that’s so, why is something written on it? What does it mean... Aizen Kohaku? It sounds like a name... but... can a sword have a name?”

“Father’s does,” Katsura reminded her, and Sakaki shrugged.

“True, but not a name like that,” she said pensively. “That sounds like a person’s name... but a sword can’t be a person... so it doesn’t make sense.”

“All I know is that that sword is bad news and it shouldn’t be out here roaming free where it can poison innocent people,” Katsura said darkly. “We need to take it and give it to Father... he’s the only one who knows what should be done with it.”

“Well, you can’t touch it,” Sakaki said pettily. “So I guess that leaves the job to me, doesn’t it? Even if it means I get poisoned on the way?”

“I think probably you’re immune to it, if you can hold it like that and not feel anything bad,” Katsura said slowly. “I’m sorry, Saki-chan, but it has to be you. I’ll keep scouting around here for the shinigami and for Koku, and if I can, I’ll bring him back to explain things for himself. If I find the corpse, I’ll dispose of it — taking that back is more important right now.”

“All right,” Sakaki shrugged. “I don’t mind. Burying corpses isn’t as much fun as cutting them to bits, and if it’s something only I can do, then I guess I’ll do it. But tell Koku, if you find him, that I won’t forget today. And I’ll get back at him, when he doesn’t have a demon in a sword to make him act like he’s some kind of hotshot.”

She swung the sword again as if to emphasise her point, then grinned.

“Without this, I guess he’s pretty useless after all,” she added, her eyes brightening. “It was the sword that attacked me, not Koku. He is still a wimp... I feel better knowing that.”

With that she slid the sword through the rough sash at her waist, skipping off towards the main village, and Katsura watched her go, pursing his lips as her figure disappeared into the distance.

If you’re happy with that explanation, I guess it will probably serve for now. I can’t explain why the sword should be out here or any of the other things you told me... but I’m more concerned by the fact Koku isn’t here. He was here... I can tell he was... but his motives... and after that...

His brows drew closer together in concentration and he held out his hands, closing his eyes as he tried to piece together the fragments of scattered reiatsu that littered the area. They were already dispersing, making the scene of the battle less and less tangible, but as he persevered, he found what he was looking for — a stray thread of spiritual energy that told him what had occurred after Sakaki's departure from the scene.

Senkaimon.

He frowned, opening his eyes.

Someone opened a gate. Them doing so destroyed the gate, but someone went through it. The shinigami? Did he make it home? Did he disarm you and take you with him as a hostage, Koku-kun? Or... is it the other way? Did you somehow open it... and take this Endou shinigami back? In which case... you must've had a reason. You didn't tell me what it was, though. Before I left, you didn't say anything... maybe you couldn't, or maybe you just didn't know. Still... taking that sword... Father will be cross when Sakaki returns it. He'll be cross that she's seen it and has begun asking questions. If she really understood what lives in that blade... but for now she's satisfied, and that's probably for the best.

He rubbed his temples, suddenly weary.

Somehow I think if she understood everything, life would be even more difficult. As it is, I'm going to have to go home and tell Father that Koku's not here. And he won't like that... he won't like that at all.

The youth's body had fallen not far from where Souja's crumpled form was still being cradled in Juushirou's arms, the Captain doing all he could to stabilise the young man in what Kirio knew would be a hurried mission to return him to Soul Society and the protective care of the Fourth Division's healers. He had charged her with a particular duty of her own, though, and, whilst the savaged state of a respected Vice Captain would linger in Kirio's young mind for a long time to come, for now she had to put it aside, focusing instead on the nameless youngster who, it seemed, had chanced his arrival at precisely the wrong time. As she knelt at his side, she swallowed hard at the oozing pool of blood that had darkened the ripped cloth of his rough robes, making them sticky against his skin, and she inwardly cursed herself for not having let Shikiki teach her even the most basic of healing spells. Whilst Juushirou had seen to it that all members of Thirteenth were versed in basic practical first aid skills, Kirio had never seen the need to learn the magic, joking that her friend would always be on standby should the need arise — but in that moment,

she knew how naive that thought had been. There was no Shikiki, not here in the forests of District Seven. There was only her, and what happened next lay entirely in her unsteady hands.

She reached out a tentative finger to touch the youth's red-soaked shoulder, and at the unexpected contact he flinched, frightened brown eyes gazing hazily up at her as though wondering if he were about to be further damaged. Had he been able, Kirio felt certain that he would have scrambled back away from her like a feral animal cornered by an unwelcome predator, but from the slick pool of blood that was forming on the grass, she soon realised how little strength he had. Inwardly her heart clenched at the wary confusion in the youngster's gaze — he seemed to both see her and not see her, and Kirio remembered vaguely the warning signs of an injured soul going into deep shock.

"I won't hurt you," she spoke quietly, not wanting to frighten him any more, and his lips parted for a moment, as though he was about to form words. Before he could, though, he took a rasping breath of air, coughing violently and Kirio's hand drew back in alarm as blood dribbled from the boy's lips. He gasped, aspirating blood into lungs that, for all Kirio knew had been sliced right through, and before she knew what she was doing, she was taking firm hold of his upper body, lifting him in the way she had seen Juushirou tend to Souja and supporting his spasming body until his choking subsided into hoarse, rasping gasps of air. He was rigid with tension — fear, shock or pain, Kirio did not know which, perhaps a combination of all three making him unwilling to submit to her touch, but she resolutely held on, rubbing his back gently to soothe the panicked gasps into something closer to a normal breathing rhythm.

"Kirio?" Juushirou's voice alerted her to her Captain's attention, and she turned, seeing him getting carefully to his feet, Souja still cradled limply in his arms. "How does it look?"

"He's alive... I'll take care of him," Kirio saw the gravity in Juushirou's anxious gaze and made up her mind, swallowing her indecision and nodding her head. "I'll bring him back, Taichou. You can count on me."

"Good girl," A faint flicker of relief mingled with gratitude crossed the hazel eyes, then, "I'm taking Souja back — it's clear we can't wait here for help to arrive, and time is of the essence. Kikyue, I want you to come with me. Souja needs you — I'm sure he'd rather you stayed close."

"But... Nakata and..."

“They’ll have to take care of themselves,” Juushirou said briskly. “We’ll send someone to meet them and bring them back to base when we get back. Kirio, don’t you linger here any longer than you need, either. Take the lad to Thirteenth and report to Enishi. Send for Mitsuki from the Sixth if you can and do what you can to reassure him until she arrives. We can’t do more than that — do you understand?”

“Yes, sir,” Kirio nodded quickly, understanding from the look in Juushirou’s eyes how serious Souja’s condition really was. “It’s fine, sir. Really. I’ll manage.”

“I know you will,” Juushirou assured her, and then he was gone in a whoosh of shunpo, Kikyue’s reiatsu mingling with his and the wavering presence of Souja’s as they disappeared back towards Inner Seireitei. Left alone in the grove, Kirio turned her attention back to her own charge, adjusting her hold on his torso as a second round of coughing wracked through his thin frame. She could feel his bones through the thin fabric of his faded clothing, and she put her hand gingerly to his chest, feeling carefully for the exact location of the sword entry. At this, he raised feeble hands to push her back, but she knocked them down, registering the weakness of their effort. Was that his injury, or was he simply undernourished and weak, an impoverished local peasant who had stumbled onto Souja by accident and who had been cut down by Kikyue’s grief before any of them had understood the real circumstances?

“You’ve every right to be scared of us,” she told him with a sigh, tightening her hold on his upper body as a respite in the coughing allowed him to gasp air into his lungs. “I’m sorry. Kikyue-dono acted without realising — but we’re not your enemies, I promise. And I really won’t hurt you. Nobody will hurt you. We’ll get you help — I won’t leave you here to die, I swear I won’t.”

The dazed brown eyes shifted towards her, and for a moment Kirio thought she saw a glimmer of comprehension deep in their murky depths. Then he coughed again, his brow creasing in pain, and the young shinigami frowned.

“It will make you feel sicker, but the quickest way to get you to a healer is for me to take you through shunpo,” she decided. “I know it hurts, but it’s the fastest way and you’ll be able to rest more comfortably.”

There was no answer and, glancing at him, Kirio saw that he had slipped into unconsciousness, his breathing ragged and uneven, but, reassuringly still there. She slid a finger across his neck for a pulse, reassured by the strong beat of the young man’s heart. This at least

was unharmed, then, and something in its resolute rhythm gave her the belief that, even alone, she would manage to get this wounded stray safely back to her home barracks.

She grasped his bleeding body more tightly in her arms, paying no attention to the smear of blood that stained the white of her obi, and instead focused all her energy on shifting both her particles and his to a safer location. Though she had shunpoed with other people many times before, she had never had sole charge of a wounded individual and it was with some relief when they dropped out of the flash step into the courtyard of her home division.

“Hikifune!”

That was Enishi’s voice, the heavy sound of his feet against the cobbles making Kirio look up, reassured by his presence. At the sight of her limp burden he let out an exclamation, and Kirio swallowed hard, remembering what Juushirou had said.

“He was hurt in the forest. Taichou said to send for Edogawa-san from the Sixth, that she’s to come at once if she can, since nobody else from Fourth will be spared,” she said quickly.

“Edogawa?” Enishi looked blank for a moment, but, as Kirio nodded, he raised his voice, gazing around the courtyard.

“Kayashima!” he bellowed, the sudden volume making Kirio jump. “You heard Hikifune. Snap to it! Go to Sixth, get Edogawa, pronto! Tell her there’s a kid bleeding all over our cobbles — that oughta get her attention!”

“Yes, sir!” The recruit scrambled to obey, hurrying out of the division gates, and Enishi grimaced, scratching his head as he surveyed the wounded youngster more closely.

“A District kid?”

“Yes, sir. That’s what we think, sir.”

“Looks like he’s been gashed about with a sword t’me. Do they play with those in the Districts too now?”

“No, sir. It’s not...” Kirio hesitated, then lowered her voice.

“Something’s happened, sir,” she said softly. “Taichou’s gone to Seventh — I don’t know when he’ll be back, but... they... we... found Souja-dono. He’s hurt — badly hurt, I think — and this District boy... he was with him.”

“Souja’s hurt, huh?” Enishi’s expression became grave. ‘Well, of

course he is — a lad like that doesn't stop out all night with no contact unless someone's got the better of him in the dark. Damn nuisance, though, if it's not even safe to go through the lands at night. And this one? He bent to touch the stranger's brow. "What happened to him — how's he pulled into all this?"

"I'm not totally sure, but I think Souja-dono said that this boy had helped him in some way," Kirio said thoughtfully, brushing the straggly brown hair out of the stranger's face. "When we came upon them, though, Kikyue-dono misunderstood, and thought her brother was under attack. She drew her sword... and..."

"Ah," Enishi's face cleared, and he nodded. "I see. Then I'm with you. The baby hawk cut her claws on him without hearing the whole business, huh? Well, if that's how it is, there's no helping it. I guess Fourth will be preoccupied with Souja, if he's hurt as bad as you say, but if Taichou's asked for Edogawa, she'll do her best to patch this kid up. That's just like him, to have the lad sent back here out of the centre of the chaos — besides, if this one was with Souja, like as not he knows what happened. That might be useful."

He bent down, moving to take the injured youngster from Kirio's arms. "I'll carry him inside, we'll find a quiet room and Edogawa can see to him there. He's bloody as hell, make no mistake, but I can hear his breathing and feel his heart, so I dare say he won't expire in the meantime."

"He was coughing blood in the forest, then he passed out," Kirio responded. "I thought his lung might be hurt, but... now I don't know."

"More like his gut, judging by the direction of the blade," Enishi reflected. "Not nice for him, of course, and damn painful t'boot, but less dangerous, I'd wager, than a lung. Probably he'll knit up all right. Needs feeding up too, by the feel of him. Light as a feather — no wonder you were able to manage him on your own."

"We'll need to find his family," Relieved of her burden, Kirio stood, glancing ruefully at her stained *shihakushou* before following her broader companion within the confines of the division barracks. "They're probably worried about him."

"Mm, most like," Enishi agreed. "We got a name for the kid, or..?"

"No sir," Kirio shook her head. "He didn't say anything to me, so I don't know who he is. When we got near the scene, Taichou thought he sensed a *Senkaimon* closing, so like as not he's not local to where we found him, either."

“Well, then he’ll just have to be our problem till we find out who he belongs to,” Enishi hoisted the boy up more comfortably in his arms as though he weighed no more than a feather beadspread, offering Kirio a grin. “Taichou’s always had a soft spot for strays — but you know, it usually works out for him. You did a good job bringing him back, too — well done.”

“I’d like to stay with him, if you don’t mind, at least till Edogawa-san arrives,” Kirio admitted. “Taichou put him in my charge, and... well... he looked so frightened, when he saw my *shihakushou*. I didn’t like that... I want him to know I’m not going to hurt him, but I want to help.”

“Taichou’s orders, so I can’t see there being a problem with it,” Enishi responded simply. “At the very least you can help me get rid of these rags. Edogawa’ll be cross if we try to clean anything up without her say so, but we can clear a path to the wound by dealing with his *hakamashita* — if that’s what it is, hard to tell just by looking — and that’ll save time if the wound is bad.”

He pursed his lips, eying her seriously.

“Listen, Hikifune — about Souja — your honest opinion, so far as it goes...?”

“About his injuries?” Kirio frowned, and Enishi nodded.

“Yes. How bad do you think they were?”

“Bad,” Kirio grimaced. “Very bad. I... I don’t know anything about healing, but I didn’t like how he looked. He was very grey... and the blood was very red in contrast. Taichou’s expression... he was calm, but there was something in his expression that said something more. They went back before me — to Seventh or to Fourth, I guess, and I said I’d see to the boy but... looking like that, I don’t think Taichou believes Souja-dono will live.”

“I see,” Enishi pursed his lips. “If it’s that way, then I suppose the best thing we can do is rally round and do our jobs as best we can, so as he doesn’t need t’worry about us for a bit.”

The room was dark, the only light the faint flickering of subdued kidou lamps that stood in each corner of the chamber. Though the sun had risen in the sky beyond the barrack walls, the shutters in the small room had been pulled to keep prying eyes from peering in. In the halls beyond, Hirata was faintly aware of the frightened buzzing of his squad members, as they whispered and jostled among themselves.

Nobody had told them the full scale of the event, and all the highest ranked members of the Seventh Division were in and around the small chamber that belonged to the Vice Captain, but somehow the vibe had spread anyway, and where the courtyard had been empty, it had slowly begun to fill with curious, anxious men and women.

Hirata had meant to deal with them directly himself, take the lead as Captain and order them back to their posts now that their Vice Captain was found but, on seeing the state of his only son, his words had abandoned him, and he had only dimly registered the presence of his daughter clinging to his *haori*, burying her head in the white folds. Kikyue had never been the kind of child to show this sort of affection — a true Endou, she preferred to convey her fondness for her family through her strength and her deeds rather than emotional outpourings, but, just as Hirata was himself, Souja's crumpled form had broken her usual composure, and it was all he could do to guide her slowly within the room, stroking her hair numbly without even taking his eyes for one minute from the limp figure Juushirou had clasped in his arms.

Later, Hirata would be grateful to Juushirou and Shunsui for their foresight and presence. Later, when he was able to string coherent thought together, he would realise that it had been Juushirou who had barked out orders to the juniors to withdraw to their own quarters, sending two recruits scurrying to the Fourth Division while Shunsui, after taking one look at Souja's dishevelled state had taken it upon himself to police the halls of the Seventh, dispatching two lower seats to retrieve the still absent Nakata and Tenichi from their patrol, then calming the panic and ensuring that nobody who should not be there encroached into what was fast becoming an emergency sickroom. On the return of the two officers, Shunsui had coopted the Seventh Seated Clansman to help keep order among the more jittery lower seated officers, whilst Juushirou had taken charge of the sick room, ensuring Souja was laid as comfortably and safely on his bed as possible before directing a pale and shaking Tenichi to wait outside the door to explain to the healers when they came what had already been done. Later, Hirata would find words to thank his friends, but for now, all he could do was collapse down on his knees beside the low slung pallet, grasping desperately at Souja's pale fingers in an attempt to rouse his son back to consciousness.

"Souja..." the word had come with difficulty to his lips, his vocal chords half paralysed from the shock and dismay of his son's condition. Kikyue sank down at his side, sword discarded and tearstained face turned towards his, but he paid her no attention, instead raising a dazed gaze to meet Juushirou's grim hazel eyes. He

could not find any words to voice his question, but Juushirou had known him a long time, and he sighed, resting a hand on Hirata's shoulder as if trying to take some of the burden into his own weary frame.

"Unohana-taichou will come herself, because I've requested that she does with utmost urgency," he said softly. "When she understands, she won't hesitate. I've asked for Shikiki as well — if she can be spared."

Hirata merely blinked at him, and Juushirou pressed his lips together, carefully lowering his thin frame down beside his friend.

"We don't know, exactly, what happened," he added. "A young boy was with him in the forest. Kikyue-chan mistook him for an assailant, but Souja managed to tell us himself that the boy had come to his aid. He's been taken to my division, and I'm sure we can question him for particulars later. Right now the most important thing is Souja — and the injuries he's sustained."

Hirata absorbed the gravity in the hazel eyes, and a lump began to form in his throat. He swallowed hard, jerking his head forward in a nod, before turning his gaze back to the still, pale-faced figure on the bed. The whiteness of his skin was in direct contrast to the blurs of red that covered his obi, his face and his uniform and Hirata, who had long considered himself immune to scenes of carnage and violence found a wave of nausea washing over his body as he contemplated the kind of assault his son had been subjected to. Seconds passed like hours as he waited for Retsu to arrive... seconds in which more of Souja's life blood slipped from his body and his complexion became ever more pale.

He squeezed the cool, dry fingers tightly, moving to brush strands of hair from his son's grimy face, and at his action Souja's eyelashes twitched, his eyelids fluttering open to meet his father's anxious gaze. At first they seemed dazed but, as Hirata let out an exclamation, they seemed to focus, relief glittering in the pale blue depths.

"Otou... sama," he whispered, no strength at all in his voice, and ripples of pain ran across his brow at the effort of forming words. "I... made it back. Somehow... I made it... back."

"Juushirou-dono brought you back," Hirata somehow managed to form words. "Report to me, Souja. Tell me what happened. Healers are coming, and they'll fix you up for sure, but in the meantime..."

"Koku?" A sudden flicker of anxiety gripped Souja's expression and he turned his head to look at Juushirou, coughing and flinching in

pain as the effort jerked his wounds. “Juu... shirou... dono... what... of... Koku?”

“Koku?” Juushirou looked blank, then, “was that the boy? The young lad who was with you?”

“He... helped... me,” Souja jerked his head in a nod. “I promised... look after... he... in danger... he... helped me... Endou must... keep... promise.”

At his words, Kikyue let out a strangled sob, her grasp on her father’s robes tightening, and Juushirou frowned.

“We’ll keep that promise for you,” he said gravely. “It’s become a Gotei promise, if he helped to shelter a Vice Captain. Don’t worry, no further harm will come to him. I’ve sent Kirio with him to Thirteenth — he’ll be all right, and we won’t let him come to harm.”

“Thank... you,” some of the tension flowed from Souja’s body, and he managed a feeble smile. “I... promised. Didn’t... want to break... my word. He... for my sake...”

“Souja, who did this to you?” Hirata cut across his son’s faltering words, grasping the young man’s fingers more tightly. “Tell me and I’ll dispatch people right away. I’ll go... we’ll go, we’ll track them down...”

Souja’s expression darkened, and he closed his eyes briefly, seeming to compose himself before attempting to speak again.

“Eiraki... basama,” he whispered, and Kikyue let out a gasp, staring at her brother in complete disbelief.

“Eiraki... Anieue, what are you talking about? Are you saying... you can’t be saying...”

“She looked like... Obasama,” Souja slid his fingers free from Hirata’s grasp, moving them clumsily to his waist as if in search of his sword, before reaching out to grasp Hirata’s *haori* loosely by the sleeve. “Young... girl. Endou... blood. In her eyes... a predator.”

“A girl who looked like Eiraki?” Hirata’s body felt suddenly like lead, and he exchanged dismayed glances with Juushirou’s troubled one. “You’re sure? You’ve barely ever seen a picture of Eiraki, and yet...”

“Mm,” Souja jerked his head in another nod. “Called her... Saka... ki. And a hut... in the hut... the sword... said Aizen...”

“Aizen?” Despite himself, Hirata could not stop the flow of

indignant, angry reiatsu from swirling up around his heart, and the shutters began to flap at the window as the wind-hawk within his soul howled out for vengeance. “This has something to do with Aizen Keitarou? This is his doing? His child...?”

“Then the child that Eiraki-hime was carrying when she fled from here was a girl,” Juushirou murmured softly. “More than that, they... and probably, Keitarou too... survived the encounter with my grandfather and have been hiding out somewhere ever since, waiting for an opportunity to strike. Kai was right — we were right. Putting distance between us and our paranoia was a bad thing — just because we had no proof, dismissing the concept was the wrong way to go.”

“You knew this was Keitarou? You knew he was here?” Hirata’s voice raised, but Juushirou shook his head, resting his hands on his friend’s shoulders.

“It’s hard on Souja, if you let your *reiryoku* flow here,” he chided gently, though Hirata could tell his friend’s calm was a forced front for his sake and nothing more. “I knew nothing at all, and so far all of my attempts to prove it had come to nothing. You knew that, Hirata. When I spoke to Kai, he thought we shouldn’t give up on the idea — but we had nothing to go on. Even the person we went out to capture this morning... didn’t turn out to be what I expected. With that... till now... Souja-kun, can you tell me how you found this information? Where did you see this hut... where was this sword?”

Souja took a laboured breath into protesting lungs, loosing his hold on Hirata’s *haori* and dropping his hand back down onto the bed as the effort to hold it proved too great. He mouthed three syllables, and Juushirou’s eyes widened with dismay.

“Rukongai? Did you just say... Rukongai?”

“You went to Rukongai?” Hirata demanded. “Souja, why would you do that and not tell me? Why would you...”

“Joumei... said... Keitarou... was...” Souja faltered, pausing to gather himself, then, “Not... tell Father... in case... wrong.”

“Joumei,” Hirata’s eyes darkened, and it took all of his effort to reign in his *reiryoku* as his anger surged through his body. “I knew it. This has something to do with them... with him. You went to see him without my permission, didn’t you? I told you not to go, yet you still went...”

“I’m sorry.” Souja’s features twisted into an expression of genuine contrition. “Joumei... thought Keitarou... in Rukongai. So... wanted

to bring back... evidence.”

He coughed, pain wracking his features, and Juushirou rested a hand gently on the young man’s bloodsoaked body.

“I’m sure Hirata forgives you, in light of the information you’ve managed to bring back,” he said quietly, casting his friend a sidelong look, and at the expression in Juushirou’s hazel gaze, Hirata felt his temper fading. Slowly he nodded.

“We’ll talk about it more, later, but you’re not to worry about it for now,” he said at length, forcing himself to keep his tones even. “You had your reasons, and Juushirou’s right. I don’t say you should do it again, but this time we’ll overlook it. You promise not to do it again, and we’ll put it behind us and focus on what you saw, all right?”

Souja’s eyes became sad, and he moved his head in a feeble nod.

“Never again,” he promised, and there was something in his tone of voice that made Hirata eye him sharply, a dreamy, almost half-real tone that suggested the loss of blood was starting to affect his son’s coherence.

“Souja-kun?” he murmured, but Juushirou grasped his friend loosely by the arm, shaking his head slightly before turning to the injured Vice Captain.

“Rest,” he said gently. “Like Hirata said, we can discuss this more later. Unohana-taichou is at the gate, I can sense her reiatsu, and you need to be treated more than anything else right now. You’ve been brave, holding on as long as you have when you must be in a lot of pain, but help is here now. We need to tend to these wounds quickly, Souja-kun — there’ll be time to talk later about details and what you thought you were going to find.”

“Mm-m.” Souja shook his head, determination glittering once more in his pale gaze, as though Juushirou’s kindness had somehow rallied his failing spirit. “I... must tell... while I can... I must. Father... I’m sorry. I... disobeyed. I... let you... down. I...”

“We’ve already said it’s forgiven and forgotten,” Hirata said frankly, “so forget about it.”

“Mm.” Souja agreed, grateful relief flickering across his ashen features. “I wanted... proof... but...”

He coughed again, twisting against the bedcovers as he sent fresh waves of agony through his maltreated body, then, “Keitarou’s... child... not... daughter. Son. Is son.”

“But you just said...” Kikyue protested, and Souja shook his head impatiently.

“More... than one,” he murmured. “Sakaki. Sakaki and... Aizen... Ko... ha... ku. The... hut... people died. Kohaku... and the sword. Dangerous. Need to... find... find the... sword...”

He let out a little gasp, his eyes fluttering closed, and Hirata reached across tentatively to touch his brow, giving him a gentle, hesitant shake.

“Souja? Souja, dammit, open your eyes!”

“He’s lost too much blood,” Juushirou spoke grimly, gently reaching out a hand to pull Hirata’s back. “He’s lost consciousness, Hirata. He won’t be able to tell us any more right now. Let Unohana-taichou see him... let her do what she can for him. He’s told us everything he could — pushed himself to tell us. We have time to make sense of it later — for now, let him rest.”

“Who did Anie go to see, Father?” Kikyue swallowed hard, gazing at Hirata in confusion. “Who is ‘Joumei’? Why did you stop him from going?”

“That’s none of your business,” Hirata snapped, more harshly than he intended, but Kikyue recoiled from him as if struck, and he sighed, rubbing his temples as if trying to erase the tension that throbbed behind them.

“Taichou?”

The door slid back unevenly on its runners at that moment, preventing the Captain from speaking any more, and he turned impatiently, seeing a white-faced Tenichi, eyes huge in his face as he took in the sombre scene within. In his slipstream was the Fourth Division Captain, however, and Tenichi’s stricken expression was forgotten as the calm head of the Unohana Clan stepped over the threshold, her gleaming white haori shimmering slightly in the uneven glow of the lamps.

“I came as soon as I received your message, Endou-taichou,” she spoke softly, all her usual polite formality evident in her tone, but her gaze was already fixed on the patient in the bed, and from the solemnity of her features, Hirata knew she was concerned. “I am sorry, however, that I have come alone.”

She knelt beside the bed as Juushirou made way for her, placing a gentle hand against Souja’s brow, before moving to loosen the tattered uniform and pulling back the black fabric to expose the damage

beneath. At the sight of the criss-crossed carving across his son's chest, Hirata let out an involuntary gasp, struck giddy with shock and horror by the obvious savagery of the attack, and only the awareness that his daughter still clung to him prevented him from losing his grip on his composure, the tears of anger and of fear hidden behind the lenses of his spectacles.

Across the room, Juushirou let out a soft curse.

"Unohana-taichou, how could such a thing happen?" he asked softly, and Retsu pursed her lips together, not answering to begin with as her delicate fingers gently probed their way across Souja's battered torso, glittering with light and energy as she carefully stemmed the flow of blood.

"I have seen such injuries before," she admitted at length with a sigh, reaching to take a clean cloth from beside the bed and wiping her hands on it briefly. "They are clean cuts, despite how vicious they appear, and they run deep, yet were applied in a frenzy. I would venture to guess that the original wound was this one, though," she touched a finger briefly to the base of Souja's ribcage. "It's the smallest by far, but probably the deepest."

She raised her gaze to Juushirou.

"Ukitake-taichou, I believe you were there when Souja-dono was found?"

"Yes," Juushirou agreed gravely.

"Is there anything you can tell me about the scene that might explain the wounds? Did Souja-dono himself say anything of his attacker?"

Juushirou hesitated, meeting Hirata's gaze for a moment, and Hirata sighed.

"He spoke of my sister, and of the demon who took her from my family," he said quietly, only just keeping his temper under control. "I think he was attacked by a girl with a sword, Unohana-taichou — but from what I understand, neither girl nor weapon were located at the scene."

"There was a young village boy with Souja when we found him," Juushirou added. "He was... injured by accident, but he's alive and I've had him sent to Thirteenth for the time being. Otherwise, we have no real clues. Souja seems badly hurt, but there wasn't as much blood at the scene as I would have expected... it made me think that he'd been moved from somewhere else, maybe by this boy, or maybe on

his own.”

“Mm,” Retsu’s expression became one of comprehension, and she asked no further questions, spreading her hands across Souja’s body as a faint, golden haze of light enveloped the wounded shinigami.

“This fight depends on Souja-dono,” she admitted after what seemed to Hirata like an eternity. “I am, quite frankly, surprised he was able to speak to you. No... Hirata-dono, I must be even more plain with my words. I am surprised that he was returned here alive at all. The amount of bloodloss is beyond anything I have ever seen on a living shinigami — the others I have encountered with such severe mutilations have already left this world for the next.”

“What does that mean?” Hirata asked sharply, and Retsu sighed, shaking her head slowly.

“I cannot regenerate his blood for him,” she said reluctantly. “The only one of my officers capable of doing that is currently on patrol in Sixth District... I sent urgent summonses to call her back as soon as I received your message, but every second is precious. This injury is serious, and more, it occurred some time before Souja-dono was found. I would wager that he lay bleeding for a while before he was recovered by Ukitake-taichou and Kikyue-dono. More, his spiritual pressure is surprisingly unstable. I cannot fathom precisely what took place, but I would conjecture that Souja-dono continued to fight against his assailant until he could literally move no more.”

“He’s an Endou,” Kikyue murmured, tears still trickling down her cheeks. “That’s what we do, Unohana-taichou, we fight. We fight and we fight and we don’t give up. Anieue wouldn’t give up — he wanted to come back here alive, and he wanted to tell us what he knew. He wanted to be helped, so please, help him! Please make him get better — I know he’ll fight, so please, don’t give up on him!”

“A healer never does that, Kikyue-dono,” Retsu assured her gravely, as the hazy barrier of golden light strengthened beneath her touch. “I can restore and stabilise his lost reiatsu with my Kidou, and I can begin to knit together the wounds he’s suffered. However, the loss of blood... is his biggest problem at present. He has bled internally and externally, and his body requires a lot of strength to mend itself. That strength would normally be found in the reserves of spirit power, but Souja appears to have exhausted his own. I can try and replenish them — and hope it will be enough to stabilise his condition until Shikiki returns. She alone among my shinigami can restore a body to its pristine former condition.”

“But Shikiki is in Sixth District?” Juushirou asked anxiously. “Unohana-taichou, what if she doesn’t come back in time? What if she’s not back till, say, tomorrow, or the day after that?”

“Souja-dono will need all his Endou strength to fight this battle for himself,” Retsu said simply. “I will do everything I can do. As Kikyue-dono said, Souja-dono already won the first battle by returning here alive. I will mend what I can and encourage his body to do the rest.”

She moved her hand to the hilt of her sword, then sighed, shaking her head.

“Minazuki’s shikai is not designed for release in such close quarters, and with Souja’s condition so unstable, I believe my using her might kill him,” she admitted. “I have stopped his bleeding now, though. From my initial inspection, Hirata-dono, your son has suffered lacerations through his lungs, liver, spleen and gut, with the blade bruising the edge of his heart — though fortunately not penetrating it. Several of his ribs have been sliced through, and, most concerning of all is this thrust through the diaphragm which not only caused significant organ damage but also severed through several major arteries, causing heavy internal and external bleeding. The place where he was attacked should have been saturated in blood — that it was not indicates to me that Juushirou-dono’s hypothesis is correct, and Souja-dono was moved from the original scene of the attack, perhaps by the young man in his company.”

“You mean he really did save Anie? He really... took him from the danger... somehow?” Kikyue whispered, and Juushirou frowned.

“I thought I sensed a *Senkaimon* open, Unohana-taichou,” he admitted, and Kikyue nodded.

“I sensed it too,” she admitted, her words shaking. “It was Anie who opened it, I’m sure. I sensed his sword, just for a moment... that’s how I knew where he was.”

“I thought it was Souja-dono who opened it, too,” Juushirou owned. “In this condition, though — is that possible?”

“I wouldn’t have said it was,” Retsu responded pensively, “but then, the spirit of an Endou is not to be gainsaid easily. Perhaps that explains his dearth of spiritual energy — Souja-dono gambled his very life on being able to come home and report to his Captain what he had seen.”

“Meaning that if he hadn’t... if he’d not moved from where he was hurt... maybe he wouldn’t be so ill now?” Hirata asked bleakly. Retsu

shook her head.

“Likely that place was just as dangerous, and, if he was found by a District boy, remote and far from Inner Seireitei,” she responded. “No, I think coming back was his only chance — I’m just amazed that he was able to do it with his body as damaged as this.”

“Then the young boy must have helped, somehow,” Juushirou pressed his lips together.

“And I tried to kill him,” Kikyue murmured.

“He’s not dead, though,” Juushirou reassured her. “I’ve trusted him to my squad and Mitsuki will come when she knows what’s happened. Even if she can’t use her sword, yet, she’ll know what to do to make him comfortable, and when Kirio held him, he didn’t seem so badly hurt as your brother. He’s hurt, but he’ll heal, and we’ll get the truth, I’m sure, when he’s had time to recover.”

Retsu cast a third barrier of golden energy over Souja’s body, then got to her feet.

“With your permission, Hirata-sama, I should like to clear this room and make it entirely quiet for Souja-dono’s respite,” she said softly. “I have brought a group of healers with me and I would ask your permission to allow them entry to your barracks in order that they may help me in treating your son. Your officers are under Kyouraku-taichou’s command, at present, I believe? They should also be dispersed to their quarters at once. Doubtless word has filtered through as to Souja-dono’s condition, and so I would not attempt to keep it from them. The best thing they can do for their Vice Captain now is go about their duties quietly and soberly and without creating a disturbance.”

“I should return to Thirteenth,” Juushirou decided. “Hirata, if you need me, send for me and I’ll come — but I have to ensure Tsunemori completed the errand I sent him on, and there’s nothing more I can do here for now.”

“I think that is wise,” Retsu agreed. “Kyouraku-taichou is better placed to help support the Seventh at present, with his barracks directly next door. I would like to request, though, that only yourself and your daughter enter here, Hirata-dono, and that you allow your son to sleep as long as is necessary. I cannot guarantee that his life will be saved at this moment... but I wish to give him every chance there is to fight back.”

“We’ll do as you ask,” Hirata said grimly. “Kikyue and I will follow

your instructions to the letter, Unohana-taichou.”

“Then it’s settled,” Retsu nodded approvingly, though the Endou Captain could see sadness in her gentle eyes. “And I should like to send the red-haired officer hovering outside your door for fresh water to clean away some of the excess blood. He seemed particularly frightened by his Vice Captain’s appearance — and I believe it would be better for him to be somehow engaged.”

“Tenichi,” Juushirou’s brows knitted together in concern, and Hirata nodded.

“My men are at your disposal,” he said simply. “Do with them as you will. Do whatever you need to do, Unohana-taichou — but please, above all things, save my son’s life.”

28. Kirio's Resolve

Chapter Twenty Seven: Kirio's Resolve

"I go away from the division for a few hours and come back to this kind of reception."

Shihouin Midori rested her hands against the door of the confinement cell, peering through the one-way glass with thoughtful, feline eyes as she surveyed the chamber's solitary resident.

"Well, Kai, what's the story behind this? I understand from Saku that one of Ukitake's men brought him here — but I'm surprised that you'd offer him such secure hospitality if he's just a suspicious pickup from the Districts. Surely there are lower ranking officials you can assign this to — what's your personal interest and why are you reporting it to me so quickly?"

"That is a question I hope to be able to answer more fully later on today," Kai said grimly, leaning up against the wall of the long, dark hallway and folding his arms across his chest. "Midori-nee, I know you had a long ride from Second to get back here and I'm sorry that you found yourself met by a summons down to the penal cells, but I don't want to take any chances. I don't know for sure, but I think this is more than just a District pick-up. I think it connects to us — both the Shihouin and the Onmitsukidou — and possibly something more."

"Do tell?" Midori turned to gaze at her brother, her eyes slits of gold in the dim lighting. Midori was known across Seireitei for being one of the most beautiful Clan princesses, but there was never mistaking how closely that beauty was related to power and influence. Even for Kai, who undoubtedly knew her best of everyone else in the Gotei's inner conclave, she could appear more like a predator than a high-blooded Clan leader, and, on reading the faint ripples in her neatly suppressed reiatsu, he was relieved that he was her close kinsman and, as such, someone Midori would never harm.

He nodded now, pressing his lips together and casting his own gaze through the one way glass to the prisoner beyond.

He was a nondescript individual, dressed in nondescript black clothing and the rough sheath that had hidden beneath his cloak now hung empty, the plain District sword he had carried being confiscated and locked away. The Gotei as a whole were unaware of the full

extent of the Shihouin's labyrinth of corridors and criss-crossing cell blocks, nor did they know how many weapons of varying kinds were fastened in secure boxes thick with dust, their owners no longer in a position to wield them. Some had been executed for the safety and protection of the Gotei, their corpses burned and the ashes discarded on the wind, their names unknown to any but the most high ranking members of the Second Division's administration. Others had been exiled, stripped of all they owned and warned that, if they ever came near civilisation again, there would be a black-bladed weapon waiting to cut them down. And, in the case of the third group, they had disappeared into the darkness underground before any formal sentence could be passed against them — beyond this mere holding cell to a place which was legend to most of the other divisions but to Kai was all too much a reality: the Deviant Confinement Facility, known in common parlance among his officers as "The Maggots' Nest."

Despite his position as Head of the Onmitsukidou, Kai did not take pleasure in the dispatching or confining of most captives, and rarely blooded his blade himself. The Maggots' Nest, however, had been partly his initiative, a suggestion made through which those members of Seireitei society who were perceived dangerous could be corralled, perhaps tamed, and even one day face release. The reality had taken a path different from the dream, however, for the majority of the seventeen current residents in the Maggots' Nest had shown no sign of improvement and, when two prisoners had managed to mutilate an officer on duty during what should have been a peaceful mealtime, Midori had put her foot down, declaring that any convict disturbed enough to be confined in the Maggots Nest would have an indefinite sentence which would likely never come under review.

It was there, in that place, that Kounou, the former adjutant of the Onmitsukidou had spent the previous ten years.

Kai sighed, turning his mind back ten years to the Suzuki incident and its aftermath. The depth and extent of Kounou's involvement in the deception still rankled with him, for he had trusted his second and the betrayal still left a bitter taste in his mouth. As for the case of Suzuki Naoto, even now he was unsure about what to think. The man in the cell was pale-faced, skinny and scarred, dirty and somehow twisted in such a way that, although he was a living man, Kai felt that when the prisoner glanced their way he was looking into the gaze of a corpse. A shiver ran down his spine, and he bit his lip. Was this the result of the poison that Kounou had used to pursue Suzuki, or something else? His conversation with Ukitake lingered in his thoughts and despite himself he could not force it away.

“Kai?” Midori’s voice brought him back to the present, and he frowned, turning apologetically.

“Sorry. I was thinking of something,” he said vaguely, his eyes becoming clouded. “Midori-nee, do you remember the incident ten years ago within the Onmitsukidou? When Kounou was in charge in my absence..?”

“I remember reading your report, and I remember signing the papers for him to be confined,” Midori’s expression twisted into an unpleasant grimace. “I dislike traitors from within the Clan more than any others. I trust he’s still firmly rotting away in the Maggot’s Nest?”

“He remains one of the six in permanent cell confinement,” Kai agreed. “I sent Saku to check on him this morning, and everything was as expected. He’s still as hostile and unrepentant as ever, but besides that, all is as it should be.”

“He should’ve been put to death,” Midori said frankly. “I never understood why you kept him alive.”

“Because there were things he wasn’t telling us — things I couldn’t quite settle in my mind and I hoped that he might choose to talk about them if we locked him up somewhere like that,” Kai admitted. “It hasn’t worked, not yet, but I wanted to leave the options open. I’ve never felt that, even when he was caught, Kounou told me the whole truth about everything. Particularly about Suzuki Naoto and his involvement. Kounou claimed to the end that Suzuki was involved, maybe a ringleader in the business, but something about it has always bothered me. And then... a little while ago, Ukitake came to me and started asking me questions about missing Onmitsukidou.”

“*Ukitakedid?*” Midori’s golden eyes widened, and Kai nodded, patting the door of the confinement cell lightly with the palm of his hand.

“Then, this morning, his officer shows up with this individual bound in Kidou bonds which, I’m fairly certain, were fired by Ukitake himself,” he agreed. “The officer didn’t seem to know an awful lot of details, which means the most of what Ukitake and I talked about has been kept in the realms of confidential, but he did say that Ukitake called this man Suzuki.”

“Suzuki Naoto,” Midori’s expression became thoughtful. “I remember the name, if not the officer. He belonged to you, and was District or thereabouts, was he not? I had little to do with him — I wouldn’t know him even if he stood before me.”

"I haven't ever forgotten him, or his letter to me claiming his innocence," Kai replied simply. "I'm not the kind of officer who automatically believes someone didn't do a crime simply because they say so, but there was something about this appeal that stuck with me. He wasn't asking me to pardon him, rather to come myself and hear his case. It was the writing of a desperate officer looking for justice, and I'm not sure that he got it. By the time I returned to my post, Kounou had taken matters into his own hands and, as far as I knew, Suzuki was dead."

"Then there's not much to be done about it, is there?" Midori sent him a quizzical look, and Kai sighed.

"We never found Suzuki's corpse," he owned. "I didn't report the full story to you back then because it was not long after Yashiko-hime was born, and I didn't want to make matters complicated. There's no way he should have survived the kind of poison dosage that Kounou's men inflicted on him with their arrows, and most of those reported the same story when I had them interrogated. Still, it's bothered me — and now this guy, who Ukitake clearly believes is the missing Suzuki..."

He paused, glancing once more through the glass.

"He might be right," he concluded at length. "Ten years isn't a long time in Seireitei, yet this man looks like a stranger to me. Even despite that, though, there's something... those eyes... that bother me. They're not the same eyes I remember, because for all his faults Suzuki was an active and busy officer, and that gaze is cold, and yet... I don't know. Maybe I'm clutching at straws, but..."

"You think he's your missing piece in the puzzle, even though you think it's impossible he should've survived the poison?" Midori asked softly. Kai nodded.

"The only time you find an Onmitsukidou who's trying to hide is if they're killed," he replied pragmatically. "I train them that way, to conceal themselves in every manner possible. Suzuki disappeared. He may have been hit by poison arrows, and he should have died, but without a corpse, there's no guarantee that he did. And, Ukitake, when he came, offered me another, more alarming hypothesis. He suggested that this might be another incident like the one with Tomoyuki... with the same puppetmaster pulling the strings."

"Aizen Keitarou," Midori's eyes darkened, and for a moment, Kai felt the surge of her *reiryoku* as if to echo her indignance. "You think this is his doing?"

“Well, whatever he is, this man isn’t a puppet like Tomoyuki was,” Kai shrugged. “He’s capable of independent response, and he doesn’t have the same aura about him as Tomoyuki did when Aizen was controlling him. Even so, though, I can’t rule out his involvement completely. Ukitake’s not a paranoid individual, and if he feels there’s some grounds to suspect Aizen, however flimsy, I trust his instincts. Thinking about it, Aizen is probably the only individual outside of Inner Seireitei knowledgeable enough about science and biology to save Suzuki’s life. I may be grasping at straws, but I felt that I should grasp them anyway, and see what happens when I pull them out.”

“I agree,” Midori ruminated on this for a moment, then nodded her head. “Interrogate him. Find out what you can.”

Kai nodded, opening his mouth to respond, but before he could, there was a suppressed flare of shunpo at his right hand and he turned, seeing Saku had materialised in the corridor beside him, her blue eyes even graver than usual as she lowered her head towards her superiors.

“I apologise for the interruption, Kai-dono, Midori-sama,” she said softly, “but a report of a disturbing nature has just reached my ears and I felt you should be notified of it immediately.”

“A... disturbing report?” Midori frowned, glancing at her brother, who shrugged his shoulders helplessly.

“Report, Saku,” he instructed. “Tell us what you know.”

“Yes, sir,” Saku bowed again, then, “It’s just that the Seventh Division Vice Captain was brought back from the Districts this morning in a severely mutilated state. Unohana-taichou is currently with him.”

“The Seventh...” Kai whitened, staring at Saku in shock. “Souja? Souja-dono was..?”

“Yes, sir,” Saku agreed soberly. “Shunsui-sama sent one of the Seventh Division recruits to ask if we could dispatch people to investigate the scene where he was found. I said I’d report to you straight away, and follow your instructions. I think Thirteenth Division are already investigating — it was Ukitake-taichou who found the injured officer.”

“Ukitake again,” Midori murmured. “What is that District boy up to now, Kai?”

“I wish I knew, but twice in one morning suggests he knows things we don’t, and I’d like to piece those together,” Kai rubbed his temples.

“All right — Saku, if Midori-nee is agreeable, I want you to take five or six officers and head to the Seventh. Find out from Kyouraku where Souja-dono was exactly and go to the scene. I want a detailed report of everything that is and isn’t on site, understand? If Thirteenth are already there, interrogate them too.”

“You can take the instruction as an order from me, if anyone queries your right to demand such information,” Midori added. “There shouldn’t be any problem if you use my name.”

“Yes, Midori-sama. Yes, sir,” Saku saluted sharply, then disappeared, and Midori sighed, casting Kai a quizzical look.

“Your old friend has his fingers in pies all over, and he’s going to put us to shame,” she murmured. “Interrogate your prisoner, Kai-kun. Find out who he is, and, most of all, why he was where Ukitake found him. It occurs to me that if this prisoner is your long lost Suzuki, that he wouldn’t be taken prisoner easily unless...”

“He was acting as a decoy for something else?” Kai asked heavily, and Midori nodded.

“Perhaps the assault on Souja-dono,” she agreed grimly. “Well, we’ll have to hear that report when it comes. I daresay something else will have been said, and Saku will find it out. Meanwhile, I have other matters to deal with, so I’ll leave this strange specimen to you to handle. Get what you can out of him, all right?”

“As ever,” Kai agreed frankly. “If an officer has been badly wounded, it raises the stakes yet again.”

“And if it proves to connect to the Spiritless Zone massacre?”

“Then it raises up yet another level,” Kai reflected, “and makes me even more sure that Ukitake’s concerns about Aizen are probably well founded. First things first, though. I’ll do as you say, Oneesama... and report back to you as soon as I know anything of note.”

“Do so,” Midori agreed. “I’ll hear from both you and Saku later, and we’ll see what conclusions we can draw from this latest turn of events.”

“Well?”

As Katsura made his way slowly down the winding path towards Keitarou’s hut, he found his father waiting for him, tattered grey cloak hung about his shoulders and the sheathed form of his *tantou* knife poked through the rough black sash at his waist. Though he had sent

Sakaki back to report, there was nobody else around, and, as he paused a few feet from where the scientist stood, he could see the tension in the other man's body, a question glittering in his pale eyes. It was more than just anxiety, Katsura decided, but verging on desperation, and his heart lurched as he contemplated once again what news he had to bring.

First I let you down, Father, and lie to you — more than once, in fact. And now... this.

He sighed, slowly shaking his head.

"I searched the entire area," he said frankly. "I went over it once again after I sent Sakaki back to you... but I didn't find any sign."

"Sakaki brought the sword to me," Keitarou pressed his lips together until they had almost drained of colour. "I sent her to help Eiraki to gather the villagers for evacuation. The weapon is here, now, in my hut, and I will have to find a way to transport it myself — it's not something I want that child holding again, even if it doesn't have any effect on her. The risk is too high — and you should have known that, too."

"Yes, sir," Katsura bowed his head apologetically. "I wasn't thinking. She just picked it up as though it were nothing, so I assumed..."

"Well, I don't think any harm was done," Keitarou acknowledged, "but in future, Katsura, please be more careful. There are things which, as my eldest son, you have been trusted with. Things Sakaki doesn't know... that might even put her in danger. I need all of you — please understand that."

"Yes, sir," Katsura had the fleeting sense that his father was suppressing his emotions, trying not to show his son how rattled he really was. The uncharacteristic anxiety rippled against Katsura's sharp senses, making him ill at ease, and he grimaced.

"I don't know what happened," he admitted. "Everything I saw and felt seemed like Sakaki described. There was definitely a shinigami, and he's definitely not there now. From the amount of blood, I don't think he's survived... but he's not anywhere I can see. There are no bodies anywhere in the vicinity, and from Sakaki's description, he wouldn't have got much further alone. As for Koku..."

He trailed off, and Keitarou clenched his fist, his knuckles whitening.

"Sakaki seems to think Koku took the shinigami somewhere," he

murmured, and Katsura nodded.

“The *Senkaimon* was disturbed,” he owned reluctantly. “I... didn’t try to open it, but even so, it didn’t feel like it would open. It felt... broken. Something had ruptured it, forcing it against itself. I don’t think that was Koku, but I can’t account for him not being there or for what Sakaki said about him using that sword. He usually won’t go anywhere near it, and yet...”

“He has been told firmly and in no uncertain terms that that sword is not for him to play with, especially without supervision,” Keitarou snapped. “There is no reason, no justification for his having taken it — even less for him to have wielded it in Sakaki’s face. The girl is confused and I’ve had to tell her all kinds of lies to put her mind at rest about where it came from, but it bothers me. It’s out of character for him, and I don’t like it.”

“Father...” Katsura paused, then, “Koku has been more unwell recently. You said I shouldn’t mention it, but I think... it’s important. I think... maybe... he’s been... doing too much.”

“You think I’m pushing him too hard?” Keitarou’s eyes became slits. “You really don’t understand what you’re talking about, if you think that’s even possible. Koku is not some fragile doll who might shatter at a moment’s pressure. And, unless you’ve forgotten the sorry state he was in when first you met him, it’s thanks to my work and my help that he’s reached this point. True, sometimes he reacts adversely, but even considering that...”

“I wonder,” Katsura bit his lip. “Sometimes, when I connect to his thoughts, I pick up fragments. Just bits and pieces, nothing clear — he likes to lock those things away from me. But... sometimes... he seems unsettled and upset. And this... is so out of character, something must have caused it.”

Keitarou was silent for a moment, then, at length, he nodded.

“Whilst I don’t believe it has any connection to my work with him, I have noticed a change in him lately, too,” he conceded. “Once recently, I found him beating his fists on a wall till they were blooded, and his spirit was very scattered. He was worried about you, but other than that, he wouldn’t tell me what was troubling him. He had that look in his eyes, but try as I might, I couldn’t elicit the information from him. He’s become frighteningly good at concealing his inner thoughts and feelings — far better than anyone else — and I can no longer read so clearly what’s on his mind. I don’t know if he’s been having... *those* kinds of episodes again... but given Sakaki’s account,

it's possible that... he has."

"You think that he went to the hut, touched the sword and as a result, fell into a delusion which drove him to attack Sakaki?" Katsura asked sharply, and Keitarou shrugged.

"You have a better suggestion?" he asked, and Katsura hesitated, then shook his head.

"I don't know," he confessed, "but I do know Koku. He doesn't do anything rashly, and he's never risen to anything Sakaki's done in the past, no matter what she says or does. That he'd go deliberately to the hut to get the sword..."

"You think he did?" Keitarou was surprised. "I had assumed the shinigami, when infiltrating our territory, went there and found it."

"But a shinigami wouldn't be able to touch it easily, surely?"

"Perhaps not, and so dropped it, so when Koku appeared on the scene, it afflicted him," Keitarou reflected. "It's the best... the only explanation I have at present."

You don't think he wanted to save the Shinigami?

Katsura bit back the words that burned against his tongue, seeing again the whiteness of Keitarou's knuckles and the tension in his frame.

No, you don't want to think that that's what happened. You've absorbed the possibility that he deliberately took the sword and went to protect the shinigami against Sakaki's brutality, but it hurts you, so you won't voice it. That makes me all the more certain that's what happened. And, of everything Sakaki said, the thing that rings the most true is... that he didn't hurt her. He frightened her and sent her home, but he didn't try to kill her. And that, more than anything, indicates to me that he wasn't in any kind of delusion when he intervened. Whatever he did, he did it with purpose and intent. I don't know what that intent was, but I'm sure he was in his right mind, even if he was holding that blade at the time.

Still, though, of all people, if Koku betrayed you, it would hurt you the worst, wouldn't it, Father? If you knew I'd told Mitsuki about Kurotsuchi, even then, you'd not be as worried as you are right now.

A faint pang resonated against Katsura's heart at this realisation, but he pushed it back.

"Mother and Sakaki have gone, you said?" he asked, and Keitarou nodded.

"We will evacuate, and quickly," he said matter-of-factly. "I have

been to the hut already and claimed what I could find. There's nothing of value left there, and I'll find a way to manage the sword. I stayed behind to wait for you, and, I hoped, Koku, but if it's just you, well, then we can't delay. Given the possibility that the shinigami escaped, our removal to the Spiritless Zone's abandoned territory is even more pressing. Sakaki let slip that the man she killed had connections to the Endou — that being the case, it's safer to assume that there will be some kind of reprisal."

"You don't think they'll come looking for us there, too?" Katsura was taken aback, and Keitarou shook his head.

"I intend on leaving a paper trail for them to follow in quite another direction, since I'm certain that, if Ukitake Juushirou and his companions get a scent of my name, they'll be here like hounds after a fox," he said simply. "I know the Endou-ke... intimately, as it happens. Their current leader is not like those who went before, which may be to our benefit, but it may not. Sakaki wasn't clear on the identity of the man she killed, just that he was an Endou — until I've ascertained what level of Endou, I think caution to be the better part of valour."

Katsura's brows knitted together for a moment, then,

"I don't know much about the Endou," he admitted at length, "but if they're that dangerous, are you sure we shouldn't be trying to leave Rukongai altogether? And what about Koku and Kurotsuchi? We've found no sign of either, and..."

"Those who aren't here will have to take care of themselves," Keitarou cut across him impatiently, and Keitarou felt his father's reiatsu flicker a little as though trying to control his temper yet again. "You said yourself that Kurotsuchi was now suspected — well, what he doesn't know, he can't be tortured into telling. I don't believe he'll talk, but just in case, it's safer that way. As for Koku, that's for me to consider, not you. As I already said, I know the Endou. If they have any clue at all to us being in Rukongai — and if somehow that shinigami made it back, even if he dropped dead on the spot as I think is most likely, we can't be too careful. They are a family of hunters, and wounded, they will hunt even more obsessively until they rake their claws through their prey. In this case, your family and the defenseless people of the village — do you want that to happen?"

"Of course not!" despite himself, Katsura paled, shaking his head hurriedly.

"Then stop wasting time here. Go find your mother and your sister,

and help them with the evacuation. Make sure you leave no trace that this place was ever lived in — take everything that indicates it was.”

“...Even Koku’s books?” Katsura paused, and Keitarou faltered, then nodded.

“Them, too,” he agreed, and Katsura could hear the forced note in his voice. “Everything, Katsura. Don’t make me say it again.”

“Yes, sir,” Katsura knew not to push his father any further, and he nodded, casting a last look back at the hut before dropping into shunpo and heading off in search of his kin.

But Koku’s whereabouts is bothering you as much or more than it is me, and that in itself is cause for concern. You usually have an answer for everything, Father... but this time, even you’re lost. Koku, what the hell were you playing at? Did you help the Shinigami? If you did, why? And what does it mean, now, for you and for us?

He was so young.

Kirio stood at the foot of the low-slung pallet bed, a troubled look on her pretty features as she gazed down at the stranger they had brought in from the Seireitei border. He was clean of blood now, robed in fresh bedclothes with his wounds cleaned and patched with the best herbal antiseptics Mitsuki had been able to provide. All the available operatives Fourth had to spare were currently at Seventh, she knew, fighting to save the life of the Vice Captain, but Kirio had seen Souja’s wounds for herself and privately she doubted that the Endou heir would survive the night, no matter what they did to him. Shikiki was the only healer whose abilities might have an impact but news had already filtered back to Thirteenth that her friend had been dispatched to help clear up the aftermath of a serious Hollow attack on a village in District Six, and, as a result, she was not on duty in Seireitei that night. Though certain an urgent alert had already been sent out to retrieve her, Kirio was not sure her old Academy classmate would return in time.

She turned her gaze back to the patient in the bed. Who he was was still a mystery, as was where he had come from, or why. When examining the injuries Kikyue’s sword had inflicted, Mitsuki had commented on the dusty nature of his clothing and the tattered length of cloth that had held tousled hair in a ragged tail. He had seemed somehow older then, unkempt and spattered with Souja’s blood, but now, lying on fresh white bedding and with his long brown hair not only clean but combed and tied in a neat tail that fell over his shoulder, she saw for the first time that he was younger than she had

imagined, younger even than Souja, she guessed, perhaps not even fully into his majority.

Juushirou had returned to the division a few hours earlier with little new to report, and had dispatched Naoko and Makoto to check the local villages in the area where Souja had been discovered, just in case anyone there had seen or heard anything, or knew who the mysterious young man was. So far nobody had come forward to claim the stray, and Naoko — after instructing her Captain in terse tones to ‘go to bed, get some rest and let others handle things’ had taken the decision to go further afield in search of clues. Kirio too had felt the jerk in spiritual energy that implied the use of a *Senkaimon*, and this coupled with the lack of information so far seemed confirmation that they had travelled away from the scene of attack, but from where was still unclear. How Naoko planned on tracking down the original crime scene, Kirio was not sure, but it was somehow comforting to know that her senior officer was trying. Though they were strangers, Kirio could not forget the fear that had flickered in the stray’s gaze in the moments before he had lost consciousness, and she badly wanted to find someone or something that would bring him reassurance that he had not fallen into enemy hands. A familiar face when he returned to consciousness would make all the difference and, although Naoko had warned her not to get emotionally involved until they knew all of the particulars, Kirio knew that she had already crossed that line. Juushirou trusting him to her care was a test of her rank and responsibility as sixth seat, but for Kirio, who had been abandoned by her own family and left to wander aimlessly around the Districts until taken pity on by a childless couple, the idea of this young man struck down and ferried far from everything and everyone he knew struck a chord with her.

“We know nothing about District people and even if he helped Souja-dono, it doesn’t necessarily mean he’s amenable to Shinigami help,” Naoko had advised her crisply, as she had prepared to leave the barracks. “Do what Taichou told you to do, but no more. If he wakes, report it. That’s all you need to worry about — given the stakes involved, it’s best you’re careful.”

“But he’s just a boy, Naoko-san,” Kirio had protested, and Naoko had grimaced, shooting her a wry look.

“Since he helped Souja-dono, he’s probably not a vigilante or an insurgent, but bringing a District individual back here is outside of normal protocol and it’ll create excitement when word spreads,” she had replied with a shrug. “I know that look, Kirio, and you probably won’t listen — but sometimes you have to think like a soldier rather

than like a civilian. We don't know this lad, and while I have faith in Mitsuki's ministrings, we can't guarantee what state he'll be in when he wakes. Like as not he'll be angry — he might even try to lash out, and I don't want to see another officer hurt."

"Taichou trusted him to me," Kirio had responded firmly. "I won't do anything stupid, Naoko-san, and I won't get hurt. I don't think he's dangerous, anyway."

"Suit yourself," Naoko had responded simply, disappearing out into the night, and at the memory of her superior's expression, Kirio frowned, wondering what it had meant.

I don't understand why she should mind so much. He's hurt, and he tried to help Souja-dono... I don't see what harm he could be to me. The way she looked at me, though, it was like she was thinking of something different. Another officer hurt... I felt like she didn't mean Souja-dono at all, but someone else. Sometimes Naoko-san is so easy to understand, then other times she's not. Still, I think she's being over cautious. I know not every situation is how it seems... but...

She turned her gaze back towards the wounded boy.
Edogawa-san didn't seem to think you needed spirit cuffs, and she wasn't worried about a hostile reaction. I know Naoko-san's looking out for me, but we need to win your trust and we won't do that by treating you like a prisoner. You're the only other one who was there with Souja-dono, and whether that was coincidence or not, we need you to put together the missing clues in the puzzle of who or what could've committed such a horrific crime.

"Kirio-neesan?"

A voice at the doorway made her turn to see Ketsui shadowed in the light of the kidou lamp that illuminated the hallway beyond, his own pale eyes clouded with concern. As their gazes met, Kirio knew that the officer had brought news, and at the preoccupation she saw in his expression, she felt her heart clench.

"Ketsui...? What..."

"Ten-nii is here," Ketsui spoke slowly and evenly, turning to glance at the corridor behind him, and for the first time Kirio made out the taller, broader figure of her old school friend, his own expression an undisguised mask of distress. There were the unmistakable traces of tears glinting against his lashes, the sight of them making her heart lurch again and she hurried forwards, reaching out to grasp him by the hands.

“Tenichi-kun? Why are you... how...”

“Kyouraku-taichou sent me here from Seventh,” Tenichi’s words were low and uneven, as though he were trying to hold back a further flow of emotion. “He sent me here because he thought I was the best person to come. He wanted me... he told me to... report to the people here. I need to see... Ukitake-taichou. I need to... report.”

“Taichou’s sleeping, and we’ve been told not to wake him,” Kirio bit her lip. “He didn’t sleep any last night, and he started coughing when he came back here, so Naoko-san and Edogawa-san made him go to bed. Edogawa-san gave him something herbal — I think he’ll sleep for a little while.”

“Sleeping?” Tenichi looked stricken. “But I was ordered... Kyouraku-taichou ordered... I have to... I need to...”

He trailed off incoherently, apparently unable to complete the sentence in his agitation, and Kirio bit her lip, gazing at him in dismay.

“Tenichi-kun?”

“Taichou’s sleeping, but Fukutaichou’s here,” Ketsui suggested quickly, a quick glance up at his brother telling Kirio that the younger man was just as concerned as she was about their companion’s uncharacteristic behaviour. “Shall I go get him... would he do instead?”

“He’ll have to.” Kirio made up her mind, seeing that Tenichi was apparently beyond making any kind of decision. nodding her head in Ketsui’s direction. “Yes, Ketsui, go get him, as speedily as you’re able. Tell him it’s important — Taichou would delegate, so that’s what we’ll do, too.”

The Tenth Seated officer sent her a look of relief that someone had taken charge, ducking between the two older shinigami and disappearing off down the hallway. Tenichi and Kirio stood in troubled silence which stretched on for a few minutes, then Tenichi gulped, detaching his wrist from her grip and dashing away the glitter of fresh tears from his lashes.

“Its my fault,” he murmured, more than half to himself, and Kirio frowned, realising that her friend’s body was trembling.

“Come inside,” she decided, pushing back the door of the sick room and gesturing for him to follow her within. “Come in and sit down. If anyone sees you in the hallway, they’ll get worried — and though I’m worried, I don’t want to start a riot. Ketsui will be back with

Fukutaichou soon... and nobody else is here except the young lad that was brought here. He's sedated and sleeping, so... we can talk."

"There's nothing to talk about," Tenichi shook his head numbly, but did not resist Kirio's gentle tug at his fingers, guiding him through the open doorway and into the small chamber. "It's my fault. You can't change that... it's because of me."

"What is?" Kirio gazed up at him, and the look in Tenichi's pale eyes almost broke her heart. "Tenichi-kun, what's happened? At Seventh... what did Kyouraku-taichou send you here to say?"

Tenichi drew a shaky breath into his lungs, and Kirio bit her lip.

"Souja... dono?"

Slowly Tenichi shook his head, and Kirio closed her eyes briefly.

"Then Shikiki..."

"She's not arrived back yet," Tenichi shook his head again, his words numb and somehow distant, yet the tears began to trickle soundlessly down his cheeks. "Apparently some people in Sixth District were badly hurt, including an officer. Unohana-taichou sent a message, but I don't know... if Shikiki got it yet, and even if she did... it... it doesn't... matter... now. Kyouraku-taichou s... said it was too late... anyway. He... was... too sick to save. Even Unohana-taichou s... said it... that he sh... should have been dead when you found him, only... he hung on. Unohana-taichou did everything she could, but... K... Kyouraku-taichou thinks Souja-dono only... held on... to report back. He thinks once that was done, S... Souja-dono didn't have any strength left. Not even Unohana-taichou could change it. He... was sleeping... and just... slipped away."

"I see."

Kirio turned to glance at the sleeping patient once more, then back to her friend.

"I'm sorry, Tenichi-kun. It must be horrible... your Vice Captain, and to be out there and not be able to do anything..."

"But you don't understand. It's my fault," Tenichi was agitated, pulling away from her once more. "I did this... it was me. Because of me... this happened because..."

He trailed off, his face paling suddenly, and Kirio frowned, following his gaze to the sleeping form in the bed.

"He's all right. He won't hear us," she repeated. "I can't leave him

— I promised I'd stay here while Edogawa-san went to fetch more herbal supplies from the Fourth, and in any case, Taichou entrusted him to me. I can't let anyone down — especially not now, not with what you've come to report.”

“Who... is he?” There was a strange trepidation in Tenichi's voice, and Kirio realised that her friend could not process any more unexpected surprises on top of the morning's events.

“We don't know,” she admitted with a sigh. “We know nothing about him or where he came from. He was with Souja-dono in the forest, that's all we know. He's probably from a District settlement, but aside from that...”

“A *District* boy...?” Tenichi echoed these words as if unable to comprehend them, then, “*With* Souja-dono?”

“It seems he was some kind of good samaritan,” Kirio agreed. “Souja-dono managed to tell Taichou and Kikyue-dono that much when I was there, so I'm pretty sure that's right. Otherwise...”

She shrugged her shoulders.

“How they met, who he is, what the connection was, where it happened... all of that's a mystery. Right now the only brief I have is to take care of him — till he wakes up, that's all any of us can do.”

Tenichi did not reply, his troubled gaze still fixed on the face of the sleeping stranger, and Kirio frowned, giving him a little shake.

“Stop it. Look at me,” she commanded, reaching up to forcibly turn his chin towards hers. “What happened to Souja-dono wasn't your fault. Stop saying crazy things as though it was, because we both know that's impossible. You tried your best — everyone did. Kikyue-dono, Taichou, me, your comrades... everyone tried. It's not your fault.”

“No...” Tenichi wetted his lips, glancing back at the bed uneasily for a moment before meeting her gaze with a clouded one of his own. “It's my fault. I don't even... I can't even put it into words how I feel, but I know... because of me...”

“I know it's a shock,” Kirio softened her voice, “but Tenichi-kun, stop and listen to how crazy you sound. Do you think for one moment that anyone in Seventh Division wanted Souja-dono to die? Don't you think everyone's wishing they could've done more to save him? Heck, I was there, I saw him... but the truth is, nobody could. Not even Unohana-Taichou — you can't blame yourself like this.”

“But I killed him,” Tenichi reiterated flatly. “Because of me... I killed him. I did this.”

“That’s stupid,” Kirio said bluntly, giving him a little shake as if trying to bring him back to his senses. “Of course you didn’t kill him, you idiot. Do you think I — or anyone else — is going to believe that?”

“They should,” Tenichi turned away, his voice becoming strange. “I can’t explain, Kirio, but I know. Here...” he patted his chest helplessly, “I feel it. I know. It’s like he’s there, haunting me... I know.”

“Listen to yourself,” Kirio begged. “You’re not capable of killing anyone, and you didn’t hurt Souja-dono. Someone did, something did, but it wasn’t you. Your blade didn’t do this. *You* didn’t do this. Stop saying that you did — we both know it’s crazy talk!”

“But it is because of me, all the same,” Tenichi swallowed hard, touching Kirio’s cheek briefly before lowering his hand. “Maybe it wasn’t my sword, but even so... you don’t understand. Its because I got taken away, and now...”

He faltered, fresh tears glittering on his lashes once more, and Kirio sighed, taking him to the side of the room and ushering him down on the bench.

“I’ve never seen you like this,” she murmured, sitting down next to him and resting her hand on his arm. “You respected Souja-dono, I know that. A lot of people did, and I can’t stop thinking about poor Kikyue-dono, her expression when she saw him... but listen, this has to stop. You’re upset, grieving — it’s natural. However, you can’t blame yourself for something beyond your power. You didn’t mean to get abducted. Yes, it happened, but you’re safe now and Souja-dono would have been the first one to tell you you were being foolish, reacting like this. He’d want you to be strong and look to catching the real culprits — he wouldn’t have blamed you and so you mustn’t, either.”

“But...”

“Endou-taichou hasn’t, has he?” Kirio questioned. “Kikyue-dono didn’t say anything, in a fit of emotion, that made you upset like this?”

“No...” Tenichi shook her head. “No, it’s just...”

He swallowed hard, lowering his tones.

“Souja-dono disappeared last night, and people... think he was

looking for clues about what happened to me,” he said uneasily, burying his head in his hands in frustration. “I hesitated in telling Kikyue-dono something that Souja-dono told me not to tell anyone, but maybe because of that... and I didn’t want this. I didn’t, Kirio! I didn’t want Souja-dono hurt, I really didn’t!”

“Well of course you didn’t,” Kirio blinked, staring at him in confusion. “I know that. Everyone knows that. You shouldn’t even feel the need to say it.”

“I really never meant... I was just... so many confusing things are going through my mind,” Tenichi groaned, “and I can’t tell you any of them. You wouldn’t understand what I’m thinking at the moment... or how much I hate it. I can’t make sense of anything... but I know... this is somehow... because of me. Even if you say it’s not... I know it is and it won’t change. Some things can’t be forgiven... this is one of those times.”

“Shh,” Kirio reached out a reassuring arm to hug him, but he pushed her back.

“I don’t deserve sympathy from you,” he said bleakly. “From you, from Ketsui, from anyone. I’ll report to Houjou-fukutaichou and then I’ll go back. I should go back... and do what I can for my division. I don’t want to see him lying there, not again, but if that’s part of my penance, so be it.”

“Tenichi...”

“Tenichi, what’s up?” At that moment, Enishi strode into the room, effectively breaking up the conversation, and Kirio glanced up, relief flooding her features at the sight of the broad-built, matter-of-fact officer.

“Fukutaichou, Tenichi’s come from Seventh... from Kyouraku-taichou, and it’s not good news,” she said quietly, getting to her feet and bowing her head towards her superior officer. “He wanted the Taichou, but I told him that wasn’t possible, so he’d like to report to you instead. He’s... he’s very upset about it, and... I think... he needs to calm down. He’s blaming himself, and...”

“Don’t talk about me like I’m not here,” Tenichi got to his feet, pushing past her and moving to face the startled Enishi head on. “I’ve got a report to give and I’ll give it. If it’s all I can do right today, dammit, I’ll at the very least do that.”

“I see,” Enishi’s genial features became sober, and he clapped a thick paw down on Tenichi’s shoulder. “Fair enough, then. Come with

me to my office. We'll talk there, and you can tell me everything Kyouraku told you to report. If it's as I think it is, I dare say Seventh'll want you back smartish, so sooner you discharge your duty and get your second wind the better."

He cast Kirio a glance.

"I sent Ketsui to help Kira oversee the juniors. They're flapping about all the comings and goings, and Shikibu and Atsudane still haven't returned from their factfinding mission, so for the time being you're the next highest ranking officer on duty here. If Tsukabishi comes back from Second before I'm done, tell him what's what, but I want you to stop with the young'un here and keep tabs on him like Edogawa and the Taichou asked you, all right? That seems like a pretty important duty — it looks like we're going to need him, and whatever it is he knows about this mess."

At these words, Kirio half-thought she saw Tenichi flinch, but he did not meet her eyes, and the moment was gone as quickly as it had come, for Enishi more or less frog-marched his former subordinate from the room, closing the door behind him with a reassuring bang that seemed to bring the world back into sudden clear focus.

Souja-dono is dead.

Kirio moved to sit down beside the bed, reaching delicate fingers to brush wisps of straggly brown hair out of the sleeping youngster's face.

I wonder if he was able to tell Endou-taichou anything before he died. I wonder if you know what happened, and whether you'll be able to wake and tell us how we can bring a murderer to justice.

She rested her hand briefly against the young man's shoulder, then withdrew it with a sigh.

Naoko-san is right about one thing, you have no reason to trust us and you might be angry or afraid, when you wake. Kikyue-dono went in with her blade before she knew what was what, and you must've been frightened. Souja-dono stopped her from killing you — but why should you trust people who hurt you when all you did was try to help a wounded man? You have nothing to do with our problems or our politics, yet here you are anyway, a victim of them all the same.

She rubbed her temples, suddenly tired.

You're so young... no older than our youngest recruits. Do you have family? Are they worried for you — are they looking for you right now? I wish I knew. I feel we need to make it up to you and prove we're not the bad guys... but it will be a miracle if you don't take a hate to us the

moment you wake.

And then there's Tenichi...

She chewed on her lip.

I never saw him like that before. Not even when Irie-san died... not even then. Then he was the strong one — it was Ketsui-kun who needed reassurance, and it was Tenichi-kun who gave it. I didn't think it was possible to fluster him... but I guess given everything that's happened to him lately, it's just one burden too many. Perhaps Souja-dono was trying to find out what happened, and got too close to the truth, but even so, it doesn't make it Tenichi-kun's fault.

She folded her arms across her chest, picturing her friend's uncharacteristically unstable demeanour.

Would I be like that, if something happened to Fukutaichou?

She pressed her lips together, reflecting on her time in the Thirteenth, and the strong sense of trust and reassurance that Enishi's presence generally brought to the busy bustle of division life. For a moment she found herself trying to envisage the division without the broad-built Yamamoto's easy presence, but try as she might she could not picture his absence.

Maybe I would. No, almost certainly I would. I'd be angry. I'd cry. I'd be upset. And if, like Tenichi-kun, it was connected to something that happened to me, I'd feel guilty. I'd feel broken up and confused, and maybe I'd react in the same way. But... more than anything, I'd want to find the truth. And... perhaps that's what needs to happen here, too.

She cast a glance at the sleeping stranger, inwardly making up her mind.

Then it's decided. I'm going to win your trust, one way or another. I don't even know who you are yet, not even your name, but I'm going to find a way to do it regardless. For Tenichi-kun's sake and Souja-dono's justice, that's something I can do. Maybe, if I can piece together what really happened to Souja-dono and why, maybe then it will lay Tenichi-kun's fears to rest. Perhaps he'll be able to find closure and move on. At least... at least I really hope so, because I don't want to see him like that ever again. If you can help me do it, District stranger, then I'll find a way to convince you we're not your enemies. Taichou trusted you to me... and now, I'm going to make sure I don't let him down!

29. Manjushage

Chapter Twenty Eight: Manjushage

The day of Souja's funeral dawned grey and overcast, a thick layer of mourning cloud woven across the bright rays of the Seireitei sun as the mourners gathered to pay their last respects to a young man cut down in the prime of his life. They were many. Every Captain and Vice Captain of the Gotei had travelled to Seventh District's central manor for the ceremony, along with the entirety of the Seventh Division, their *shihakushou* neat and properly pressed, the obi at their waists not the usual white of their daily uniform but the dark red of the Endou Clan as a mark of respect for their deputy's passing. Though the urgency of the situation and the potential threat Souja's death had opened up against the Gotei were fresh on everyone's minds, there was nonetheless a sense of mutual grief and respect for an adjutant who, with his inoffensive courtesy and reasoned temperament, had been well respected by all he had met. Many had looked to him to continue the peaceful policies Hirata and his father had extended across the once war-torn region and now, with the body laid out in state before them, the hopes of not only one Clan but Seireitei as a whole seemed to be fragile, capable of crumbling into dust.

White was the colour of the dead, therefore Endou Clan custom forbade the wearing of it by any other at a Clan funeral, and as a result, no Captain had worn their *haori* to the proceedings, casting a muted tone over the gathering. Each Clan Captain had additionally chosen to wear an *obi* in subdued Clan colours in order to respect the Seventh District custom. Souja alone was robed in snow white, his injured body having been carefully and tenderly washed and dressed in expensive mulberry-silk weave cloth that was wrapped tightly around his damaged torso with a wide sash of deepest ruby. His thick dark hair had been brushed and pulled over his shoulder in a casual tail, fastened by a silver clasp engraved with the Clan emblem of the bird of prey surveying his domain. At a glance, his expression was one of serenity, as though reposed in sleep, but the unnatural ashiness of his skin gave away the fact that the lips, though parted, drew no breath, and that the spirit, once vibrant and full of promise had long since begun to scatter into the crisp District Seven ether. At his side lay his sword, sheathed in its ebony-carved scabbard to conceal the fragmenting blade that lay within, an identical wrap of ruby cloth swathing the hilt as though to indicate the passing of two noble

spirits, not just the one. Souja had been a brave shinigami, a resolute fighter and a diligent swordsman — and Hirata had decreed that he would leave the world as such, with dignity and pride as a son of the Endou Clan.

He was reposed on a square board of polished wood, smooth and carefully carved for the occasion with a frame of bamboo slats supporting a thin mesh canopy to protect the corpse in the event of inclement weather. Beneath, tightly packed wadges of straw and wood formed the basis of the funeral pyre. Hirata had chosen to have his son cremated, ostensibly on account of the severe injury the boy had sustained against his untraced assailant, and, on consultation with the family, they too had agreed. Though nobody had voiced it, all had been painfully aware of the other reasons for Hirata's choice — although the Endou and Urahara shared distant blood, the Urahara Clan disdained cremation, and by choosing to put his only son's body to the flame, Hirata was making clear his desire to separate his family from the shackles of that biological connection. It was not Nagesu nor the people of Third District who had inspired this bitter decision, as all present knew, but the recognition of his sister's betrayal and of Keitarou's true heritage that had made him decide to revert to the traditional funerary rites of his own Clan instead of the usual compromise of ritual which had dominated the previous few generations. Souja would not be hidden in a coffin, nor bound in stone beneath the earth in the vaults of the Endou ancestors, but rather would be cast into the atmosphere as a spirit of smoke.

Now, for the first time since a generation before Shouichi had wrought havoc through the District and slaughtered his way to power, a solemn line of Clansfolk filed towards the pyre to offer prayers and lay flowers around the silent corpse. At the head of the procession was Hirata himself, who paused for a moment with distant, heavy eyes as he regarded his son's still features, reaching out a gloved hand towards his cheek before stopping, and pulling back. There was a moment of complete silence, as he gathered his emotions, then, very gently he reached down to place the single iris bloom against Souja's chalk-white sword hand. The bloom was a deep reddish purple, the *hana-shoubu* whose silhouette adorned the adjutant's badge that lay in state at Souja's feet, and the meaning of Hirata's gesture was not lost on any of those gathered. The flower was the traditional blossom of the Endou, its delicate petals the determined reddish hue that typified the warrior family, as well as being a symbol of Souja's position as adjutant of the Gotei squad. More than this, though, it was the name of the flower, the '*shoubu*', which was engraved most deeply into the minds of the congregation. It was a challenge, a cry of war in a time of

grief, a resolution that, no matter what the cost, Hirata intended to avenge his son's death.

He pressed his hands together, closing his eyes for a moment, then turned away from the pyre, his expression calm and settled, but his pale eyes glittering with something few had seen there before. A chill wind whipped around the grounds, causing more than one member of Seventh to shiver and wrap their arms more tightly around their bodies as they cast hesitant, anxious looks in the direction of their Captain. Though he seemed calm, he it was a dangerous kind of calm, and those who had worked with him for a long period of time knew that he was only just keeping the predator under wraps. The hawk wanted vengeance, and only the need for propriety held it in check.

From the heart of the cluster of Seventh Division members, Tenichi watched his Captain's actions in numb, detached silence. The sight of Souja's body, so serene and still atop the pyre had awakened both panic and remorse in his heart, reviving the memory of Masaya's warning words and then, that frantic moment when he had heard Kikyue's yell of grief and knew that his Vice Captain lay dead. Shunsui had sent him to report to Thirteenth, believing that he was in shock from the tragedy, but it ran deeper than that inside of him and, although he had tried to push it away and focus on his duty, it kept returning, eating away at him piece by piece until it disrupted his dreams and tortured his waking moments. More than anything he had not wanted to come to the funeral, but more than anyone he knew he could not avoid it. It was his fault, he kept reminding himself darkly. He hadn't chosen it to happen, nor had he ordered it, but he was responsible for it all the same. He had allowed himself to be snared by Masaya, taken to Keitarou, and then he had lied. Souja had asked him for the truth and he had not given it, and because of that... because of his deceit...

He shook his head as if to clear it, afraid his emotions would spill over once again. Souja's mother now stood at her son's side, a dark veil covering her face and concealing from view the tears that Tenichi felt certain were flowing copiously down the elegant, gentle woman's cheeks. Ai was a *hime*, not a soldier, and unused to the brutality of conflict so close to her door. Her hands shook as she laid her bundle of flowers beside Souja's head, then, very slowly, she bent down towards him, pushing back her veil just the slightest bit to brush her lips briefly against Souja's brow. At this heartfelt farewell from mother to child, Tenichi's heart spasmed with genuine grief, remembering his own mother's death and the night that Keitarou had called for them, bringing medicine and memories of a time long since left behind. He had not realised then, he told himself bitterly, that Keitarou's

appearance would eventually bring him to this point.

As Ai turned from the pyre, she stumbled slightly as though her emotions had overwhelmed her, and Hirata took her arm gently, leading her away from the scene in solemn silence. Kikyue was next, dressed, unlike her mother, in the muted robes of a shinigami on duty, with only her Clan pendant about her throat to show her true connection to the dead man. Her eyes were red and her cheeks pale, but there was an angry defiance in her aura that had seemed lacking since the day of her brother's death, and as she reached Souja's side, she touched his free hand, taking his fingers in hers and squeezing them hard. Her lips moved, and though Tenichi could not hear what she was saying, he felt sure that she too was affirming her father's declaration and assuring her brother that they would find and destroy the people responsible.

Misashi was the next to pay his respects, leading the youngest member of Hirata's family by the hand as he gently guided her forwards. Sayuri was eight years old, Tenichi remembered with a stab of anguish, a very young, innocent eight, yet she too was robed in the mourning colours of her family, her dark hair properly fastened and her Clan pendant glittering around her neck. From there, though, the illusion of a Clan *himewas* shattered, for there was no concealing the grief in the young girl's eyes as she hurried forward, tears streaming down already stained cheeks.

"Oniisama," she sobbed, her words soft but loud enough for the crowd at large to hear them. "Oniisama, don't go! Don't leave Sayuri behind!"

From the side, there was a choked sob from Ai's direction at her daughter's plaintive words, and Kikyue grabbed her mother's other arm as if to give her reassurance.

Sayuri had reached the pyre by now, her petite form just tall enough to be able to see over the top, and as she stretched out small hands to lay her precious burden of crimson flowers at her brother's side, Misashi caught up with her, crouching at her side and putting his hand on her shoulder.

"It's time to say goodbye to Oniisama," he said quietly, his tones grave. "Say goodbye, Sayuri-chan... Souja will be sad, otherwise, if you don't say it properly."

Sayuri gulped, a fresh storm of tears in her pale bluish eyes, but at Misashi's urging she nodded bravely, standing up on tiptoes and, in imitation of her mother, planting a kiss on her brother's cheek.

“Sayuri will be good, Oniisama,” she murmured, her tones uneven and punctuated by catches in her breathing. “Sayuri will be good, so don’t worry. Sayuri will help Hahaue and Chichiue, I promise. Please go to a good place, Oniisama. Sl... sleep peacefully.”

“Good girl,” Tenichi heard Misashi murmur, and the older man rested a hand briefly on Souja’s shoulder before turning to lead the little girl away. Tenichi closed his eyes, swallowing hard as he tried to erase the image from his thoughts. More than one of his companions were also biting back tears — to his left, Nakata had an expensive silk handkerchief in his hand and was unashamedly mopping at his eyes. Sneaking a sidelong glance at his roommate, Tenichi envied the older man’s ability to let his emotions flow. If he released the floodgates on his, he knew that there would be no reeling it back in... and beneath his grief and his horror at what had happened, he could not escape that stifling, overwhelming sense of fear.

If I told someone, what would happen to me? If I did, what would happen to Ketsui? I can’t. I can’t say anything. Souja-dono is dead. He can’t tell anyone anything, either, if he even knew.

He swallowed hard, troubled by the brief flicker of relief that stirred in his heart.

I’m not glad he’s dead. I’m not! I didn’t want this! I’m not his enemy, not the Taichou’s, not anyone’s. I didn’t promise to become Keitarou-san’s ally, nor did I agree to any of this! I only wanted to help the people in the Districts... I’m not happy he’s dead and I’m not going to be relieved about it!

“Kotetsu, you all right?” Nakata murmured at this juncture, nudging his companion, and Tenichi started, staring at his roommate for a moment before hurriedly gathering his wits.

“As all right as anyone can be, given the circumstance,” he murmured, and Nakata nodded sombrely.

“We’ll get him, though,” he replied frankly. “We’ll get him, cut him down and make him wish he’d never crossed the Seventh. Mark my words, we will... nobody is going to get away with doing this to the Endou or to Seventh Division.”

Tenichi didn’t answer, his heart spasming once more as he found he had to look away. The Captains were now paying their respects, he realised with a jolt, led by Nagesu, as current Leader of the Council, with Juushirou bringing up the rear. Even he had chosen to obey the traditions of the Endou Clan, despite his District status, for his *obi* was a dull cobalt grey instead of its usual pristine white. His thin, pale

features appeared worn and preoccupied, and Tenichi pressed his lips together, remembering that his former Captain had a long association with the Endou and had known Souja from infancy.

“Cremation is unusual,” he managed at last, realising that Nakata was expecting him to make some kind of response. “I didn’t think that happened in Seventh — I thought, because of their Urahara connections...”

“The one behind this is a damned Urahara, so like Hell would the Captain pander to those traditions,” Nakata muttered, and Tenichi flinched at the venom in his companion’s voice. “Ah, no offence to Nagesu-sama and his kind, of course, but as insults go, enough is enough. Besides, this is the true Endou way of seeing off a dead spirit. You’ve heard the stories, I s’pose? Being in Seventh, I guess you must’ve.”

“Stories?” Tenichi was jerked momentarily from his reverie, gazing at his friend in confusion, and Nakata sighed, shaking his head.

“Endou are a rough bunch. You know that bit for sure,” he said matter-of-factly. “In times past, there were lots of murders and struggles over power. It was tradition then, y’see, to cremate the spirit and send the ashes into the ether as smoke. Well, that was the spirit of the person, you see... leaving this plane and going to hunt down their enemies from the next. Instead of casing them in stone, which the Urahara brought to this District, they’d be set free to roam and bring down their foes.”

“Hunt... down...?” Tenichi visibly blanched, and Nakata nodded.

“That’s what they say,” he agreed, apparently oblivious to his roommate’s sudden change of colour. “The flowers, too. A *shoubu* is a challenge, right? A contest, win or lose, a battle to the death if need be. That’s why the *hana-shoubu* belongs to our squad, but it’s the Endou’s flower first and foremost. And the spider lilies, the *manjushage* that everyone else is laying down, that’s another thing. In Endou tradition, the *manjushage* has special powers to waken the spirit of the dead and send him out looking for vengeance. It’s because it’s the colour of blood... legend has it that Endou dead don’t rest till every one of their enemies lies in his grave.”

Tenichi swallowed hard, turning to glance back at the funeral pyre with new eyes. Though he was not normally given to superstition, suddenly the masses of red-blossomed spider lily flowers made him uneasy, surrounding Souja’s body like a protective aura of blood-red blooms. Did they really have the power to stir Souja from his sleep

and send him hunting for vengeance? Could he know from beyond the grave..?

“None of that stuff is true, Nakata, it’s just legends,” the division’s Fifth seat put austere in before Tenichi’s mind could run away with itself. “Living people are the ones who hunt down enemies, not the dead.”

“Well, maybe so,” Nakata acknowledged, “but I’m just filling Kotetsu in on the cultural history. Figured he ought to know, since we’ll be up soon to lay our flowers and pay our respects to the Fuku.”

“We... will?” Tenichi looked uncertain, and Nakata nodded.

“S’why we’re here and in uniform like this,” he responded simply. “You’re white as a sheet, you know — pull yourself together a little, huh? He was a fine man and we’re all going to miss him — but it’s down to us, now, to take up where he left off. If the Fuku’s ghost isn’t going to haunt his enemies to death, well, we’ve gotta do it for him. We’re his agents of justice, if you like... our duty to him is to avenge him, no matter what.”

“You can’t honestly believe that you’ll settle Kotetsu’s nerves that way,” the Fifth seat snorted. “He’s not an Endou, Nakata, he can’t be expected to understand how our Clan works.”

Tenichi bit his lip, remembering Masaya’s clinical words about Souja once more.

“I think maybe I do,” he murmured. “To be his vengeance... is now our job?”

“Of course,” Nakata agreed solemnly. “He was our Fuku. He won’t rest easy till the one who killed him is sleeping just as soundly.”

“Seventh, pipe down and get into formation,” The hissed words of the division’s Fourth Seat prevented Tenichi from responding, casting them all a meaningful glare. “Remember where you are. We’re up next, and Taichou’s said anyone who disgraces the squad here today will answer to his sword for it after the ceremony, so let’s do things right.”

The flames licked high up into the sky, bending and dancing and making the air warp and haze with the heat and smoke of the inferno.

From his hidden location, far from the crowd of sombrely dressed shinigami and Clansfolk, a solitary figure watched the fire burn, his fists clenched tightly beneath the dark folds of the heavy cloak that

concealed him. Deep beneath the cowed hood, two silver eyes glittered with the tell-tale sign of tears as he witnessed the Endou Clan Leader's sole son and heir being returned to the ether.

Everything he had tried to prevent... and yet it had ended like this.

The tears trickled down Joumei's ash-white cheeks, but they were tears of anger and frustration as much as they were grief, a swirl of uncharacteristic emotions filling his usually calm, composed heart. Death did not normally shake him — it was a normal, accepted part of life that the Kitsune had embraced in order to live in freedom, but then, this time was different. This was not a Kitsune being returned to the earth, but another, a man whose death Joumei had not been ready for, and therefore one which had hurt him twice as much. It was as though the flames of Souja's funeral pyre had set light to his own pride and spirit, for deep inside of him he felt a genuine swell of indignation that one he considered a friend had been so ill abused.

Keitarou.

His eyes narrowed to argent slits, hate filling his mind at the thought of the Kitsune's nemesis.

You did this, I know you did. Somehow, for some reason of your own, you took Souja-dono from us and from Hirata-sama. It won't be forgiven, or forgotten.

He leaned back against the trunk of a nearby tree, watching the dance of smoke mingling among the clouds, and his gaze hardened.

A very Endou funeral, and unlike anything our Clan would ever sanction, but in this instance, it seems appropriate. To think you were the one who once told me about your family's customs, Souja-dono, and the sending of the vengeful spirit into smoke to track down and slay their foes. Well, I'm a scientist and I don't believe in supernatural vengeance, but the message is loud and clear to me all the same. I was supposed to die before you, not mourn your passing — and I won't let Keitarou get away with stealing your life from you.

He glanced at his hands, the faint sheen of *Sekkisekidust* coating the whiteish skin and helping, he knew, to damp his presence from the gathered shinigami.

"The time for hiding in silence is obviously at an end," he murmured, tilting his palm so that the dim light of the overcast day caught the shards of stone, making them glitter ominously. "You wanted to flush us out, Keitarou, and I'll grant you your wish. Souja-dono's death is a grudge I intend to take up personally — and one I

won't lay to rest until your life is also forfeit. I'll accept the message in that smoke and become my friend's vengeance instead. We'll find you, we'll track you down, steal what's precious from you... and maybe then I'll let the Endou burn what's left; let them desecrate your body in the same way your people desecrated Souja-dono's."

He pulled the cloak more tightly around his body, slipping into a cautious shunpo as he drew nearer the gathered congregation. Surrounding his body with *Sekkiseki*-enhanced *kyokkou*, he was all but invisible to them, and for a moment his gaze rested on the fair-haired leader of the Urahara Clan, reminding himself darkly that to reveal himself in front of his family's long time enemies would do nothing towards furthering his cause. As he contemplated his next move, however, his gaze fell on a thin figure to the side of the shinigami Captains, his lank white hair tied with a dark ribbon in a loose tail down his back.

He pursed his lips, a faint memory surfacing in his thoughts.

Ukitake Juushirou, surely? Well well. Perhaps there is a recourse for the Kitsune after all.

He stepped back, preparing to drop once more into shunpo, the flickering, dancing light of the flame burning itself into his thoughts. *We will get even, Souja-dono. You have my word. Your fight might have ended, my friend, but ours... ours begins from here.*

"The mood here today is oppressively sombre."

Kirio pushed open the door of the small, plainly furnished bed-chamber, a spare blanket draped over her shoulder and a vessel of water clutched in her other hand. As she did so, from across the far side of the room Mitsuki raised her gaze from her patient, placing her hand gently against his ribcage as she monitored the beating of his heart.

"It's to be expected," she murmured, gesturing for Kirio to put the water down behind the door and come to join her. "Thank you for doing that, Hikifune-san. I realise Thirteenth's numbers are depleted today, with it being Souja-dono's funeral... you probably have many other things to do besides helping me."

"Taichou told me before he left this morning that I was to do what I could and make our unexpected visitor my top priority," Kirio shook her head, nonetheless doing as she was bidden, taking the blanket in both hands and folding it in half before draping it over the patient's legs. "I don't know if he's worried about the boy's safety, or if it's just

that he wants to ensure we're taking good care of him, but either way, that's what I was told to do and I intend to do it regardless."

"I see," Mitsuki's gaze softened and she sat back, reaching for a vial of ointment that stood on the small shelf beside the bed. "Can you pass me some of that gauze please? I'm going to re-dress the wound now, and I can't quite reach it from here."

"With pleasure," Kirio picked up the roll of gauze, passing it across. "And I know that there's every reason for gravity, when a Vice Captain just got killed. It's just... I didn't know Souja-dono very well, so I think the shock for me was that someone could cut down an officer like that and do it in such a brutal way. This morning, though, seeing Taichou and Fukutaichou readying themselves to leave to pay their respects at the ceremony, it hit home. Souja-dono was someone's son as well as just an adjutant. It has wide reaching complications in a political sense, but also in other ones, too. Taichou's not said much about it to me, but I can tell he's upset about it and not from a Gotei point of view. It's had an effect on lots of people... out of the blue like that, someone so young being slain..."

"Too young," Mitsuki agreed, tearing a strip of gauze from the roll and folding it, dipping it in the ointment before applying it to the wound. "He wasn't yet born when I left for Rukongai, so he can't have been much older than his early twenties at most. It's not even a life, and you're right. When someone young dies like that, it's somehow twice as shocking as if it were someone old and battle-scarred."

She frowned, and Kirio bit her lip.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to remind you of the Spiritless Zone."

"You didn't," Mitsuki managed a brief smile, shaking her head. "Death lives with us all, though, and that's a fact of our existences. We're shinigami. Death Gods. We deal with death all the time. Because of that, perhaps we imagine ourselves inured to it, or somehow immune. We're not, though. We're trained to be strong, but really we all have weak points. You're right, it's a sober atmosphere. If not for taking care of Koku, I might have gone to the funeral myself. Even though I didn't know Souja, I know his family and I would have paid my respects. Right now, though, this is my priority... as a healer, this is all I can do."

"Koku?"

Kirio glanced at her companion in surprise, who nodded her head, setting the vial down beside the window and wiping her hands on the towel that lay nearby.

“J... Ukitake-taichou said that Souja-dono called him by that name before he died,” she confirmed, a sad look in her soft grey eyes. “He was very insistant, and kept repeating over and over again how this ‘Koku’ had come to help him and that we shouldn’t treat him like an enemy. I don’t know any more details about what he might have told his father or his sister, but from my perspective, this is my patient and his recovery has to come before anything else in my mind.”

She offered Kirio a tired smile.

“You’ve been a really helpful assistant, Hikifune-san. Thank you.”

“Taichou and Fukutaichou both told me to report to them if and when he wakes up,” Kirio shrugged. “He’s an important witness, now, and the only one we have, so it’s part of my duty to be here as well. Because I was there at the scene and I know the circumstances, I’ve been here from the start, too — I’d sort of like to be here when he wakes. I feel that we’ve a lot to make up to him for, especially if we’re going to win his trust — I want to show him that shinigami aren’t the bad guys, and that he wasn’t wrong to try to help one.”

“Mm,” Mitsuki looked troubled. “Kikyue-dono’s reaction was entirely understandable, but unfortunate. Still, you’re right... and this is probably the right place to do it.”

She cast her companion a faint smile.

“I think you know that I went to school with your Captain, Vice Captain and Third Seat,” she added. “I know the kind of people they are and, even in the short time I’ve been back in Seireitei, I’ve come to realise that Thirteenth is a very friendly division. With so many people here who understand the Districts, I think that if this patient of mine is going to be convinced to open up to anyone, it will be people in this division. The gaps are not so wide... and it gives me something to do too, now, instead of just being useless.”

She patted her waist pensively.

“Yuuyugo isn’t at the stage yet where I could release her and not take harm from it,” she admitted regretfully, “but in this case, Kikyue-dono’s aim was fortunate and I was able to mend the wound without using spiritual techniques. He’s recovering and I’m happy with his progress — he’ll make a full recovery, and I don’t think it’ll be long before he’ll start to stir.”

She collected up the remains of the linctus and the used towels, folding them over her arm.

“I’ll go rid myself of these,” she added. “I’ll come back and check

on him later — I trust someone will come relieve you of sentry duty so you can have a break and some food later on?”

“Tsunemori-san said he would,” Kirio nodded. “I’ll be fine, Edogawa-san — thank you.”

She grinned, though her eyes were sad.

“I’ve learned a little bit about healing from you these last few days,” she added, “and it takes my mind off the fact that Tenichi won’t answer my messages or see me.”

“Kotetsu... Tenichi?” Mitsuki frowned, as if trying to place the name, and Kirio nodded.

“Yes. He came here the night Souja-dono died to report to Fukutaichou, but he was really shaken up with grief and saying all kinds of crazy things about being to blame. Since then I haven’t seen him. I imagine Seventh is pretty busy — but he hasn’t come here, and I don’t understand why he wouldn’t even send a reply to tell me he’s buried under a pile of work.”

“Juushirou told me about him,” Mitsuki pondered, forgetting her usual attention to formality as she considered the point. “He said the same thing — that this Tenichi was very disturbed by Souja-dono’s death. In fact, Kyouraku-kun apparently asked Tenichi to report here to get him away from Seventh and give him some space — apparently he was quite worried too by the way in which this officer reacted.”

“Grief is a funny thing,” Kirio said soberly. “Edogawa-san, you and Taichou know each other well, don’t you?”

“Mm?” Mitsuki’s cheeks pinkened slightly, and Kirio’s eyes became wide as she interpreted the expression of sheepish guilt that crossed her companion’s fair features.

“I’m sorry... did I ask a bad question?”

“No... no,” Mitsuki shook her head with a wry smile. “I slipped, didn’t I, and called him by his given name? At school, that was how it was — I have to remember though that now we’re not classmates but shinigami and he’s a Captain to whom I need to show respect, especially in front of his subordinates. I’m sorry, Hikifune-san. I didn’t mean any informality.”

“I don’t mind,” Kirio shook her head. “I just... I think that, maybe, if you were close friends at school, you’d understand why I’m so worried about Tenichi as I am. He’s always been one of my best friends, maybe like my brother in a strange kind of way... he’s never

been like this with me before. His brother, too. He's not spoken to Ketsui, either. I'm really worried about how this has affected him — and what I can do about it. I'm afraid of what he might do — I never thought I'd say it of him, but I'm worried he might do something... rash."

"Like try to avenge the murder himself?" Mitsuki questioned. Kirio nodded.

"He blames himself, and that would be the easiest way to assuage blame," she agreed heavily. "Tenichi's committed and takes duty seriously, even if he can be flippant and frivolous when there's time for that. I don't know... but he scared me, acting like that. It was like I was seeing a stranger... a stranger haunted by his Vice Captain's ghost."

"Death does change people, especially seeing it like that at close quarters," Mitsuki reflected. "I'll mention your concerns, though, to my Captain when I go there to report on my patient later today. If he's emotionally traumatised or exhausted from the effects of the ordeal, she'll find a way to settle it. And am I right that he was the young man abducted not long before I returned here? It may simply be that the stress of both incidents so close together have proven too much for him to handle on his own. It's no reflection on his ability, if that's the case — but it's usually the shinigami most in control who suffer the deepest mental injuries. They don't ask for help soon enough, you see — and this might be one of those cases."

"Thank you," Kirio was relieved. "I appreciate it. I know you've had a lot of your own troubles to deal with, Edogawa-san — it's kind of you to help us with so many of ours, too."

"On the contrary, this makes me feel useful," Mitsuki patted the vial with a rueful smile. "It's better, when there's something to do and you can do it. Until my healing abilities are recovered, I'm no use in any other capacity — so I'm grateful that I have something to occupy me while that happens. The Spiritless Zone wasn't a nice experience — but so long as I'm on my feet and involved with living people, it's easier to make my peace with the memories of the dead."

She inclined her head slightly, then withdrew from the room, sliding the door shut softly behind her.

"So your name is Koku, huh?" Kirio glanced over towards the sleeping patient, moving to draw the clean white blanket up over his body once more. "I guess it's nice to know who we've been looking after these past few days. Maybe it'll help us find your family, if we have a name to put about. Nobody's managed to work out where that

Senkaimon opened from or even how to reactivate it, and everything we look into seems to be a dead end. You're all we have in the equation, Koku-kun — if we help you find your family, will you forgive us for mistaking your motives and help us find the killer of our officer?"

So, it was over.

Hirata stood before the charcoal remains of the pyre, watching the faint wisps of smoke that still drifted upwards towards the sky. It had been a fierce flame, he remembered absently, cast with his own Kidou and, with the help of the breeze it had spread evenly, engulfing the body in a ball of orange and red that reminded the Captain of the blood that had soaked his son's uniform the day he had been brought back.

Now, he reflected bitterly, he could do nothing but accept that Souja was gone. The son which he had raised with such pride and affection would never again come to his office late at night to discuss squad matters, nor act as such a reliable right-hand man in so many tricky Gotei tasks. The number of individuals present at the ceremony had been an overwhelming indication of how much Seireitei would have accepted and welcomed Souja's incumbency of the Clan in the future, but for Hirata, the future of his dynasty was the last concern on his mind. For him, the fire had consumed the last remnants of a child he had loved, and, as a father, the grief was almost beyond bearing. He had suffered sacrifices and faced death head on many times in the past, but this blow had been a personal one.

Many of the mourners had been solicitous in their greetings to him that morning. Guren had paused for a moment in particular to express his deep regret, and though the Kuchiki's words had rent fresh tears through Hirata's pain, he had not been able to rebuff consolation offered with such grave sincerity. Guren had been in the same position, and for the first time Hirata had felt a connection of sorts to his austere neighbour — but it was a connection he did not want.

Souja...

He raised his gaze up to the sky, watching the last drifting haze of grey dispersing in the air. When it cooled, what remained of the ashes would be scattered around the gardens of the Endou mausoleum, and, in keeping with family tradition, it would be done after dark. For now, though, he had time to think, and it was that time he feared most of all.

“Hirata..?”

The voice was soft-spoken and gentle, but at the sound of it the Endou Clan leader visibly started, swinging around to see Juushirou standing a short distance away. He was alone, his dark robes and equally muted *obi* in stark contrast to the white of his hair and the sallow colour of his skin, yet it was the expression in the older man’s eyes that made Hirata’s heart clench in his chest.

“Juushirou...” he managed, and the Thirteenth Division Captain frowned, crossing the grass quickly between them and standing at his side, gazing at the pyre with thoughtful, sober eyes. He did not speak at first, and Hirata found he was glad of his friend’s understanding. For a few minutes they just stood there in silence, each one deep in thought. Then, at length, Hirata broke the quiet.

“I suppose that, as an Endou, this is what I should expect.”

The words were soft, yet full of pain, and Juushirou’s dark brows knitted together as he slowly shook his head.

“No father should expect this,” he said gravely. “More, Hirata, no father should accept it. Souja was murdered, and that murderer must be brought to justice. You don’t have to stand and endure it. This isn’t a burden you ought to bear, and you needn’t bear it alone.”

“Juushirou?” Hirata cast his companion a wary glance, and Juushirou sighed, resting a hand on his friend’s thin shoulder.

“Today, as Clan Leader, you held your thoughts and feelings in check, but we still felt the Wind Hawk, screaming to get free,” he observed. “For the sake of Ai-dono and Kikyue and Sayuri, you held your calm. You were composed, as a Leader must be, but there’s nobody here now that you need to be strong for. Souja was your son and you loved him. Probably more than anyone else, if the truth be told. You can’t simply take it as a burden of leadership and pretend it doesn’t mean anything more. We know it does... and it will do you harm if you don’t acknowledge that.”

“As you said, I’m a Clan leader. A Captain, too,” Hirata bent to touch the charcoal, allowing the fine black dust to disintegrate in his hands. “If I fall apart, who else is there to hold together the pieces?”

Juushirou pressed his lips together thoughtfully for a moment, then he shook his head.

“Shunsui and I are here,” he said quietly. “Ryuu, Enishi and Kai, too. People who care for you, and people you can trust. We know the Endou, and we understand everything that you’ve faced better than

most of your squad do. This is another unforgivable blow caused by an unforgivable enemy, and that enemy must be found and taken down — but in the meantime, it's you that we're worried about the most. Clan aside, Division aside, you're a father and your son has been taken from you. You have to let yourself face that too, Hirata — else you'll never be able to move forward."

"Forward?" Hirata let out a humourless snort. "How can I move forward? My son and heir is dead. I don't have another, and even if I did, Souja isn't someone I can replace. He was my only son, the one I trusted with everything. And, worst of all, if he was right... if this connects to Eiraki... how much more will they take from me, Juushirou? How much more will I be punished for lacking resolve that time in the forest? How many times will I regret not slicing through Keitarou's throat when he lay there helpless before me... not vapourising him with my sword's spirit? How much higher is the cost going to be?"

His words caught in his throat, trembling with emotion, and to his frustration and dismay, his vision began to blur as his eyes filled with the tears that he had so far suppressed.

"I can't move forward," he whispered. "You don't understand, Juushirou, because you're not a father and you haven't lost a child. You can't understand... no matter how much you try. Souja was everything to me... and now..."

He broke off, too choked to continue, and Juushirou reached across to put a reassuring arm around the younger man's shoulders.

"I understand that a good friend of mine is in pain," he said gently. "That's as much as I need. Nobody expects you to settle with this right away. On the contrary, you need to take time and space to deal with it in whatever way you can, and I know that, as an Endou, hunting down Keitarou and finding out the truth is as much a part of that process as sending your son into the next world as you did today. Souja was a fine young man. I will miss him too, and I won't forgive those who took his life. But he would be the first to tell you not to push folk away and try to cope on your own. Even as a Captain, even as a Clan Leader, you have friends who surpass those levels and will be there for you regardless."

Hirata swallowed hard, but there was no holding back the tears now, and he closed his eyes, allowing them to trickle soundlessly down his cheeks as his grief for his son engulfed his heart. Juushirou did not comment, allowing his friend's emotions to flow, and Hirata stumbled forward, kneeling down beside the remains of the pyre and

resting his hands lightly against the charcoal remains of the wooden plinth.

“I thought that I had become immune to death, pain, things like that, when I raised and mastered Tsumi no Fuuhi,” he murmured, more to himself than to his companion. “I thought that, as an Endou, I’d become inured to it. But it’s not true, Juushirou. It’s not. Seeing my son, bloody and dying... will live with me, haunt my thoughts and dreams for a long time to come. The pain of it... I can’t even describe. It makes me sick to my stomach, angry yet unable to focus that anger... if I let these feelings free, I’m truly afraid of myself and what I might do. I want Keitarou, I want him dead... but even that won’t sate this hunger. I want my son back, Juushirou, and it’s the one thing that my sword, my *haori*, even my Clan Leadership can’t bring about!”

“No, Souja can’t be brought back,” Juushirou carefully knelt down at his friend’s side, patting him gently on the back, “and I won’t insult your feelings by making glib statements, but I will say this at least. Now, it hurts. Now it feels as though the pain won’t ever go. I’m not a father, but as a son, I’ve lost a parent — a parent to whom I never got to say a full goodbye. Father died whilst I was ill with fever, and I never... there were many things I didn’t get to say to him. Souja... at the very least... he came home. He came home, and you could say goodbye. Now, it means nothing — but as time passes, that will help. Souja... Souja knew he was going to die. It was in his eyes, in his words — he knew. Even knowing that, he exhausted the last of his strength to come back and speak to the person who mattered to him the most. He wanted your forgiveness for his actions, and to tell you what he had learned. Those things done, he was at peace. Because he was at peace, he let go and stopped fighting. He’s passed the baton over to you, and you will fight for his sake, I know that. What Souja went through in that last fight, only he knows — but what mattered the most to him was coming home to speak to his father.”

Hirata nodded slowly, reaching up to remove his glasses as he wiped away the still falling tears.

“I’m not the child I was when we first met, or became friends,” he whispered softly, “but even though that’s true, I feel... like... I’ve become him again. I’m afraid of myself, my family, what the path ahead might be. I’m unsettled and shaken... and once again, you’re here to put the pieces back together and reassure me. It can’t heal me yet, Juushirou, but I... I am grateful. I know you came here specifically for my sake, and that at least is a comfort. Before my wife and my daughters, I have to be strong. Before the Clan, I have to be resolute. But you’re right. Before you, before Shunsui, it’s different.”

“That’s what friends are for, and it’s why we’re here,” Juushirou said gravely. “We mourn Souja-kun too. We want justice for him too. We’re with you and we’ll do what we can to help.”

“Mm,” Hirata agreed, replacing his spectacles on his nose and getting unsteadily to his feet. “I should return to my family — they will be wondering where I am, and I didn’t mean to linger here as long as this. Before I do, though, what of the boy? The boy that came back with Souja — what of his condition — has he yet awoken?”

“Not yet, but Mitsuki and one of my officers are watching over him carefully,” Juushirou replied. “He’s not in a position yet to question, but when he is, we will talk to him.”

“I would like to speak to him myself,” Hirata reflected, but Juushirou shook his head.

“This Hirata is not someone I can unleash on an unsuspecting District boy whose only involvement in this is to have stumbled on your son in a bad situation,” he chided. “He was already cut down in error by Kikyue — I don’t want to terrify him even more and I don’t think you could handle that conversation without letting the Wind Hawk rail free. No, we will take care of the boy ourselves, but you have my word that anything we learn will be reported to you as soon as possible.”

“Souja wanted us to protect him,” Hirata objected. “I wouldn’t harm him.”

“No, I know, but you don’t realise how intimidating you can be when you’re angry or upset,” Juushirou said matter-of-factly. “This isn’t something you can deal with rationally yet, maybe not ever... no matter how much you pretend to your kinsfolk, you can’t fool Shunsui and you can’t fool me. Trust us where this one is concerned and leave the boy to me. I’ve taken on Souja’s promise for him, and I will make sure it is kept.”

Hirata was silent for a moment, then he nodded.

“I trust you,” he admitted. “Perhaps you’re right. Perhaps... you are right.”

He sighed, stretching his arms over his head, then,

“I will go to rejoin my kin now,” he added, “but thank you, Juushirou. My heart is a long way from being settled, but at least... I am not alone.”

“Of course not,” Juushirou agreed. “You’re never that, either in the

Gotei or outside of it. Keep that in mind, Hirata. If you need to talk, we are here and we will always find time to listen. All right?”

Hirata inclined his head slightly, a faint, tragic smile touching his lips.

“I will remember,” he responded, “but for now... I have to ensure that the final preparations for my son’s ashes to be scattered are put into place. To be busy helps take my mind from things, so I will see to this myself.”

He bowed again, then turned his back on the still smouldering pyre, making his way slowly towards the main manor house. He did not want to face his kin again, but Juushirou’s words had at least given him reassurance that he was not fighting this battle alone, and, as he stepped through the door, he heard Kikyue call his name.

“Otousama? Otousama, Hahaue is looking for you... she really looks quite unwell.”

“Kikyue-chan...” Hirata paused to gather himself, meeting his daughter’s gaze with as much composure as he could muster, then he nodded his head.

“I will come directly,” he said evenly. “I’m sorry for taking so long... please, lead the way.”

It had been a long day.

Urahara Nagesu, Head of the Urahara Clan and Captain of the Third Division stepped into his office with a heavy sigh, closing the door behind him with a click and running his hand gently over the sensor to activate the kidou lamp. Outside, the sun was setting, yet in his mind’s eye he could still see the vivid colours of the dancing flames as the Endou Clan had committed their son and heir to the ether. It had not escaped the Urahara Clan leader’s notice that Hirata had chosen to revert to Endou tradition, rather than following on with the Urahara custom of burial that they had adopted in more recent years, and something about this shift in trust had rankled against Nagesu’s nerves.

It’s not that I don’t understand Hirata-dono’s feelings.

He removed his spectacles, dropping them down onto his desk and moving to the window to fasten the shutters for the night.

I know that it isn’t me that he’s angry at, nor is it my family that he’s sending a message out to. Or at least, not a member of my family I have

any control over. I just felt it as a definite division between our two Clans that hasn't been there like this for a long time. Just when I thought relations had improved between us, too. I do dislike disquiet... I dislike murder and intrigue and this level of unrest.

He unlooped the shutter ties, pausing to glance out at the empty divisional courtyard before pulling the wooden slats closed and tying the cords in a firm knot.

Had I but killed you the last time we met, Kei-kun, none of this would have been allowed to happen. Had I had even one inch of Father's ruthlessness, I would have sliced you through — but I hesitated and you found a chance to escape. Where you are now, what you are planning... I don't know. I work hard, but my scientific knowledge cannot keep pace with yours and I know it all too well. It might have been my breakthrough that transformed purification of Hollow souls, but it was your science that grounded our Senkaimon technology, and your work that created the Hell Butterfly. All I can do is cling on to the scraps you leave me... it is an unenviable position when in the beginning you should have been the one here at my side.

He sank down behind his desk, burying his head in his hands.

How many more times are you going to shame my family, Keitarou? How many more times do you intend on punishing me and the rest of Seireitei for the death of your Father? Never mind that I loved Keitsunejiisama too. Never mind that other families lost loved ones then, and have never once spoken in resentment towards me or my wife or children. Only you carry this burden and you'll continue to carry it till you die, I'm sure of that. But if the rumours leaking out of Seventh Division are true, and Souja-dono was killed by a child of yours, it means your hatred can continue even beyond your lifespan. The problem grows ever graver... and somehow, I must find a way to pull it all together.

“Taichou?”

There was a soft knock at the door, and Nagesu glanced up, reaching for his spectacles as he raised his voice to call the visitor in. The door slid back to reveal his eldest son and Vice Captain, Shiketsu, and at the sight of the gleaming badge about the young man's upper arm, he bit his lip, once again reminded of the silent, white-shrouded corpse atop the funeral pyre.

I still have my son and heir, whilst Hirata-dono is cast into deepest mourning. My family are guilty in this, yet he feels the burden of it. The world is not a fair one, and it gets darker by the day.

“Otousama, are you all right?” At the sight of his father's

expression, Shiketsu dropped the squad formality, approaching the desk and pausing a short way away from it. "I knocked two or three times, but you didn't reply — I wondered if you hadn't come back yet."

"There was no reason to outstay my welcome at a place no Urahara is wanted or needed," Nagesu said quietly. "I am fine, Shiketsu — I'm sorry. It pains me, that's all, knowing that we can't escape this association. The Council haven't met yet, and nothing formal has been said, but there are rumours and they are enough. This is Keitarou's work, make no mistake."

Shiketsu's expression darkened, and he frowned.

"Souja-dono was investigating the disappearance of his officer," he remembered gravely. "Kotetsu Tenichi. He chaired our last meeting, and he discussed it in some detail. He was talking about increasing security in Inner Seireitei, stuff we could do as Vice Captains to try and prevent any further incidents taking place. It's difficult to comprehend what's happened to him... even though I was there and I saw him cremated just as surely as you did, I can't really believe it. He was not an ostentatious officer, but he made his mark. I think... it will be some time before I forget him."

"He was very young for the duties ascribed him," Nagesu murmured. "But youth isn't always a reason to prevent a promising shinigami's promotion. Even if he was the Endou heir, I believe that many people thought well of him. I had begun to hope... perhaps for a future in which there would be a truly peaceful Seventh District. Hirata-dono has made such forward steps, but he is still... there are still moments when the hunter raises its head. Souja-dono, by all accounts, was different."

"Do you think Endou-taichou will do something rash?" Shiketsu looked anxious. "He seemed very composed at the funeral earlier, but then, I could sense it from him. The Hawk everyone talks about, but nobody wants to see... and I wondered."

"Let us all hope not," Nagesu pulled an expressive face. "Between you and I, Shiketsu, that's the last thing the Council needs. We don't know where Keitarou is, or what his *modus operandi* is. We don't know if he wants to lure people to him or whether he has a plan to kill other Clan individuals. Seireitei has lost a Vice Captain. It can ill afford to lose a Captain so soon after, particularly in the same division. There are no obvious contenders to succeed him, now. Misashi-sama might take control of the family, but the Division requires a shinigami, and Kikyue-hime is far, far too inexperienced to

take command.”

“And Seventh must be an Endou,” Shiketsu murmured, sinking down on a cushion before his father’s desk and letting out a sigh. Nagesu nodded.

“There’s no other choice for it, not as we are at the moment,” he agreed. “I’m sorry, this really isn’t a weight I should place on your shoulders after such a heavy day. I just wish it hadn’t happened when I was Council incumbent — I can’t help but wonder if it occurred on my watch on purpose. Maybe it’s not just an attack on the Endou, but one on the Urahara as well.”

“We’ve expected an attack from Keitarou for a long time,” Shiketsu pointed out. “He’s never targeted the Urahara head on, though, even if he has attacked elsewhere.”

“The last time we met, he said he didn’t hate me — even though he wanted to,” Nagesu remembered. “Perhaps that’s why — but then I said many things then about Keitsune-jisama, things which upset him. We are even more strangers now than we were, and I decided once and for all after the death of Guren-sama’s son that I would have no further leniency where he was concerned. If he shows himself to me, Shiketsu, I will... no, I must kill him. There is no other recourse for the Head of the Urahara to take.”

His eyes narrowed.

“And if he should kill me, then the duty will fall to you,” he added matter-of-factly. “I am not so arrogant to believe I can defeat a genius with a blade he has already seen.”

“Keitarou hasn’t seen your sword since you attained Bankai, sir,” Shiketsu pointed out. “And he can’t fight with swords, so they say. I think you would kill him...”

He sighed, shrugging his shoulders.

“...but I will take the message to heart and be ready, should the duty fall to me,” he added reluctantly. “Although the Urahara-ke can ill afford to lose its Captain at the present time. I see you do so many things, Father, and I’ve been to the Council with you more than once — but I don’t think I’m remotely ready to step into your shoes. If Endou-taichou doesn’t act rashly... promise me you don’t intend to do anything like it, either?”

“I’m not rash, not usually,” Nagesu admitted. “Even if I wanted to, I imagine I wouldn’t manage. No, Shiketsu, you can rest assured that I will plod along methodically in my usual way, and make what I can of

the circumstances as they present themselves to me. A little more impulsiveness wouldn't go amiss — but I'm a scientist and I'm a planner, and there's not much I can do about either one. It is difficult to know how to move when so much information is missing — even if that lapse leads to an unforgivable loss of life.”

“Father...” Shiketsu frowned, his brow drawing together thoughtfully, then, “Are you thinking of Shougo-dono?”

“Shou...?” Nagesu started, staring at his son as if he'd grown another head. “What do you mean, Shougo-dono? Why would I... what brought that subject out all of a sudden?”

“I don't know,” Shiketsu admitted. “Maybe just the funeral... everything that happened. It made me remember... and I wondered if you'd thought about it too. It was... the last time the Urahara were so heavily involved in something, and...”

“Shougo-dono died in the line of duty,” Nagesu sighed, removing his glasses once more and rubbing his temples as he felt the starts of a migraine digging into his skull. “His death was unfortunate, and could probably have been prevented with better data provision, but even so I consider it far different from the circumstances in this particular case. Yes, it was a messy affair, and no, I hadn't forgotten... but to align Souja-dono's death with Shougo-dono...”

“Maybe there's nothing similar about them at all,” Shiketsu sighed, shrugging his shoulders. “True enough that Shougo-dono was buried with all honour and respect, and Souja-dono's corpse was destroyed in the most savage of Endou heathen rituals when they cast it up into smoke like that. Souja-dono was murdered, whereas Shougo-dono was taken down by Hollows and I wasn't trying to say they were connected. I didn't mean the ceremonies were the same, either, or even that their deaths were all that similar. It's just... Shougo-dono died in the Rukon, that's all. And Souja-dono was attacked there, too — so I suppose it made me remember.”

“I see,” Nagesu stroked his chin pensively. “I suppose in that light, I understand. The Rukon isn't an area we enter very often. True, the Spiritless Zone project has changed the level of shinigami involvement over the divide, but that has fallen almost entirely to the Fourth Division and the majority of the work has been theirs. Now, since they pulled out, the Zone is devoid of supervision and Rukongai is once more something of a black hole. Perhaps it was a bad idea, withdrawing Eleventh and Twelfth from their duties outside of Seireitei — but then the Spiritless Zone was intended to try and counter that change, so that sacrifices like Shougo-dono's would not

be repeated.”

“Maybe Keitarou killed the healers in the Rukon to get us out. Or rather, to get Unohana-taichou’s people out,” Shiketsu said darkly, and Nagesu nodded his head.

“The possibility exists, but the evidence as yet is not clear,” he said tiredly. “The Council meeting may reveal those details... I have already received word from Hirata-dono requesting that I summon Ukitake to give evidence in his absence, as he was present for Souja-dono’s last testimony. Ukitake is a level-headed Captain and not given to embellishment, so I greatly hope he will be able to provide us with firm data we can work with. At present we have nothing — just a grieving family and a cloud of ash and smoke drifting over the Seventh.”

He eyed his son keenly.

“I would rather you didn’t mention Shougo-dono amongst your peers, or even, outside of this office,” he added quietly. “To you, he was a name and a distant kinsman, but to others he was more than that. You understand that it would hurt to have those wounds reopened after so many years.”

“I know,” Shiketsu agreed. “I wasn’t going to bring the topic up. The Council decided back when it happened that it was better left alone, because of the number of people it impacted on. Putting Eleventh and Twelfth Divisions back into working order was more important — as well as addressing the risks the Rukon provided and the problems with tainted souls getting out of control. I wasn’t going to start gossiping about old kinsfolk who fell in battle more than twenty years ago now... don’t worry.”

“Good,” Nagesu looked relieved, but his expression was still clouded. “Then I’ll ask you to make sure all tonight’s patrols have dispatched with their usual efficiency and that nobody has decided to take advantage of the unusual timetable to slip away from their assigned posts. I would rather not appear before them till morning — but I can still sense Yunosuke’s roaming reiatsu and he should be able to help if you need an extra hand.”

“Yes, sir,” Shiketsu got slowly to his feet, and Nagesu could sense the reluctance in his son’s aura, yet the young man did not disobey the command. Instead he bowed his head in respect, then withdrew from the chamber, closing the door softly behind him with a click.

I’m sorry, Shiketsu. You wanted reassurance, and I gave you none.

Nagesu grimaced, resting his chin in his hands.

And I lied to you, also. I had thought of Shougo and the others, when I saw Souja-dono's wretched body lying there, silent as the grave. I remembered just as you did, a time when it was an Urahara whose body had been cleaned and dressed by the Fourth Division, and when the Captains assembled in mass mourning for officers felled in the line of duty.

His brow creased slightly at the recollection.

I'm sure we're not the only ones who remembered them today, even as we said goodbye to Souja-dono. Mareiko, Minaichi... I wonder what you were feeling, seeing that young boy's body consumed by flames. I hope it didn't rake through old memories for you too harshly... but even if it did, raising the subject would be a mistake. There is no time for grieving, or remembering past losses. We can only move forward. Keitarou already has a lead on us — we must catch up to him before we are forced to attend another memorial like the one today.

Author's Note

曼珠沙華 Manjushage (the red spider lily) is a flower with historic associations with death and funerary rites in Japanese (and I think, Chinese) culture. I do not know of any tradition of it waking the dead, that was my artistic licence for the benefit of the Endou. As for the Iris, or 花菖蒲 *Hana-shoubu* (also known simply as *shoubu*), this flower is the emblem of the Seventh Division as chosen by Kubo. The Japanese word *shoubu*, as Nakata explained and as I've referenced before, can also mean a battle or a competition, only written with different characters. Therefore Hirata is issuing a challenge as much as he is venerating his Clan and honouring his son with his gesture. The *hana-shoubu* is usually considered to be a purple flower, but it also exists in a deep reddish colour — which is also a colour belonging to the Endou Clan.

Also, mulberry-thread woven cloth is white, not mulberry. I don't know why, but yay for Classical Japanese class for teaching me this random and fairly useless piece of information.

...You people have no idea how hard this chapter was to write :(.

To end this on a slightly less sober note, I was flicking back through the Meifu chapters earlier this week (a necessity for continuity on a certain zanpakutou, because my brain is small and highly leaky, LOL) and rereading some of the reviews and I realised how much some of the comments made then have helped me (I think) improve my writing to now. There are a lot of things in 2nd Manuscript that make

me go *whoops* now, in terms of style and redundant words... yet everyone was so supportive then and I'd like to think that Sukuse is a better written story for that fact. Thank you, minna, for helping my writing evolve. I know it has much, much further to go, but it's nice to feel I'm going in the right direction :). I think it merits cake... especially after a chapter like this one, which two, three years ago I would probably not have managed to write at all

30. Stray Fox

Chapter Twenty Nine: Stray Fox

“This Council session will now come to order.”

In the high ceilinged, ornate central chamber of the new Council complex, the low murmurs of the assembled representatives faded into silence, all gazes turning towards the most elevated of the throne-like seats which, with the opening of each year passed from one Clan’s responsibility to the next. Today, Juushirou reflected, it was Nagesu, the fair-haired, bespectacled Head of the Urahara Clan who took the floor, eyes full of consternation behind glittering lenses and his straw-like hair already escaping from the rigid black clasp with which he had attempted to tame it. Tall and lean, Nagesu possessed a far more conservative nature than his immediate predecessor, and, under his cautious, neutral guidance, the Urahara Clan had managed to bury many of its more scandalous skeletons, establishing themselves once more as the prime Noble family for scientific research within Seireitei. Nagesu himself had learned both scientific and shinigami skills from an early age, and was renowned throughout Soul Society as a man of significant intelligence. He was not arrogant, however, and on many occasions he had pointed out that his skills were often the result more of hard work than any spark of genius nestling inside of him. Geniuses, he would say with a dark smile, only happened at most once in each generation, and in his, that talent had fallen somewhere else.

The name was as yet unspoken, but it hung heavily over the entire gathering nonetheless.

Aizen Keitarou, formerly Urahara Keitarou, Nagesu’s blood cousin, exiled scientist, and one of the most ruthlessly intelligent individuals to come out of the Urahara Clan in several centuries.

Unfortunately for Nagesu, who had spent so much of his life trying to present the peaceful, rational face of the Urahara, Keitarou had always chosen to apply his genius to the dark side, and, as the pale-eyed, fair haired Clan Leader prepared to open the meeting, more than one of the delegates present felt certain that this latest event weighed once more on Nagesu’s considerably active conscience.

From his position at the side of the room, Juushirou watched Nagesu’s formal opening of the meeting, his eyes narrowing as he absorbed the tension in the older man’s thin frame. It was not usual

for a Captain who was not an official Council representative to be summoned to a meeting of this nature, much less for Juushirou himself to attend, as, despite his blood connection to the Kuchiki Clan, he had clung proudly to his status as ‘District’ and as such, had no real business interfering in one of Soul Society’s more ancient expressions of democratic rule. Still, though, this was not an ordinary meeting. The Endou Clan’s seat remained empty, draped with a black cloth to indicate that the family were in mourning for Souja’s untimely death. Glancing at it now, Juushirou felt a tug on his own heart, remembering the many times he had observed Souja as a youngster, his skills and his personality becoming more and more vivid with each passing year. He would have made a good Clan leader, one day, he realised, a sudden swell of anger welling up inside of him at the unfairness of the situation.

He was too young. Too young to die. Too young for any of these things to happen. If it was Keitarou or if it wasn’t, we need to get to the bottom of it. We need to get them, and quickly — not just for the sake of any other potential victims, but for the sake of the Endou. Misashi-sama and Hirata worked so hard to bring their family forward and reestablish themselves as a respectable Clan worthy of recognition. They’ve had more than their share of tragedy.

“Ukitake-taichou, please, step forward,” Nagesu’s voice penetrated Juushirou’s fierce inner thoughts, damping his ire like a wave over flame, and he got to his feet, bowing hastily towards the Clan Leader before obediently coming forward to stand where the other man had indicated. In a Captain’s meeting, Nagesu was Juushirou’s equal — but here, in a grander setting, the District Captain was vividly aware of the gulf of status that really lay between them.

Still, nobody raised even the faintest murmur as he moved between the seats, inclining his head respectfully to each of the present Clan leaders as he passed. There was Yuuichi, son of Hashihiko and head of the Yamamoto since his father’s death three years previously. He was stubborn and strong-willed, but skilled with a sword and known for his decisive judgement. Next was Midori, the Princess of the Shihouin, whose lithe, graceful figure had changed not at all since the first time Juushirou had met her almost thirty years before. Nagesu’s seat was empty, on account of his position as Leader of the Council, then came Retsu, robed for once in the colours of the Unohana and with a ceremonial *haori* across her shoulders rather than the more utilitarian white robe she sported when on duty. Her eyes were sad and her aura was grave, and Juushirou knew that no matter how impossible the asking, she regretted not being able to save Souja’s life.

On the other side was Sora's mother, the redoubtable Kyouki, her green eyes as vivid as ever and not a single streak of grey in her wild dark hair. To her side sat Guren, perfectly turned out in the colours of the Kuchiki, the white scarf about his throat and the folds of the *kenseiken* against his ebony mane singling him out as the Head of the Kuchiki. He sat perfectly still, poised and apparently calm, the picture of Kuchiki serenity, but Juushirou could see the dark storm clouds in the other's austere gaze, and he frowned, remembering the murder of Guren's own sole son Ribari. That had been Keitarou's handiwork, too, and Juushirou's gut lurched at the thought that history may have easily repeated itself to his close friend's cost.

The final member of the gathering was Tokutarou, Shunsui's older brother and head of the Kyouraku. Though once the staunchest enemy of the Endou across the whole of Seireitei, Tokutarou's Clan had, in more recent years forged significant trade and diplomatic relations with their neighbours, and Juushirou knew Tokutarou well enough to recognise that he considered this murder almost as seriously as he would the assassination of one of his own kin. Tokutarou had always taken a keen interest in Shunsui's friends, supporting and acknowledging Hirata even when shunning the rest of the Endou, and Juushirou knew that Tokutarou's message of support and condolence to District Seven had been one of the first and the most sincere to arrive.

It was a sombre, tense gathering, and it gave Juushirou no comfort at all to dwell on the thoughts in the minds of these elevated Clan individuals.

"I apologise for summoning you here in such peremptory fashion, Ukitake," Nagesu spoke softly, his words grave. "I believe you understand the reasons for my doing so."

"Yes, sir," Juushirou agreed sombrely. "Hirata sent a message to Thirteenth Division by way of Nakata asking that I report on his behalf at this meeting. When your message reached me, Nagesu-sama, I assumed you had received similar communication. Hirata felt that, with my neutrality, I was the best choice, and I consulted with S... with Kyouraku-taichou before I came, to ensure I had a full and complete report to give. I had therefore been prepared to come today — and will be of as much help as I can in whatever the Council wishes to know."

"It's beyond belief," Midori's voice, shaking and full of anger, cut through the atmosphere before Nagesu could respond in his usual, circumspect way. "A young man like Souja-dono cut down in such a

savage way. Juushirou, you were there, weren't you, when the lad spoke to Hirata? You heard what his last words were? There are unhealthy rumours circulating around the barracks and the common areas and I'd like to know the truth of it from someone who heard it first hand."

"Rumours, Midori-sama?" Juushirou glanced at her, and Midori nodded impatiently.

"Keitarou," she said emphatically. "Aizen Keitarou."

At the mention of the name, Nagesu visibly flinched, and Midori shot her neighbour an apologetic look.

"I'm sorry, Nagesu-dono. I don't mean to dig up old wounds, but we need to know and if young folk like Souja are being killed, we don't have time for individual sensitivities."

"You may ignore my feelings on this matter as you see fit, Midori-dono," Nagesu said wearily. "My Clan have long since disowned any connection to Keitarou, and with good cause. My personal thoughts are as one betrayed many times over, not as one who has sympathy for Keitarou's actions. Speak as you see fit. I too have heard the rumours and will not pretend otherwise. If there is proof of his involvement, I will hear it with the rest of you. He is no longer a man that I consider family."

"Proof..." As the man's pale eyes turned towards him, Juushirou's brows knitted together. "I don't know whether there's that. Not yet, at least."

"But Souja-dono did say Keitarou's name?" Guren interjected, and Juushirou nodded.

"He told Hirata and I that he'd received a report from one of the Endou agents that Keitarou was active, and he went to find out if there was truth in the story," he said simply. "He was... not very coherent at the end, Guren-sama. He had lost a good deal of blood, which I'm sure Unohana-taichou can attest to with more accuracy than I can. Even so, though, he was adamant that he'd seen a sword of some kind with the name Aizen on it, and also that the person who had attacked him had been a young girl who resembled Hirata's sister, Eiraki."

"The girl who killed my son," Guren muttered, and Juushirou inwardly flinched, berating himself for speaking the woman's name so easily. Slowly, he nodded.

"Yes, sir. I'm sorry. I did not mean..."

“You have nothing for which to apologise, Ukitake. On the contrary, if Nagesu-dono can allow us to run roughshod over his feelings, I must allow the same where mine are concerned,” Guren rubbed his temples. “My burden is not so heavy as his — my son was the victim, not the mastermind.”

“As you say,” Nagesu said bitterly, “though I believe there is scarce one individual in Seireitei’s Clan heirarchy who can claim to remain untainted by Keitarou’s actions in some way or another.”

“In the Districts too,” Tokutarou put in frankly. “Though Misashi-dono and Hirata-dono and I have worked hard to repatriate all the people displaced from Seventh District during Shouichi-sama’s incumbency, time and time again we’ve come up against similar stories of individuals being slaughtered to feed illegal experiments — even of families forced or bullied into betraying or selling loved ones in order to promulgate some kind of underground research. There’s no direct thread tying Keitarou to these deaths — but plenty of circumstantial evidence to suggest that the common folk of Seventh District paid a heavy price.”

“I may have witnessed one such individual first hand,” Juushirou admitted. “In the time when Keitarou held me hostage in the underground cell in District Seven, there was a person there who had been more than half-turned to Hollow. I’m sure, thinking back, that this person was one of Keitarou’s experiments.”

“Almost certainly,” Midori sighed heavily. “But he’s been quiet for so long, and now, out of the blue, to strike down Souja-dono?”

“It isn’t as though we can say it’s the first time he’s committed this kind of atrocity, though,” Guren said bitterly. “First Shouichi-dono, then my own son and heir, now the young Endou boy. It strikes me that this is a continuation of that wretched man’s war against the Seireitei Clans — and no matter how much blood is spilt or tears are shed, it’s never enough to sate his appetite.”

“You think he might be planning on attacking other Clan descendants?” Yuuichi looked troubled, and Guren shrugged.

“The evidence of his contempt for Clan speaks for itself,” he said bleakly. “Aside from those cases I have already cited, there have been other Clan individuals who have died at his hand. Retsu-dono, I believe you lost a kinswoman some several years ago on account of her being simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. Keitarou also tried his best to destroy my brother — it is only by the grace of the Gods that Seiren’s will to live is stronger than his constitution and has

allowed him to still remain alive — though the consequences of that experience remain with him and he is not as physically active as he once was. And, of course, we must not forget the manner in which Ukitake here was used to set upon your brother, Tokutarou-dono — I think it matters not to Keitarou who he attacks, so long as in the end Clan blood is spilled.”

“We are speculating about things for which we have no proof,” Tokutarou said frankly, seeing Juushirou’s clear flinch at the memory of a battle in the snow during his second year at the Academy. “As you say, Keitarou has killed many, and has attacked far more. I haven’t forgotten how those events you mention affected Shunsui, but I also recall that Keitarou was attacked by Kinnya-sama’s blade and — though I’m no expert on *zanpakutou*, I believe it to be quite an exceptional weapon.”

“It is so,” Guren confirmed, a faint flicker of Clan pride surfacing to damp his anger as he inclined his head in Tokutarou’s direction. “Of the great elemental swords, it is, like my late Father’s, one of those powerful spirits that come around once in a few generations.”

“However, we did not find a corpse,” Midori reminded him acidly, “and I believe Kinnya-sama himself, when called to report before this body regarding what occurred, expressed some doubt that his attack had killed Keitarou.”

“Hirata saw him after he had fallen,” Juushirou agreed regretfully. “Spoke to him, too, but he and Eiraki-hime both escaped into a *Senkaimon*. Hirata was the last person to see Keitarou or Eiraki-hime — and he told me himself that he’d failed to stop them on account of his sister’s interruption. At the time we told him that it was no bad thing that he had not been able to follow through on a ruthless Endou impulse, but...”

“If that failure has now precipitated this, it was a costly error from which I imagine he will take significant time to recover,” Guren said gravely, and despite the criticism his words suggested, Juushirou heard only sympathetic sadness in the Kuchiki Clansman’s tones. “More than any here present, I understand Hirata-dono’s current state of mind... and regret that neither my kinsman nor I myself were able to avenge Ribari when we had the opportunity.”

“Keitarou is not a foolish man,” Kyouki observed. “Therein lies our problem. We are dealing with a chaotic genius — a mastermind of mischief to the most extreme degree possible.”

“I fear Kyouki-sama is correct,” Nagesu rubbed his temples, his

expression pained. “I believe he is alive, and that he has somehow recovered from the injuries dealt him by Kinnya-sama’s blade. What state of physical body he is in at present I do not know — but I imagine that his mind is intact, and, if he has Eiraki-hime and also, others to support him... that is probably enough to wreak havoc on us once again.”

“That’s true. We’ve seen from earlier examples that his methodology isn’t haphazard and there must be a master-plan behind it,” Tokutarou acknowledged. “If this is his work, we need to establish the pattern and act on it before he can create more trouble... ideally by finding and bringing into custody the man himself.”

“More than that,” Midori shook her head. “I apologise for saying this, Nagesu-sama, but Keitarou has proven himself an enemy who will only stop when he no longer has life — and the Council should focus on eradicating him rather than bringing him into custody.”

“Well, we have to find him first,” Tokutarou pointed out.

He sent Juushirou a glance.

“At the very least, the Council summoned Juushirou here to hear about Souja-dono’s last words, did it not? We should begin by analysing those... and also, I want to ask about the young lad that was brought back with him. I understand Kikyue-dono gave him some nasty scars — I trust that he will live?”

“He is doing well, but still hasn’t regained consciousness,” Juushirou nodded. “Mi... Edogawa-san has been looking after him, with support from some of my people, and she’s assured me his injuries aren’t life threatening. What his involvement in this is still unknown, but I can say with confidence that he was not involved in the assault on Souja-dono in any respect.”

“Your evidence for this?” Midori asked softly, and Juushirou frowned.

“Firstly, he was unarmed at the scene,” he said frankly. “Secondly, Souja-dono pretty much begged Hirata and I to make sure he was taken care of. He said to us, and to Kikyue-dono that the boy — whose name is, I believe, Koku — had come to help him and that he’d promised to help the lad in return. I took that promise on for him and have done what I can — Souja-dono was adamant, and so for me that seals Koku’s innocence.”

“I suppose in this regard Souja-dono can be considered the most reliable witness,” Tokutarou pursed his lips, “and I think we can trust

Juushirou's testimony as being unembellished."

"There is also the matter of the young girl which Souja-dono claimed to have assaulted him," Retsu put in quietly at this juncture. "I realise that it is a highly unlikely probability, but something in his description reminded me of reports I received from my Third Seated officer about the individual who attacked them in the Spiritless Zone. When I heard that Souja-dono had been attacked by a girl wielding a sword, I did some specific tests on his body during autopsy. There were two significant findings — if I might report these to the Council as a whole?"

"Please, go ahead," Nagesu nodded in her direction, and Retsu bowed her thanks, turning to face the rest of the room.

"Firstly, there was no evidence of foreign reiatsu on Souja-dono's body," she said evenly, "with the exception of that belonging to the young stray currently in Thirteenth Division's care. Following careful examination of Souja-dono's injuries, however, I must concur with Ukitake-taichou's account. This Koku's reiatsu is only present in areas of Souja-dono's body which would suggest that at some point he provided support — most likely after Souja-dono was already hurt. Souja-dono's body was also crudely bound with a peasant's *obi*, suggesting that someone attempted to stem the flow of his blood by using it as a tourniquet — although whoever did so clearly had no medical knowledge, and was unsuccessful in his attempts. This correlates with the idea that the District boy helped Souja-dono after he was attacked, but played no part in the encounter himself. I have heard from Mitsuki-san since that the youth was missing his *obi* when he was brought to her attention, and as she cleaned and treated his wounds on arrival at Thirteenth, I believe her account accurate."

"But there was no other foreign reiatsu on the body?" Nagesu asked sharply, and Retsu shook her head.

"Secondly, I examined the marks left by the sword," she continued pensively. "It was not easy to be entirely conclusive, due to the extreme brutality inflicted and the damage sustained by Souja-dono during the attack. However, in some of the more clear cuts, it seemed as though the same kind of weapon was utilised in the slaying of Souja-dono as in the murder of my subordinates."

"In short, one assassin, two crime scenes?" Midori's eyes became glittering slits of gold. "And Souja-dono identified this assassin as looking like Eiraki-hime — so far it doesn't look good for Keitarou's camp, does it?"

“We have no conclusive evidence, particularly to explain motive or opportunity in either one of these crimes,” Retsu cautioned, “but yes, I would agree. My first impulse was that these were carried out by the same individual — a young woman with no reiatsu but an extremely powerful killing instinct which is not easily abated.”

“Strong enough to kill a Vice Captain of Clan birth?” Guren looked alarmed, and Juushirou wondered if his mind had flown to Shirogane. Retsu sighed, shrugging her shoulders.

“I cannot explain the evidence, I can only describe my findings and what logically makes sense,” she said apologetically. “I do not understand, either, Guren-sama, but still, that is my conclusion. I believe Souja-dono called her “*Sakaki*” — Ukitake-taichou, is that correct?”

“If memory serves, yes,” Juushirou agreed pensively. “But since we have no way to verify it or even pursue it, I don’t suppose any of us have spent much time dwelling on her name.”

“Indeed,” Retsu looked grave. “I imagine there are many more pressing matters to be settled first, but it is well to have that recorded, just in case it becomes useful at a later date.”

“How long before the boy awakes, Juushirou?” Kyouki cast Juushirou a glance, and Juushirou frowned.

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “I have left it to Mi... Edogawa-san’s discretion to report to me when he shows signs of waking. I understand the importance of his testimony, but it can’t be rushed. He is the only person who may shed any light on what happened to Souja and therefore I think it’s important that he is not mishandled. Demanding information from him might be counter-productive. When we found them, Kikyue-dono unleashed her sword on him, and the subordinate I charged with taking Koku back to Inner Seireitei reported to me that he seemed afraid of her uniform when she went to help him.”

“We may not have time to kid-glove him,” Yuuichi pointed out. “One Vice Captain and eight healers lie dead. How many more will we lose before we get to the bottom of this?”

“Two others, too,” Kyouki said grimly. “Two men from Tenth Division died in strange circumstances not far from the Inner Seireitei perimeter. It appeared to be a Hollow kill. Normally I’d leave such matters to Hakubei and Tenth to handle, but it bothered me, since according to the Inner Seireitei gate records, one of the dead men entered Seireitei, purporting to come to find healers to help his

comrade. No visit was made to the Fourth Division, though, when I checked with Eriko-dono...?”

She paused, glancing at Retsu, who shook her head.

“Eriko-san asked me about it, and I checked personally. No such log was made with our people,” she agreed gravely. “This shinigami did not come to us for any reason. More, I must disagree with you on one point, Kyouki-sama, if you will allow it. One dead officer from Tenth Division died from Hollow-inflicted wounds. The other was covered in Kidou burns — to a horrific degree. In fact, if not for his *zanpakutou* at the scene, we would not have been able to make an identification.”

“Kidou... burns?” Nagesu’s eyes widened, and Retsu nodded.

“Crude Kidou, but yes, I believe so,” she agreed. “I would say... a spell went out of control and exploded, engulfing him in it. I do not think he fired the spell himself, however. I rather believe... he was already dead. That may have been the Hollow, also, but the death was made to look like something else — or an attempt was made to cover his identity so that it could be used for some further purpose. I do not know which, but he was not robed in *shihakushou* at the scene.”

“Yes, yes. I’d forgotten that,” Kyouki nodded eagerly. “The gate guard reported a man wearing dishevelled *shihakushou* entering the gate and giving the dead officer’s name... but described a man who did not fit the profile of Hakubei’s lad.”

“Do we have a clear description?” Juushirou asked softly, and Kyouki frowned, eying him keenly.

“You have a suspect?” she enquired, and Juushirou frowned.

“Well, there is an individual in Second Division custody, so perhaps,” he agreed cautiously, meeting Midori’s gaze for a moment. Midori nodded.

“That individual was apprehended the morning Souja-dono was brought back injured. He may have been acting as a distraction — but for now, we’d rather investigate that ourselves and see what we come up with. No useful information has come from him, yet,” she said crisply. “I’ve left it to my brother — when there’s something to report here, I’ll make sure it’s known.”

“At the very least, though, does your suspect have dark hair, Midori?” Kyouki asked, and Midori nodded.

“He does,” she said cautiously, “but so do many people.”

“Blue eyes?”

“Blue?” Juushirou’s gaze became one of disbelief, and the assembled Clan leaders turned to state at his sudden outburst.

“Juushirou?” Tokutarou looked concerned, and Juushirou reddened, bowing his head hastily in apology.

“I’m sorry, that was out of place of me and impolite. Please, forgive me,” he said slowly. “I just... I was involved in the snaring of Midori-sama’s prisoner, and he does not have blue eyes. However, a young man who helped Mitsuki across the Spiritless Zone with Aomori-san apparently did.”

“You think this to be a connection?” Guren looked sceptical. “There are just as many individuals in Seireitei with blue eyes. Probably even more in the Districts, if the truth be told. I have heard Mitsuki’s story, too, but I cannot see a link between that and this. The young man in the Spiritless Zone has no way of getting here without help from someone like the man we seek. However, if he were an agent of Keitarou’s, he would not have helped Mitsuki nor risked being captured by taking the time to carry Aomori across a large stretch of territory. Yes, perhaps he had spirit power, but he clearly was contaminated and had no idea what to do with it.”

“Guren-sama is probably right,” Nagesu murmured. “There is very little likelihood that someone from the Spiritless Zone could cross into Seireitei without access to secure codes for *Senkaimon* which have not been disturbed by any but those in authority either before or since the tragedy that occurred over there.”

Juushirou’s eyes narrowed as he remembered Kai’s words.

Not between the Spiritless Zone and Inner Seireitei, perhaps, but if you took a different route...?

He opened his mouth to speak, but Nagesu held up his hand to indicate for him to stop.

“We cannot pursue something with so little evidence, Ukitake,” he said simply. “Guren-sama is correct. This young man with blue eyes rescued Edogawa-hime and allowed her to treat and return Aomori to the main camp, as well as summoning help from Seireitei which undoubtedly resulted in the saving of three lives. There is no scientific evidence to show a way of crossing from Rukongai to Seireitei without being detected. We are grateful for his interference in the case of Edogawa-hime and Aomori Seri, but he is not a person of interest to the Council now the name of Aizen Keitarou has come to light.”

“But...” Juushirou began, and Midori frowned.

“Juushirou, you know who we believe the man in Kai’s custody to be, don’t you?” she said quietly, and slowly Juushirou nodded. “We suspect that he is involved in the abduction of Kotetsu Tenichi, and perhaps others as well. We suspect he might have an alliance with Aizen Keitarou, though right now we can prove neither one. Most importantly, though, *his* ability to activate a *Senkaimonis* explained by his previous connections to the Onmitsukidou. However, those rules apply to a very limited number of individuals, and it is extremely rare for an Onmitsukidou to go rogue, let alone go rogue and manage to survive. I am very sure that there are no other individuals who fit that description anywhere in Seireitei at the current time. Therefore, you should take note of Nagesu-sama’s opinion. Scientifically, it is not possible. Therefore it is not possible. We should be looking for Keitarou, not trying to tie the guilt of ending lives to someone who ended up saving people we were not there to save.”

There was a particularly pointed edge to her last words, and Juushirou bit his lip, half-wondering what Kai might have said to his perceptive sister about Mitsuki and their close relationship. He said nothing, however, and, taking his silence as acquiescence, Nagesu turned his attention back to the matter at hand.

“So, if the young boy who currently sleeps in Thirteenth is not yet ready for our questions, we must return to Souja-dono,” he mused. “Ukitake, did you mention a sword bearing the name of Aizen?”

“Souja-dono said something about finding a sword,” Juushirou sighed, but nodded his head as he realised the angle of conversation had irreversibly shifted in a new direction. “Additionally, he made it very clear that, whilst he thought the girl who had attacked him was the daughter of Eiraki-hime, he felt certain that Keitarou and Eiraki-hime also had a son. He said the name Kohaku... but not much more. He was not very coherent in describing either thing. He said that we... or he... or someone should find this sword, but whether it connects to this Kohaku person is unclear. I got the impression that the name was somehow engraved on the sword — but I’m certain that Souja didn’t mean the sword was called Kohaku.”

“But why would you write such a giveaway set of characters on a weapon of any kind?” Yuuichi demanded. “If you’re a madman in hiding, do you go to the trouble of neatly labelling all your toys for public viewing?”

“There must be a reason. Keitarou doesn’t do anything for no reason,” Nagesu said wearily. “That is all you can tell us, Ukitake?”

“More would be speculative,” Juushirou was apologetic. “That was

all Souja-dono really said, sir. As I mentioned, he was incoherent due to loss of blood.”

“Perhaps the name was on the sword to give the impression of Aizen’s presence in a place where it was not,” Guren rubbed his chin. “He has acted in that way before, using decoys and lures to make us look stupid. What if this Aizen sword was another such ruse — a distraction away from the genuine article?”

“Such as the son, Kohaku?” Kyouki asked, and Guren nodded.

“It seems possible,” he agreed. “If we assume that Keitarou is no longer as physically sound as he was, thanks to my uncle’s attack, he must rely on this son a great deal. Surely, then, it makes sense to set up a situation in which everything points to him, whilst in fact concealing him in an entirely different location. Then if, as Souja-dono apparently did, someone stumbles onto the base, he returns none the wiser.”

“That does sound like something Keitarou would do,” Tokutarou admitted. “But in the same vein, Guren-sama, it might mean that Kohaku doesn’t actually exist. Maybe there is just the illusion of his existing... the sword... and so on. Perhaps the only living child is the girl.”

“I must beg to differ on this matter,” Retsu put in softly. “Madeki-kun’s report to me clearly described a young girl in her late teens. I am quite sure that the likelihood of her being the killer of Souja-dono is quite high. Yet Eiraki-hime was already with child, I believe, when she and Keitarou-dono first fled from this place. That implies that there is an older child — which seems likely to be the son, Kohaku.”

“Either way, the elder son is someone we know nothing about, yet, and that’s a gap we need to fill in,” Midori remarked. “Whether he exists or not, we need to find out, and more, what his role in all this is. I can’t imagine that kid sis does all the blood and guts work whilst oniichan sits on the sidelines and waits it out.”

“Maybe Keitarou is incapacitated. Perhaps the mastermind is his son,” Yuuichi suggested.

“That possibility also exists,” Guren nodded. He clenched his fists. “There are too many avenues and not enough certainty!”

“Well, one certainty we do have,” Nagesu said grimly. “In the message from Hirata-dono, I received an intimation that Souja-dono had been to Rukongai. I do not know the exact coordinates, and I do not believe investigations around the area he was found have so far

indicated a particular location on the other side. We have traced residue that indicates a *Senkaimon*, but nothing more than that... an old test gate no longer in active service that was barely safe when we decommissioned it. I believe it suggests Keitarou — or agents of his — have been lurking in the wasteland surrounding the Spiritless Zone. Since Kai-dono has already had his men search the Spiritless Zone to no avail for any sign of those who killed Retsu-dono's officers, I believe that an area of the wasteland Rukon is the most likely site for a base. We no longer patrol it, as it does not house individuals, therefore it could be considered a judicial black hole. Likely the killer of the healers penetrated the Spiritless Zone to carry out her crime and then withdrew to a place we did not consider... a place where resources are so depleted that life for one as spiritually able as Keitarou ought to be impossible. By crossing over there, Souja-dono too became a victim — but the wasteland Rukon remains an extremely wide area of land to investigate. The business with the Tenth members cannot be resolved for now and should be set aside in light of that fact. For the time being, preparing a mission to Rukongai ought to be our first priority. The Council should now vote on further action to take — Ukitake, you may stand down."

"Yes, sir," Juushirou bowed his head, obediently withdrawing from the chamber but, as the guards on duty closed the big heavy doors behind him, he glanced back at them, frustration welling up in his heart.

You can see that a Senkaimon was opened then without you knowing about it, yet you can't see that one might have been used in another way by another individual. Perhaps there is no connection and I'm paranoid, but I know Keitarou and I know how he works. I know people think that I'm only bothered about this blue eyed dark haired young man because he saved Mitsuki at a time I wasn't able to be there for her, but it's not just about that. It bothers me... most of all, it bothers me that Mitsuki has stopped talking about it. Even if I raise it, she brushes it off as irrelevant. The man in custody in Second is not the blue eyed man — but Mitsuki is acting as though the danger is over. Is it really over? She escaped with her life once, but that doesn't mean she's safe. Souja is proof of that... and there's no way I can let anything happen to anyone else, least of all Mitsuki.

"Taichou?"

As he stepped out into the main courtyard, Enishi's voice made him start out of his reverie, glancing up to meet the concerned gaze of his Vice Captain.

"Enishi-kun?" He frowned, brows knitting together in confusion.

“Why are you... did I ask you to come meet me here?”

“No, you didn’t, but I felt it important I came myself,” Enishi said brusquely. “There’s a visitor at Thirteenth, says he needs to speak to you. Won’t tell me his name, or anything about him, just says that he’s known to you and wants to speak to you face to face.”

“A visitor?” Juushirou’s eyes widened, all thoughts of Mitsuki and her blue eyed rescuer flying from his thoughts at this surprising turn of events. “What kind of visitor? He wouldn’t give you his name? What did you do?”

“Told him he could damn well stay outside and wait, then, since I wasn’t about to let him in without knowing what he was about,” Enishi said matter-of-factly. “You weren’t there to ask, and there are young’uns inside Thirteenth, as well as that waif of yours and Edogawa besides. I’ve left Shikibu watching over the place just in case, but it didn’t look like he was going to put up a fight.”

He scratched his head, clearly perplexed.

“That said, he didn’t seem inclined to give up and go, either,” he admitted. “Sat himself down on the grass, in the shadows away towards Ugendou, and told me he’d wait. Seemed as though he was going to stay there all night and day if need be, so I decided I’d come get you and tell you about it personally.”

“And he told you nothing about who he was or why he wanted to speak to me?” Juushirou frowned, and Enishi shrugged.

“Not a jot,” he owned. “I thought about arresting him, but then, I figured, he might well be on the level. Strange looking youngster, though. Silver through and through. Eyes, hair, the lot. Never seen one as uncanny as him before, I’m sure of it. I thought he might attract a crowd, but he settled himself in the shade and... well, before he became a tourist attraction...”

“Silver?” Juushirou’s eyes narrowed, a vague, hazy memory surfacing briefly in the back of his mind. His more recent conversations with Hirata flitted through his head, and he pressed his lips together thoughtfully, nodding.

“All right, Enishi, I’m coming,” he said, making up his mind. “I’ll come meet with this strange silver apparition of yours, and see what it is he has to say.”

As Juushirou and his adjutant returned to the Thirteenth barracks, there was no sign of the mysterious visitor, and Enishi frowned,

clearly perturbed as he glanced around him, looking for any sign of the cloaked figure he had left behind.

“He was here, I swear,” he murmured, then, “Shikibu! Are you here?”

“I’m exactly where you left me, Fukutaichou,” Naoko emerged from beneath one of the drooping willow trees, folding her arms impatiently across her chest. “You took your time coming back.”

“It’s probably my fault, Naoko — I was detained at length by the Council,” Juushirou interjected, before Enishi could respond. “In the meantime, I understand that there’s someone who’s here to see me? I can sense a reiatsu around this place that I don’t know, but...”

“I sent him to wait in a less prominent location, where he wouldn’t disturb the rest of the Division, or our neighbours,” Naoko said matter-of-factly. “I told him that if he wanted to see our Captain, he should follow our terms and do as I say. He seemed amenable, especially when I explained to him that Dokusou Houshi isn’t a nice weapon, and I’m not a friendly border guard.”

“You threatened him?” Juushirou’s eyes widened, and Naoko’s lips thinned.

“I’m concerned that people are stalking around this Division lately,” she said flatly. “I don’t like that there’s an unknown District kid suddenly foisted upon us without us knowing a jot of information about him — not even confirmation of his name. I don’t like that Mitsuki was followed in the barracks garden and nobody tracked whoever it was... and now, someone appears out of the blue and expects to be granted an audience with the Captain at a moment’s notice. It’s a lot too much activity for me, and it’s never a bad thing to be wary of strangers.”

“Mm,” Juushirou’s eyes softened as he glanced at her, reading the expression in her obstinate greenish gaze. Her mind had gone to the death of a close kinswoman during their final year at the Academy, and, though Juushirou would never raise Suzuno’s name or ask insensitive questions about his Third Seat’s motivation, he understood her line of thought all the same. She had not been able to protect Suzuno from Keitarou’s murderous intent, but she would do what she could to protect Mitsuki, and the fact Keitarou’s name had risen in the investigation had spurred his Unohana subordinate to triple her usual vigilance.

He nodded, gesturing to Enishi to follow him.

“I’ll wait in Ugendou,” he said evenly. “Naoko, if you can find this visitor — providing he’s still here — I’d appreciate it if you’d escort him through the rear gate directly to my quarters. I agree that it would be better if he and the rest of the Division remain strangers, given what Enishi’s told me, and I understand your concerns for security, too.”

“You’re going to meet him?” Naoko said doubtfully, and Juushirou nodded again.

“I think I ought to,” he agreed. “Don’t look like that — if it turns out to be dangerous, I’m sure I’ll be able to defend myself. I don’t think it will, though — I have a hunch that this person is known to me, and if I’m right, he’s someone I need to speak to without fail.”

“I’ll come with you,” Enishi decided, meeting Naoko’s gaze, and jerking his head forward in a gruff confirmation of her unspoken question. “It’s my job to back up the Captain, and even though I know you can take care of yourself, Taichou, I’d be happier, just in case it gets violent. I don’t like judging on appearances, but given what’s happened lately, I’d rather be on my guard.”

Juushirou hesitated for a moment, pressing his lips together, then he sighed, nodding his head.

“Very well,” he acquiesced reluctantly. “I can see you’re both determined, so I won’t insult that resolve by dismissing it. Naoko, you go fetch the visitor from whatever place you sent him, please. Enishi, you come with me to Ugendou. We’ll soon settle this matter one way or another.”

“Yes, sir,” Naoko looked relieved, saluting and disappearing into shunpo, and Enishi grinned, striding forward to open the gate. The narrow pathway led to the small plank bridge that crossed the channel of water which flanked the Captain’s private chamber. It was not used very often, for most members of the division accessed Juushirou’s quarters via the wooden walkway that had been carefully constructed — as Shunsui had once joked — to bear the weight of the entirety of the Gotei should they all decide they needed Juushirou’s advice at the same exact moment. In contrast, the bridge was no more than a makeshift affair, requiring a hop and a jump to make it safely to the other side of the koi lake. Juushirou negotiated with ease, and, as Enishi thudded down beside him, he pushed open the sliding divide, stepping within the office-cum-sleeping area which had become his Inner Seireitei home.

“You’re sure about meeting this guy?” Enishi settled himself on the

floor, casting his Captain a final, quizzical glance, and Juushirou nodded.

“Like I said, I think it might matter that I do,” he agreed gravely. “It’s all right, Enishi. This is my decision as a Captain. If it’s how I think it is, well, I might be the only person who can hold this conversation, so, if possible, I mean to do it.”

Enishi’s expression became perplexed, but before he could put his confusion into words, Ugendou’s door slid back, and a figure entered, robed in dark blue fabric with the distinctive pattern of white vines woven deeply into the cloth. He moved silently, the cowl of his cloak pulled up over his head, and at his approach, Enishi cast Juushirou a sidelong glance, clearly poised and prepped to move should this strange, unexpected guest prove to be dangerous. Juushirou shook his head slightly, fixing solemn eyes on the newcomer, who paused a foot or so away from the two Gotei officers, lowering himself gracefully to the floor and bowing his head forward in a gesture of sombre respect. At length he lifted his head, reaching up a hand to push back the hood of the cloak, and Juushirou found himself face to face with a silver-haired apparition, a long tail of fine argent hair falling down over his shoulder, and the light glittering in his eyes made their delicate blue colour appear almost the same metallic shade. He was young, maybe in his early or middle twenties, but there was a gravity to his expression that made Juushirou feel he was not unused to hardship or burden.

There was something distinctive in the young man’s features that made him certain that his hunch had been correct, and he sat back, indicating for his guest to speak.

“Thank you for agreeing to see me,” the man’s words were low and soft, their phrasing proper and deferential, yet somehow full of suppressed emotion that did not reflect clearly through the mask of composure on his face. “I realise that you have no reason to — particularly with so much uproar among your fellow officers. It’s not usually my policy to risk making such things worse... but in the circumstances... I don’t feel that I can remain quiet.”

“You did not give a name to my adjutants,” Juushirou chided softly. “I realise you’ve had a less than warm welcome from my Third Seat, but in the circumstances...”

“It was no less than I expected from a well disciplined shinigami squad representative,” the youth shook his head. “I have suffered no offence from it. As you say, the fault is mine for not correctly identifying myself before demanding to see you. It was impertinent,

though I hope you may understand my reasons for being so circumspect.”

“I believe so,” Juushirou’s eyes narrowed for a moment, then, “We have not met before, but all the same, I am reminded of past encounters, and believe that I must be speaking to Joumei-kun, correct?”

Enishi started, staring at his Captain in surprise at this quick and apparently random identification, but the silver haired ghost nodded his head, a wry smile touching his lips for the briefest of instants.

“As you say,” he confirmed softly. “I am Ichimaru Joumei, son of Ichimaru Shunmei, who claimed an acquaintance with you some twenty years or so ago. My coming was a gamble, being that we had not formally been introduced, but I remembered that Hirata-sama has trusted you with the truth of our existence in the past. I remember Father speaking well of you, and I felt you might be willing to hear what I had to say without jumping to conclusions or misconstruing my presence here. There is nobody else in Inner Seireitei to whom I dared come.”

“I will listen to you,” Juushirou agreed, “but I have one question. Why come to me? Why not Hirata? Surely, in the circumstances...”

“Precisely because of the circumstances, I dare not show my face before the Endou,” Joumei shook his head slowly. “I would also not trouble Hirata-sama directly at a time like this. I... have no right to stand before a Clan in mourning, not even to offer my respects to a man I considered my friend. All I can do is face one he trusts and hope that I can make him trust me... or at least, my word, so that the culprit in this crime can be brought firmly to justice.”

“In that respect, I think we feel the same,” Juushirou said grimly. “Enishi, it’s all right. You can sit back. I don’t believe we’re in any danger from our visitor — even though his origins are unknown to you. I did indeed know Joumei’s father, from the time we worked in Seventh — it’s possible he might have important information to tell us about Souja-dono and his actions before his death.”

“About Souja-dono, huh?” Enishi obediently relaxed his stance, rubbing his chin absently as he re-examined Joumei’s features for himself. “Is that true? You know something about that? It’s a messy business... if you can help, please, tell us what you know.”

“Souja-dono was a friend of mine,” Joumei shifted his position, crossing his legs and folding his hands in his lap, “from when we were small boys. Father and Hirata-sama ensured it was that way, so that

we would both grow to form a strong bond of mutual trust for the time we would inherit our respective families. We are... were... about the same age, but I... had always expected to be the one to die first. My people... our life expectancies aren't long, and I never anticipated..."

He faltered, shaking his head, and Juushirou felt certain he saw the glitter of genuine grief in the other's eyes before it vanished once more behind the silvery mask of composure.

"In any case, the night before he died, he came to see you, did he not?" he asked gently, and Joumei nodded his head.

"He did," he agreed sadly. "I sent a message to him asking him to come. In hindsight, I wish I had not — but I didn't expect him to act on my information in the way that he did. In our years of acquaintance, he never seemed to be the type foolish enough to dive through an unknown *Senkaimon* chasing ghosts. I thought he'd ruminate on it, try and gather some hard evidence and keep a close eye on those he considered important to him. More, I hoped he'd take care of himself — but it seems he decided to do the absolute opposite."

"Did you think... he was in danger, then?" Enishi asked abruptly, and Joumei shrugged.

"I thought there was a chance, and told him to be careful," he admitted with a sigh. "Maybe that very thing drove him to act impulsively. I'll probably never know, but until I know how weighty the burden of our guilt is in his death, I want to make sure I do what I can to resolve it."

Juushirou sighed, extending a pale hand and resting it gently on Joumei's shoulder.

"You are not to blame," he said simply. "A lot of people seem to feel they are... but the only one who is is the one who held the blade. We won't refuse your help, though. Seeing Hirata so upset... is not nice for a friend. More, seeing a young boy I've known since birth savaged and hurt in such a vicious way... it will live with me for a long time. You're right when you say it needs resolution — even if that doesn't seem enough."

"Mm," Joumei agreed. "In which case, I'll tell you what I told Souja-dono, and trust you to do with it what you can."

He slid his fingers into his *obi*, pulling out a scrap of worn paper and pushing it across the floor between them.

“It’s not the neatest,” he said apologetically. “My sister is a brilliant scientist, but her script is somewhat unintelligible in places. I’ve tried to make it clearer, but maybe I’ve made it worse.”

“Let me see,” Juushirou scooped up the sheet, glancing at it and then frowning, casting Joumei a surprised look.

“This relates to Tenichi?”

“To his abduction, at least,” Joumei agreed. “You know, I think, that we were the ones who located and returned Tenichi-dono to Seventh Division?”

“*You* were?” Enishi’s eyes almost popped out of his head. “How on earth did you manage that?”

“My people have ways and means, and besides, someone conveniently dropped him on the grass outside our dwelling,” Joumei responded dryly. “There’s no doubt he was placed there to entice us out, which worked — so Izumi did tests on Tenichi’s damaged *obi*, and she picked up evidence that suggested he was taken out of Seireitei. We believe that the location he was taken to was a place within the Rukon, though we can’t be more specific. Our records are old and out of date, but Izumi did find a mineral match with an element unique to the Rukon. We think that the kidnappers took him through a spirit gate and that’s why you found no trace of him.”

“I... see.” Juushirou’s eyes narrowed thoughtfully. “Souja himself said something about Rukongai... but he wasn’t specific as to where, either.”

“That was what I was afraid of,” Joumei chewed down on his lip. “When I heard what had happened, my immediate thought was that he’d fallen foul of the people we were trying to thwart.”

He paused, eying Juushirou for a moment, then, “You know the name Aizen Keitarou, don’t you?”

“Too well,” Juushirou said darkly. “Souja mentioned him as well — and that he got that information from you. Can you be more specific as to why you made that connection? Was it just because of the ransom note Hirata received, or...”

“Hirata received a note?” Enishi blinked, and Juushirou nodded.

“A note for Tenichi, demanding Joumei and his people in return for his officer’s life,” he said blackly. “Not the kind of note Hirata was about to grace with an answer. Then Tenichi was released, and was returned here.”

“The only reason that would happen would be if it was a trap,” Joumei agreed. “Keitarou is the most likely one to be hunting us, even though those who betrayed his father are long since dead and buried. However, the real reason for our suspicion was more scientific than supposition. Izumi sensed Kidou at the scene where she found Tenichi and brought him back. Concealing Kidou, faint but just about within her grasp. It was Urahara reiatsu — and that, coupled with some unknown Rukongai location and the ransom note suggested to us that this was probably Keitarou’s doing. The spirit cuffs Tenichi wore and his apparent lack of memory suggested someone with intelligence and forethought covering their tracks... as far as we could see, all the leads fed back to one origin.”

“Tenichi was used, in fact, to draw you people out?” Anger flickered in Juushirou’s hazel eyes. “Then, because Souja followed up the investigation by himself, he became caught up in something and wound up losing his life as a result.”

“Have people been sent to Rukongai?”

“Not yet, but they will be,” Juushirou shook his head. “The Council were discussing preparations for a covert search, but we’re still reeling from the events in the Spiritless Zone and there’s a significant lack of personnel to deal with that and the Hollows here given the fact that Seventh Division are currently in deep mourning and Fourth are hardly much better. The rest of us are stretched quite thinly — and if Keitarou is the enemy, we can’t go in unprepared. We know, some of us, what he can do first hand. Souja’s death is a warning to everyone else... this can’t be taken lightly.”

“I agree,” Joumei nodded. “I also think, though, that Keitarou will attack the Kitsune at some point in the not so distant future. I’ve been evacuating as many people as possible to safer space in small groups, and now there are only a few left. I’ll remain, of course, because so long as I’m there, nobody will believe we’ve moved — but I’d like to send my sister away from there if at all possible. If anything happens to me, she’s the only other survivor of our direct line, and the only one who can currently take my place.”

“You want us to offer her safe conduct here?” Juushirou asked, and Joumei shook his head.

“You mistake me,” he said matter-of-factly. “I wouldn’t ask you to protect an outsider who carries no individual value or worth to the Gotei simply as a refugee. No, Juushirou-dono, that isn’t my meaning at all. I would like to offer Izumi to you as an aid to your investigation. I’ve come here to explain to you the situation, but the

paperwork is all hers. I think, given her prior knowledge, she might be able to earn her shelter by assisting in a scientific capacity. Remember, she's also the one who sensed the foreign reiatsu near our home. If anyone is well placed to provide evidence, I believe it's my sister."

"Thirteenth Division is becoming a haven for strays," Enishi reflected with a rueful grin. "Well, Taichou, what do you think? I'll go with whatever you decide, of course, but we've already got Edogawa moonlighting in and out, and then there's the young lad Hikifune brought back here on your orders... now we're to take in someone else?"

"If it's inconvenient..." Joumei pressed his lips together, but Juushirou shook his head.

"The Kitsune are a secret, and that secret must also be protected," he said gravely. "Izumi-hime can come here, and I will find some explanation for her presence among us. I believe she's younger than you?" this last to Joumei, who nodded.

"About the same age as Souja-dono's sister, Kikyue-hime," he agreed.

"Then maybe I can get away with telling people she's a new recruit sent by Genryuusai-sensei from the Academy early on account of her particular skills," Juushirou gazed at his hands pensively. "I'm not good at lying, but I think that might work. She can observe what she needs to and report to Enishi or I in secret when the time is appropriate — that seems safest, if it's only to one of the two of us. Nobody need know that she's a member of your people, since few know they actually exist. Enishi, I'll fill you in on the necessary details afterwards, but I know you won't share them with anyone unless I give you leave."

"Damn straight," Enishi said gravely, "but what about Shikibu? Are you going to keep this from her, too? It'll be hard, if that's the case... she's sharp, and with this being a girl and all..."

"Most female recruits encounter training with my third seated officer at some point or another," Juushirou explained, casting Joumei a weary smile. "As I believe you've already seen, she's a woman of some considerable personality and will. It began that way in Seventh, when the Endou were loath to let their *hime* join our squad and even less happy about the idea of them being trained by men — but Naoko's good at training, and Enishi's right, with a new recruit, she'll ask. We'll include her in this as well, I think — but absolutely nobody

else within the Thirteenth and nobody from outside, save, of course, Hirata if he should ask, must know who Izumi-hime is or why she's with us."

"Can be done," Enishi seemed relieved, nodding his head. "I'll brief Shikibu, if you like — she'll probably pick up the important bits quicker than me in any case."

"It's comforting to me that you have officers willing to trust in your word with so few questions," Joumei observed. "From what Father told me, I shouldn't be surprised — but I am grateful for it, too. I'm an unknown, and my word carries no guarantees... yet you're listening to me and more, your officers will too. That comforts me... it makes me think Izumi will be safe here."

"She will be fine, you have my word," Juushirou agreed. "With Hirata and his family in the state they're in, your Kitsune only have us to turn to for help, and in this instance, I think we must provide it. Whatever the Urahara or Keitarou still think of your people, sins die with those who commit them — younger generations should not be tainted by the past."

"In our case, it's a fact we've accepted in order to live on at all," Joumei reflected, "But thank you. I'll tell Izumi to prepare and I'll send her here as soon and as subtly as I can."

"In the meantime, how much can you tell us about Rukongai?" Juushirou asked quizzically. "The Onmitsukidou have already searched the Spiritless Zone from top to bottom following the assassination of our officers, but they found no perpetrator anywhere and all our leads have gone dead. We captured an individual but he refuses to talk, and nobody can connect him with Rukongai anyway. Souja went to Rukongai, but what happened to him there is still a little unclear. We believe he was attacked by a child of Keitarou's, but..."

"A male child?" Joumei asked sharply, and Juushirou shook his head.

"A young girl," he replied, "but Souja was quite definite about there being a son as well. He said the name Kohaku, and something about a sword that he thought we should find. He was incoherent by this point, though, and it wasn't completely clear what he wanted to tell us."

"I warned Souja about this because it occurred to me that Keitarou's child, if born, might have been a son," Joumei's expression darkened, making his strange eyes seem all the more spectral. "He

probably went chasing after it for that reason, because he realised that if Keitarou had a son, it might be a problem for his family. I imagine he went to protect them, and in doing so, caused the exact circumstance I hoped to prevent by warning him. Now Hirata-sama has lost his son, he has no heir. And whether it's considered honourable or not, Keitarou's wife is Hirata-sama's sister, Eiraki-hime. That being so..."

"You think Keitarou had Souja killed so he could use his own son to claim the Endou line?" Juushirou was aghast, and Joumei shrugged.

"It's a possibility," he admitted. "So long as the Endou refuse to disown Eiraki-hime and remove her from the family line completely, that risk remains there. Misashi-sama told Father that he wouldn't do that, because Eiraki-hime's actions acted as a reminder to the Clan of how precarious their situation was and how much they had to rebuild. Also, as her father, I believe he found it painful to cut ties with one he had raised — but because of it, the Endou have not disowned Eiraki-hime. She has parted from them, but, even through a female line, a son of Keitarou's could, in the absence of another male heir, claim the Clan legitimately."

"But Aizen is a wanted criminal," Enishi protested. "Surely in those circumstances, nobody would..."

"Keitarou is. His son, however, is not," Joumei said simply. "Unless Seireitei can find, and implicate this son in a crime against the Gotei or the people of Soul Society, there's no reason for him not to emerge as a claimant. The Endou still have succession by combat as legitimate form of power transition, providing the claimant is within the required degrees of the Clan. As I understand it, as Hirata-sama's sister, Eiraki-hime's bloodline belongs to the main house, therefore any son of hers, no matter how unsavoury his sire, could potentially challenge Hirata-sama for power in District Seven. More, if the Council could not find a crime to lay against his name, should this son succeed in killing Hirata-sama, the Clan would be his by right. I think it impossible that Keitarou does not know all of this from the time he spent in Seventh — and even if he didn't, Eiraki-hime could not have been ignorant of it. A son through a female line cannot inherit the Endou Clan, but he can still claim it by defeating Hirata-sama and rendering him powerless in fair combat."

"That's why you asked whether a male killed Souja," Juushirou looked troubled. "Keitarou's possibly out-thought everyone yet again. If he fielded his daughter to kill people, then it means he's keeping his son for bigger and better things — that's what you're saying, isn't it?"

Keitarou took and married Eiraki-hime for her Clan connections, and now he might exploit them through legitimate loopholes only the Endou can do anything about?”

“I don’t know, but the possibility is there. I imagine, given the way Hirata-sama reacts when Keitarou’s name is mentioned, that the idea of someone sending a killer after Souja-dono is not unlikely.”

“In which case, we need the young lad to remember something about the attack, don’t we?” Enishi glanced at his Captain, who nodded.

“Young lad?” Joumei looked quizzical, and Juushirou sighed.

“He was with Souja when we found him. Souja said that this lad — this Koku — tried to help him, but his actions were misinterpreted as aggression by Kikyue and he was struck down,” he said wearily. “He’s currently within our barracks receiving treatment, but his life isn’t in any danger. We believe him to be from one of the District villages — but we haven’t yet discovered which one. He’s in the care of a healer I trust, and she believes he may rouse soon, but he hasn’t been able to tell us anything himself, yet.”

“I see,” Joumei frowned, and for a moment he was silent. Then his head snapped up, silver eyes gleaming.

“From the Districts?”

“Yes. Probably Seventh — Souja-dono was found in Seventh.”

“But Souja-dono went to Rukongai,” Joumei pointed out. “You told me that yourself, didn’t you?”

“Well, yes, but...”

“Did you think that maybe this stray also came from there?”

“From *Rukongai*?” Enishi’s brow furrowed. “But the lad has *reiryoku*. True, he’s skin and bone, but...”

“Not the Spiritless Zone,” Joumei continued patiently, ‘but the wasteland Rukon. Oh, you don’t really think it’s abandoned?’ as Juushirou and Enishi exchanged looks. “Izumi’s test results indicate that individuals with *reiryoku* have been living outside of the Spiritless Zone confines for some time, and you’d be foolish not to chase that up. Just because your officers found no trace of Keitarou and his people in Gotei governed space doesn’t eliminate the possibility of them lying low in the areas your Seireitei has disdained and written off, now does it? Regular shinigami patrols to that area may have ceased twenty or more years ago, but just because the *Senkaimon* were

sealed, it doesn't eradicate the possibility of spiritually tainted residents stuck on the other side."

"I suppose that's true," Juushirou acknowledged. "It makes for unpleasant thinking, but if Izumi-hime's science indicates that Tenichi was held somewhere outside of the Spiritless Zone then the huge expanse of land we thought we'd evacuated may not be as empty as we thought. Searching it for individuals good at hiding will take time, effort and manpower... but the way you put it makes it seem imperative that we try. If Keitarou was hiding in the wasteland Rukon, then it would explain why the same sword killed Souja and the people in the Spiritless Zone. I don't suppose he has an easy stream of weapons on the other side of the divide — but he probably does have access to Plus souls who he can brainwash and send to do his bidding on Shinigami land, even if he can't cross into it himself."

"Well, I can't speak for all the particulars in this case, and I have no knowledge of the Spiritless Zone, but I'm fairly certain the Gate used to drop Tenichi on our doorstep was one of those decommissioned by the Urahara big-wigs when they decided to stop sending shinigami over the divide," Joumei observed acidly. "It's not a huge leap of faith to assume that other discarded *Senkaimon* between Seireitei and the Rukon — and even between regions of the Rukon — are being similarly manipulated by Keitarou or his allies."

"That's true, too," Juushirou chewed on his lip. "The Gate we believe was used to abduct Tenichi was on an old *Senkaimon* network plan but not one of the more recent ones. It was deactivated not that many years ago, but it's possible there are even older ones which were switched off before that and which don't even show up on the grids I've looked at. I don't remember a time when regular shinigami patrols were dispatched into the Rukon — before it was handed over to Fourth and the Spiritless Zone project began to take shape — and I've never been there myself — but I suppose if they happened, there must've been ways and means to get easily in and out."

"I only know what's been handed down from previous generations," Joumei admitted, "but I do think I heard once that in ancient times — or at least, before the Gotei squads were formed — First and Third District took charge of business in the Rukon. That was when *Senkaimon* first began to be developed, so it wouldn't surprise me if prototype Gates were littered all over the place in a supposed deactivated state. *Senkaimon* were an Urahara invention — my family have some of the notes pertaining to it, though I believe most of the work to have been Keitsune-sama's, and therefore the data is probably in Keitarou's hands. I don't know what else he might've dabbled in

over the years, but it stands to reason that he'd pursue his father's science to its natural conclusion."

"Keitarou has a competent knowledge of *Senkaimon*," Juushirou agreed. "And I did know that it was Urahara science and tied up with that part of the Clan. Our current *Senkaimon* technology was harvested from notes he left behind after Nagesu-sama chased him out of Seventh District, so if there were to be dead Gates lurking around the place, it isn't surprising that he'd use them. Furthermore, he wouldn't be averse to using local people if he thought he could gain an advantage. I've heard about the 'dead blades' some of the Pluses carry... one of these could well be the murder weapon Unohana-taichou was discussing in the meeting earlier. If the girl who attacked Souja was Keitarou's daughter, perhaps it's not that she has no reiatsu, but just is good at concealing it and utilised a weapon that was spiritually dead. Given that shinigami use spiritual methods of investigation, it seems probable that he'd arm her with one of these blades to fox our judgement and throw us off their scent."

"I'd keep thinking along those lines, if I were you," Joumei said frankly, "and I would be grateful if you shared any answers you happened to come up with. Keitarou's desire to kill us doesn't just run one way... I would like to see him eliminated, too, both for Souja-dono's sake and in order that the young ones among my people had a chance to live their lives without actively being persecuted."

His eyes narrowed.

"Out of interest, how old is this young lad of yours? Is he as old as Souja-dono, for example?"

"Younger," Juushirou mused. "Barely twenty, I'd say, certainly not much more. I see where your thoughts are going, Joumei-kun, but it won't work in this case. Koku might be from Rukongai — I admit, it's a possibility I hadn't considered, but I will, now. If so, it makes sense that Souja-dono asked so emphatically for us to protect him. If he's been eking out a living in a dangerous world where Keitarou's lurking, I imagine Souja probably didn't want him to be sent back. Whether Koku knows or doesn't know of Keitarou, it's not impossible that he could face punishment for helping a shinigami. We don't know enough about this yet, but we'll have to handle everything carefully. I'm quite sure he's not the child you're thinking of, however. If Keitarou does have a son — and Souja seemed certain that he did — it's not this boy. Souja would've said as much, and anyhow, he's too young."

"Mmm. Pity," Joumei clicked his tongue against his teeth. "Oh well.

I suppose that would've been far too easy, wouldn't it?"

He bowed his head.

"I've imposed on you for long enough," he reflected, getting to his feet and bowing again towards the Captain and his adjutant. "Thank you for seeing me under such circumstances. I'll make arrangements for Izumi to come here as soon as I'm able."

"Will you be all right, going back by yourself?" Juushirou wondered, and Joumei offered a wry smile.

"I'll be just fine," he replied lightly. "Really, you have enough to worry about without concerning yourself over a few stray foxes."

With that he was gone, and Juushirou and Enishi exchanged looks.

"What do you think?" Juushirou was the one who broke the silence, and Enishi frowned, rubbing his chin.

"I don't know who that was, but if you do, I'll go along with what you decided," he said at length. "I trust you, so that's enough for me — if it's something you can't discuss in detail, I won't press it. I wonder about the boy, though. Koku, I mean. Do you think that silver-haired young'un is right — is he from Rukongai, and not District Seireitei at all?"

Juushirou pressed his lips together pensively.

"For now, we're going to keep that idea to ourselves," he said softly. "Rukongai citizens are not allowed to enter Seireitei under any circumstances, and if it was to become widely known that the boy we had here could have come from there, it will create panic. More than that, what Joumei said about the area outside of the Spiritless Zone bothers me. If he's right — and he may well be — Seireitei might have bigger issues to face than just the escape of one local vagabond."

"You intend to protect the lad?" Enishi asked astutely, and Juushirou nodded.

"Koku tried to help one of our men, and came here because of that," he said matter-of-factly. "He wasn't trying to break through the border; he came on Souja's account, not his own. When I think about it, we were slow not to draw the same conclusion Joumei did. Souja had no reason to be so emphatic about protecting a District boy — there are ways and means in place for us to do that without him needing to press it so hard. A Rukongai citizen, though, that's different. Souja was a smart lad and he would've known there was no recourse for support for someone who'd broken through the divide...

someone who as far as the Council are concerned, shouldn't even exist. Crossing from Rukongai into Seireitei is still potentially a capital offence, and Souja-dono would've realised that, too. It troubles me to consider the full ramifications, but I think Joumei's probably right."

He sighed, shrugging his shoulders in resignation.

"As far as I'm concerned, digging too deeply into his background is less important at the moment than gaining his trust and finding out what he knows," he added wearily. "If it comes out later, we'll deal with it when we can. I'll keep Souja's promise. I gave my word. That means it stays between you and I and nobody else, Enishi. Not even Naoko and not Mitsuki either, not yet. I don't want her to be connected to this Rukongai business... it would hurt her if she found out that all the work they did over there didn't include all of the needy population, and she's got enough to deal with without us adding burdens to her. No, we'll keep it quiet and see how things pan out. He's a District boy until someone proves it to the contrary — it's just simpler that way. If we're breaking Seireitei law, the fewer people who know about it the better."

"Does that information blackout include Kyouraku?" Enishi was surprised, and Juushirou hesitated, then nodded.

"For now," he agreed, "until we know more. Do you mind?"

"It's unusual, but if that's the order, that's good enough for me," Enishi assured his companion, and Juushirou grinned, clapping his friend on the shoulder.

"It's times like this I'm glad you're my adjutant," he said, relief in his gaze, "though I'm sorry to drag you into my deception."

"Part of the job. Comes with the badge," Enishi patted his Vice Captain's insignia nonchalantly. "What the Captain says, goes. That's how I was taught, and it's seen me fine so far."

"Lucky for me," Juushirou chuckled. "Right, then. I need to tell you a little more about Joumei and his people. It's complicated, but if Izumi-hime is going to be among us, it's only fair I tell you what I can. It relates to the Endou, and is their secret business really — but Joumei's coming to me makes it ours too, from now. He showed himself to you, so that means he's willing to let me trust you — and I will."

"I'm listening," Enishi sat back against the wall of the chamber, folding thick arms across his broad chest. "If it goes some way towards putting this whole business to rest, I'm game to do my part!"

Author's Note

...*Byakuya*...

31. Hirata's Return

Chapter Thirty: Hirata's Return

“All official patrol duties are off till the end of the week, far as I can gather,”

Nakata pushed open the door of the small bed chamber, casting its sole occupant a grim look as he moved across the room towards his bunk. “Latest word according to Hajime-dono, who seems to have all the answers on everything at the moment. Kikyue-dono's here, but she's been locked in Souja-dono's office since dawn and nobody dare disturb her. Nobody's going near the Captain's office, so I couldn't tell you if he's back yet or not. There was a Council meeting this morning, but Taichou didn't go, and nor did anyone else from the Clan... and that's the latest word as far as it stands.”

From the corner of the chamber, curled up against the wall in the shadow cast by the blinds half covering the window, Tenichi raised his head, turning to glance absently in the direction of his roommate. He made no attempt to speak, however, and Nakata groaned, tossing his sword down on his own bunk before making his way purposefully to the District boy's side, grabbing him firmly by the shoulders of his *shihakushou* and giving him a short, violent shake.

“Hey!” This seemed to wake Tenichi from his reverie. “What are you doing? I was listening!”

“Answer a guy when he speaks to you, and then he won't try and wake you up by force,” Nakata snapped back, releasing his hold and Tenichi flopped back against the wall, hunching his body defensively against any further attacks. “Right now, the whole division is in chaos, and Hajime-dono's doing his damndest to hold things together, but he's only Fourth Seat and he's not from the direct line of the Clan, so there's only so much he can do. In the circs, he needs everyone who's fit and able to be backing him up. You should be right at the front of the queue, not mooching around in here. You're not an Endou — this affects you less than everyone else, so for heaven's sake get off your backside and go do something useful! You've been half in a daze since the funeral — no, since before it, since the night he died, and I really thought you had more spine than that.”

“Fukutaichou is dead,” Tenichi said flatly, “I don't have to be blood kin to care about that.”

“No, you don’t. We all care. We’re all angry, we’re all grieving, we’re all ripped apart over it,” Nakata retorted gruffly. “Those of us who have blood ties, however feeble, we feel it too. However, we’re soldiers. We have a squad to hold together and we need everyone on board. We have no Vice Captain, and right now, it doesn’t seem likely anyone’s going to step up to fill that role. In the meantime, those of us who can should get out there and make sure discipline doesn’t fall apart. You’re Eighth Seat. Pull yourself together. Getting all emotional over this is what the enemy wants.”

“You don’t know what the enemy wants,” Tenichi pushed Nakata away from his bunk, swinging his feet over the side and getting languidly to his feet, padding barefooted across the small, square room to the window to gaze out at the training yard that lay beyond. It was more or less deserted, only a few recruits half-heartedly playing with *bokken* in a space normally filled by rank and file shinigami and the sound of someone calling drill, and he bit his lip, a sudden memory of his first day in Seventh assailing his senses. It had been Souja who had greeted him then, he remembered, taken him around the division and then handed him over to Kikyue and Nakata for briefing and training drill, and as he dwelled on this, Souja’s voice seemed to ring loud and clear through his head.

“Things are probably different here from Thirteenth,” the Vice Captain had said, “but we have our own sense of solidarity, and if you work as hard as Juushirou-dono’s said, you’ll fit right in with the rest of the squad very quickly. We’re expecting a lot of you, Tenichi — Seventh prides itself on its military skill, but also on its loyalty to each other and to the Gotei.”

“Those values suit me, too, sir,” Tenichi had replied earnestly. “I intend to work hard and earn my rank, as well as Ukitake-taichou’s praise.”

Tenichi closed his eyes briefly, forcing the recollection away, but it was soon replaced by another. A dust-dishevelled, preoccupied Souja, pale eyes penetrating his as they hurried through the night, back towards the safety of the division barracks.

“That area of Seventh is high risk, and I would rather not lose you again. I’m sorry, since it’s obviously a place of pilgrimage for you, but as your Vice Captain, I have no choice. You must not go back there — and you certainly must not try to tell your brother or take him there. It would be seriously frowned on if you were to disobey that instruction — and if I’m more lenient in my judgements, the Captain would not be. I’m sorry that it means taking your father from you again when you’ve just found

him, but I must give priority to the living, and not the dead."

"To the living, and not the dead," softly Tenichi echoed the Vice Captain's words, feeling them resonate inside of him far more now than they had done at the time. The image of the still form lying in state on the plinth as the first licks of amber flame teased away at the edges of the white funeral robe crossed his thoughts briefly, and he swallowed hard.

I am the living and you are the dead now, Fukutaichou. You just didn't know then that this would be how it would turn out, and nor did I. Was that shadow Kurotsuchi right? Was this all a consequence of that?

"Kotetsu?" Nakata came to stand beside him, casting him a quizzical look. "What are you muttering to yourself about?"

"Something Fukutaichou said to me, when he brought me back after I was found in Seventh District," Tenichi sighed, turning away from the window to face his older companion. "It doesn't matter. None of it does, now."

"You're still blaming yourself for all of this, aren't you?" Nakata's eyes became slits, and before Tenichi knew what was going on, strong arms had taken him by the shoulders once more, propelling him across the room and shoving him hard so he fell backwards onto his bunk. "Of all the idiot things. If the Fuku did go looking for clues as to what happened to you, well, then he got caught off guard and the worst happened. It doesn't lead back to you in the slightest. Even Kikyue-dono hasn't said so, and she's none to stable about anything right at the moment, poor lass. You've taken it far too deep inside of you to be of any use to anyone — either snap out of it or someone will have to poke you out of it with the sharp end of their sword. Fuku'd be the first one to be cross that he'd created such disarray... not going on with your duty is disrespectful to him and you know it."

Tenichi started, glancing up at his older companion in surprise, and Nakata nodded resolutely.

"There, that got through, didn't it?" he said, evidently satisfied. "If you understand that, then get yourself together and come with me. Hajime-dono told me to get a hold of you, and if I have to go back and tell him you're mooning like a girl in your room, he'll probably come here and slash sense into you himself. We've a job to do and we'll do it. Grieving is for after hours, in private time, when the lights go out. While we're awake, we're on active duty — the Taichou's relying on us to hold it together, so come on."

Tenichi paused for a moment, then, slowly, he nodded his head.

"You're right," he said softly. "I'm sorry, Nakata-san. I guess, coming from Thirteenth, I'm not used to this. Seventh is... different. I'm not an Endou, and perhaps that makes it harder for me to understand what the right way is to behave. I just keep seeing him, as he was when he died, and then, on the pyre..."

He trailed off, swallowing hard, and Nakata clapped him on the back.

"Like I said, you're from outside. I guess the shock hit you harder, but it'll fade quicker, no doubt," he reflected. "Come on, though. Working will take your mind off it, and there's a lot of work to be done. The juniors rely on folk like us — if we fall apart, the whole division is doomed."

"That's true, too," Tenichi managed a weak smile. "All anyone can do for Fukutaichou now is that, isn't it?"

"Well, however calm he was, he was an Endou too, make no mistake," Nakata said pensively. "I wouldn't put it past him to come after us from beyond the grave if we let the squad collapse over a little thing like his being killed. He was a brave man, you know, coming back here with that grave an injury to make report to the Captain about what he'd found. I admire him for that. You probably never saw him with the hunter's sword in his hand, and he didn't show his claws in the same way Kikyue-dono does, but he was capable of it, there's no question about that. Whether the old tales about the smoke from the funeral pyre are true or not, I'm not waiting to find out. Fukutaichou left the squad in our hands, so we'll do our best by it. That's why we wear this uniform — so snap to it."

"I'm coming," Tenichi nodded, sliding his sandals onto his feet and lifting his sword from its resting place beside his bed, sliding the scabbard through the white fabric of his obi. "Did Hajime-dono say what exactly he wanted me to do?"

"That's more like it," Nakata nodded approvingly. "And no, he didn't. Looked run off his feet, and just grabbed hold of me on his way to the mess hall. Said I should unearth you and bring you downstairs smartish... so that's what I intend to do. Like as not he'll rail into you for shirking in the dorm when everything's so chaotic, so prepare to bow your head and take whatever he says to you, all right? S'quicker that way."

"Mm," Tenichi frowned, but did not argue, and Nakata grabbed up his own weapon once more, moving to throw open the door and leading the way purposefully down the long, narrow hallway that led

from the Seventh Division dormitories to the core complex of the barracks proper. As they walked, Tenichi was aware of snippets of conversation from this room or that, and the occasional silhouette of someone passing a doorway, clearly so bent on an errand of their own that they didn't even have time to stop and exchange greetings, and despite himself, a dull ache settled in the pit of his stomach.

What am I doing? This is my division, and I need to pull myself together. Nakata's right. If I blame myself... well, that doesn't change anything. If this was my fault, then I more than anyone should be working to the bone to keep things going. If even a tiny bit of penance can be done by that, then I should be the first to offer myself to oversee recruits, or clean barracks, or file papers, or anything my superiors send me to do. Whether Fukutaichou's ghost is or isn't glaring down at me, it doesn't change anything. He's not here, and that's at least in part due to me, so I ought to do whatever I can in return. Since he came back, nobody's said anything about my abduction, so it's safe to assume that whatever Fukutaichou discovered, none of it was linked back to me. That being the case... maybe all will be well. I didn't wish for Fukutaichou to die, but I can't reverse it, and... well... the best thing I can do is try and move on.

"Kotetsu!" As they entered the mess hall, a relieved voice called out his name, and Tenichi's head jerked up, seeing the tall, lean figure of the Seventh Division's Fourth officer coming towards him. Kitabata Hajime was a shinigami approaching middle age, the first streaks of grey beginning to show through his dark hair and his thin, hooked features giving him the visual impression of a hunting bird waiting to swoop down and pounce on any unsuspecting individual he had singled out to be his prey. He was a third degree member of the Endou Clan through the female line, and therefore politically quite insignificant, yet Hirata had seen promise in his efficiency and his loyalty, and so had given him preferment over others of higher blood rank, allowing him to rise to the highest rank in the division not held by a member of the first degree family themselves. Tenichi knew, because Nakata had told him, that there had been some rumblings about his appointment to Fourth Seat, but he had proven a good choice and had operated as second in command to Souja's patrols since Hirata's son had been old and qualified enough to take up the Vice Captain's badge. Looking at Hajime now, Tenichi could see the strain of the previous few days reflected on the senior officer's face, and he berated himself once again. Souja's death had affected everyone, just as Nakata had said. Souja's quiet authority and firm trust in his father's choice of Fourth seat had helped to quell any rebellion towards his position, but now, with Hirata apparently still attending to his family in Seventh and the Vice Captain dead, Hajime's

own position was likely to become tenuous.

But I'm District, so he feels he can command me without fear of me talking back. And, dammit, that's my duty, too. To me, Hajime-dono is my superior officer and that's all. I don't care about degrees of Clan.

"I'm sorry for taking so long, Hajime-dono," Tenichi said now, bowing his head apologetically as the officer approached. "I hadn't realised you were looking for me till Nakata-san came to alert me."

"Well, you're here now, thank the skies," Hajime said heavily, clapping the younger man on the shoulder. "I need all the help I can get, so don't be expecting to go to bed early tonight... maybe not at all. Kikyue-dono's dealing with Souja-dono's papers and clearing his office of anything that should go back to Seventh District, and though I've asked if she wants help, she's determined to do it on her own. My own patrol — Souja-dono's patrol, I should say — they've been set to mundane tasks around the division since we're running no active patrols till the Captain says so. Yours, though, is all over the place at the moment. Some of the recruits are in the yard, but the rest..."

"Mutiny on the horizon?" Nakata asked clinically, and Hajime sighed, nodding his head.

"Without Kikyue-dono to hold them firm, that's what it seems," he said tiredly. "The problem's with Ohara, of course... he won't take orders from me, and being Kikyue-dono's second, he's got considerable authority over some of the juniors in your patrol. I need you to go straighten the young'uns out. You can't do anything about Ohara — he outranks you in seating and all of us by birth, damn him, but between the two of you, I hope you'll be able to pull the juniors together and knock some sense into them. I need messengers to send out to various divisions, and I also have to compile a report for Misashi-sama before the sun sets, so my workload is too full to start chasing inexperienced Clansfolk around the barracks."

"Damn Ohara," Nakata muttered with feeling, and Tenichi frowned, reflecting on Kikyue's appointed second-in-command, Ohara Masayuki. In contrast to Hajime, he was a second degree Endou of about Tenichi's own age, and, though born through a female line, the eldest son of a particularly influential member of the current Endou administration. His father, out of favour under the previous regime had been actively involved in Misashi's rebuilding of Seventh's economy following Seimaru's downfall, and had continued to provide sound counsel to Hirata once the transfer of power had taken place. Tenichi had not met the elder Ohara, though he knew that he was considered a wise, reasoned individual and was much respected.

Unfortunately, his son was more of a hothead, and, though it had never been voiced in polite circles, Tenichi knew that the young man had ambitions above his station. Shunned in his attempts to wrest Fourth seat from Hajime, he had settled at Fifth, entered Kikyue's patrol by his own will and, as many members of that group commonly believed, had aspirations of marrying Hirata's eldest daughter in order to consolidate his position in the Clan. Kikyue had never given any indication of being interested in Ohara as anything other than as a subordinate, and Tenichi did not believe Ohara's interest went beyond the material but, with the death of Kikyue's only brother, it was almost certain that the young man would begin to throw his weight around once more.

"If his father wasn't such a good man, I'd slice the lad's head off and send it back to Seventh District in a box," Hajime agreed grimly, "but as it is, all I can do is focus on those who are likely to flock around him. You two are sensible and you have your heads on right. Kikyue-dono relies on you both a lot, I know, so I'm going to, too. Let Ohara do as he likes, but round up the others and find something useful to do with them. Run a drill session, if you like. The yard's more or less empty, and it wouldn't hurt to take people's minds off everything. Not that that's really possible — but it's better than watching that poser strut up and down the halls days after the Clan heir has been laid to rest."

"Yes, sir," Tenichi said gravely, saluting, and Nakata nodded, following suit.

"Will do," he agreed frankly. "Ohara only ever listens to Kikyue-dono, but there's more than a few of us who'd run a rapier through him just to stop his tongue flapping. Second degree or not, this is squad, and he should treat you with more respect."

"Well, it's just till the Captain comes back," Hajime offered them a wry smile. "Kikyue-dono received a message from him that he expected to return later this evening, so it's not so long. If Ohara continues to flap and waste time, he might find himself the next object of a Clan funeral, and it won't be a moment too soon — but in the meantime, let's do what we can to get things back to a sense of discipline. Kyouraku-taichou told Kikyue-dono that he'd send people to help if we needed it in Taichou's absence, but I don't want to have to send out to our neighbours for help. That would be shame on the Endou, and there's been enough of that already with Souja-dono cut down in such a way."

"Agreed," Nakata nodded. "C'mon, Kotetsu. We've work to do —

let's get to it right away. Your sword's sharp enough — I dare say you can strike idiocy out of some of the juniors with it if need be."

He grabbed his companion by the arm, hauling him off in the direction of the training arena, and Tenichi allowed himself to be taken, glancing back thoughtfully at Hajime before he disappeared out of their sight.

"It's tough in a Clan squad," he murmured, more than half to himself. "Rank is about more than just ability. I guess I knew that... but hadn't really perceived it till now."

No kidding, "Nakata clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth." I've never had much time for Ohara... or the airs and graces he puts on to try and be impressive. Well, I might call him Masayuki-dono in front of his face, but that's only because form demands it and I don't want to show disrespect to his Pa. Be glad you're not a part of all of this, Kotetsu — at times like this, it's a headache for all."

Tenichi's lips thinned, but he made no response, instead following his companion out into the training yard. The few recruits were still there, and their expressions brightened at the appearance of two seated officers as they hurried over eagerly.

"Is the Captain back?" one asked anxiously, and Nakata cuffed him lightly across the back of the head, letting out a snort.

"If he was, d'you think we'd be out here amusing you whelps?" he asked gruffly. "No, not yet. We've been instructed to run drill in the yard, though, and that's what we'll do. You, and you, go round up the rest of Kikyue-dono's patrol. Masayuki-dono is probably engaged with some other important business, so you needn't bother about him, and Kikyue-dono's not to be disturbed, but everyone else. Tell them it's a direct order and there'll be consequences for any who don't bother to show — all right?"

"Yes, sir!" The recruits snapped to attention, before hurrying off towards the main door of the barracks, and Tenichi sighed, glancing at the three remaining individuals pensively.

"Better put the *bokken* back where they belong," he said lightly. "We're running sword drills, since it's clear that this division's defences need to step up a gear. Go on, hurry up! We're not going to wait till sundown!"

The trio exchanged glances, hesitating for a moment, and Tenichi's eyes narrowed.

"Is there a problem?" he asked softly, and the oldest of the three

stepped forward, lowering his *bokkenso* that it rested against his leg.

“Ohara-dono told us to practice with *bokken* out here,” he said slowly. “We weren’t to play with swords, he said, since there was nobody of authority on hand.”

“There wasn’t. Now there is,” Nakata said crisply, reaching to grab the *bokken* and pulling it forcibly from the youth’s hand and glancing at it. “Kotetsu gave you an order, and you’re expected to obey it.”

“But... Ohara-dono...” the recruit prevaricated, and Nakata sighed, swinging the *bokken* around until it made contact with the back of the young man’s knees. The force of the swing was not as strong as it might have been, but it was enough to make the recruit stumble, and his companions let out yells of dismay, hurrying to help him to regain his balance.

“Ohara-dono told you not to spar with swords unsupervised, and quite right too, given the aim some of you have, but you’re not unsupervised now,” Nakata tossed the *bokken* aside, glaring at the youngsters with a look that Tenichi knew meant trouble would follow if they didn’t obey with speed. ‘That being the case, Kotetsu gave you an instruction. I’ll give you one chance further to do as he bade you, or I will be using this,’ he patted the hilt of his sword, “and parting some hands from wrists, *bokken* still attached.”

“I would sooner you didn’t maim any division members in my absence, Nakata, however trying they might be.”

A fresh voice prevented anyone from finding out whether Nakata intended to make good on his threat, as with a whoosh of shunpo, Hirata himself materialised in the middle of the yard, his dark red Endou cloak wrapped around his shoulders in place of his usual white *haori*. Beneath it, however, he wore the black and white of a shinigami on duty, and as Tenichi gazed at him, he saw that the older man’s pale eyes were guarded and closed, preventing anyone from seeing into his thoughts. His words had been calmly spoken, but a chill breeze whipped around the ground, indicating once again that his control was only on the surface. At the sight of him, the recruits took several steps back, the two younger ones releasing their *bokken* as they scrambled into a position of proper respect towards their Clan Leader, and, as Tenichi bowed his own head, he felt his heart thumping in his chest.

“Taichou!” Nakata was the only one who seemed unperturbed by the sudden arrival, making his regulation obeisance before striding over to where the other stood. In physical build, Nakata was both

broad and taller than the Endou Leader, yet he kept a respectful distance from Hirata's sword arm, turning to gesture to the recruits.

"We were going to begin drill, and were waiting for the others to arrive, sir," he explained evenly. "These children seemed rather too fond of their wood sticks, so I was inducing them to exchange them for swords. That's all."

"I see," Hirata did not seem to be particularly listening, and as Tenichi raised his head slowly, he felt the pale eyes turn towards him, meeting his gaze thoughtfully yet impassively. A long moment of silence passed between them, then Hirata nodded his head.

"Very well," he murmured. "Nakata, remain here and do as you've been ordered. I imagine my daughter is still busy with sorting the Vice Captain's office, so I won't disturb her. Tenichi, I want you to come with me. You seem as good a person as anyone to make report."

"Me, sir? Yes, sir, of course," Tenichi's heart skipped a beat, but he nodded his head. "We were told not to expect you till this evening, or we would have been..."

"I intended to come then, but there was little for me to do except stand around and wait for the sun to set," Hirata cut across him, gesturing towards the main building. "I therefore came back more quickly, and will attend to whatever has accrued in my absence. Tenichi, I'll hear your report first, I think. Where is Ohara in all of this?"

"We don't really know, sir," Nakata said honestly. "Neither Kotetsu nor I have seen him — we received instruction from Hajime-dono."

"I see," Hirata's eyes narrowed slightly, but he nodded. "All right. If Ohara joins your drill, he is to take charge on my orders. If he does not, I'll hear his reasons why later on. You might send a recruit to report to Hajime that I've returned, since I won't have time to track him down myself. There's far too much to do without an adjutant to delegate to."

With that clinical statement, he swept away across the cobbles, cloak billowing in the wind his sword had undoubtedly produced, and Tenichi swallowed hard, meeting Nakata's gaze for a moment then setting his teeth, heading quickly in the direction his Captain had already gone. Though Hirata had spoken in detached, neutral tones, there was a tension prickling about his aura that told Tenichi his Captain was less rational about the absence of his Vice Captain than he was trying to make his division believe, and that, on the contrary, this detached, cold manner of speech was almost certainly the only

way Hirata could hold his composure before his men. Tenichi's mind flashed back to the memorial ceremony, and the brief glimpse he had had of his Captain following the cremation of Souja's body. It had only been a glance, the most fleeting moment imaginable, but Tenichi had been almost certain that the glitter against Hirata's lashes had not been the feeble sun glinting off his spectacles but a sign of real emotion showing itself at last. There was no indication of that now, of course, but in some ways that awareness made the Captain a more forbidding prospect.

Still, to disobey his instruction was unthinkable, and so he quickened his pace, finding that, by the time he caught his commander up, the latter was already unlocking the Captain's office, pulling the door back and ushering the District man inside. Tenichi bowed his head, doing as he was told, and Hirata shut the door, fastening the latch before moving across the room towards the window. He made no attempt to sit down, instead leaning up against the glass, his back to the world outside and his sharp, hawk-like gaze once more searching deep into Tenichi's own.

"Well, Kotetsu Tenichi. Your report, please."

Six words, softly spoken, yet a chill ran down Tenichi's spine, and he nodded his head hastily.

"Yes, sir. As you said, Kikyue-dono has been busy in S... Fukutaichou's office, and Hajime-dono has been taking charge of everyone else. His patrol have been busy with chores around the division, and he summoned Nakata and I to lead a drill, which we were about to begin when you returned, and..."

"If I wanted to hear the mundane, I would have taken a recruit," Hirata's cool tones sliced through Tenichi's babbled response, cutting him dead mid-sentence. "If I wanted an educated, insightful rundown of everything I'd missed, I'd speak to Hajime, since he's doubtless the one who's holding the ropes together. I didn't call you here to try my patience — which I warn you, is running extremely thin at the present time."

"I'm sorry, sir, I'm not sure I understand?" Tenichi's face drained of colour, as he stared at his Captain uncertainly. "If you didn't want me to... what did you... what kind of report...?"

"I have been thinking very hard about the night my son disappeared from Seireitei," Hirata said softly, and the shutters at the window rattled slightly as a sudden wind howled through them, circling around the office and causing several of the papers on the

desk to scatter from their neat pile. "Very hard, indeed. I'm sure I've done nothing else, in the brief spaces of time that have been my own."

"Sir..?" Now Tenichi could feel the sweat against his palms, hoping against hope that Hirata could not sense the fear in his aura or hear it in his voice.

"When I sent Kikyue out to search, I asked you a question," Hirata's eyes narrowed, and Tenichi once more had the impression of being hunted by the hawk that lived within his Captain's blade. "I asked if there was anything you remembered that you had omitted to tell me. Do you recall that question?"

"Yes, sir, I do, but..."

"You told me there was nothing you had not reported to me," Hirata cut across him again, and before Tenichi knew what was happening, his Captain was right in front of him, pale eyes gleaming with something more terrifying than the cold stone impassiveness he had shown outside, two thin, gloved hands digging into his shoulders and forcing him to meet the Clan leader's gaze head on.

"That was a lie." Hirata's words were no more than a whisper, but the rattle of the shutters indicated that the man's temper was rising, "wasn't it?"

"Tai... chou?" Tenichi swallowed hard, and Hirata's eyes became slits behind the lenses of his glasses.

"Kikyue reported to me that you had had a conversation with my son — information that he had made you conceal," he continued, still in the same low tones. "Information she had to pry from you — information about where you had been with Souja the night he brought you back to base. Kikyue said that you'd promised him not to go back there... nor to speak of it. To her, perhaps, that was appropriate... but to lie before me, your Captain, about anything that could have lead to finding him more quickly..."

"I'm sorry, sir," Tenichi bit his lip, wanting to take a step back from the prickling aura that now seemed to encircle him, but it was impossible, for, even had Hirata's fingers not still been digging into his shoulder-blades, the sheer force of the other's suppressed reiatsu was enough to render him unable to move. "I didn't know... I didn't think... I thought Souja-dono would have reported everything to you. He... he gave me the impression that it wasn't to be spoken... in front of anyone else and... and that if I did..you... would be... cross. When you asked me, we were... in front of... everyone. Therefore..."

“You chose to hold your tongue,” Hirata seemed to calm himself a little at the wavering note in Tenichi’s tones, releasing his hold and stepping back as though realising the threatening nature of his behaviour. “I see. Then will you tell me now, Tenichi, what promise it was my son extracted from you? What secret, exactly, was he trying to protect?”

“I don’t really know very much, sir,” Tenichi took a deep breath into his lungs as the pressure surrounding his body abated. “Just, Souja-dono said that the people who found me... I shouldn’t ever mention having seen them. He said where they were was dangerous land and I should keep it a secret. I didn’t... want to disobey Fukutaichou, and I didn’t know who or what they were, so I didn’t think I should tell Kikyue-dono... only... because Fukutaichou was missing...”

“I see,” Hirata folded his arms across his chest, leaning back against the window once more with a heavy sigh. “So it was the people Souja collected you from that he had you keep a secret?”

“Yes, sir.” Tenichi agreed, relief in his expression. “I don’t really know enough about them to even call it a secret, but one of them said... bad things would happen if I wondered too much about them, and then Souja-dono... so... I decided... it would be best to do as I was told.”

“Then I will ask you to maintain that promise,” Hirata reflected at length. “Those words are good ones to remember, and you should hold onto them. The people who retrieved you work for me and they are trusted agents, but their existence is a secret guarded only by a very few... even Kikyue knows nothing of their presence. Your knowing of them could become problematic... if you were to discuss their existence with anyone without the proper clearance, then...”

He stopped, pressing his lips together slightly as though cutting himself off before finishing what promised to be an unpleasant sentence, and Tenichi felt another shiver run down his spine.

“I have no intention of discussing it with anyone, sir. You have my word, I would rather forget it ever happened,” he said quickly, and Hirata nodded.

“And that was all? My son never mentioned anything else to you after that time?”

“No, sir,” Tenichi shook his head. “I act within Kikyue-dono’s patrol, and so my time with Fukutaichou was not as great as some others. We had no particularly close relationship... I respected him a

lot, but... it wasn't as though he took me into his confidence about anything, if that's what you mean. He didn't ever expand on what happened that night, and never spoke to me of it again... not even of my abduction."

"Ah yes. That," Hirata's eyes glittered briefly, putting Tenichi back on his guard. "That is something else I need to review with you. I understand you came back to Seventh in a confused state, but I wondered if you had remembered any more about what happened to you when you were in someone's custody?"

"Taichou?" Tenichi blinked, and Hirata nodded.

"Anything, no matter how small, I wish to hear it," he said quietly. "I know that you reported being dragged into a *Senkaimon* — but otherwise, gave nothing of use. Where that *Senkaimon* led... is now of significant interest to me, given the circumstances in which my son was found. If you remember anything... I want to know."

Tenichi faltered, memory of Keitarou and the promise made in Rukongai momentarily choking his vocal chords, and Hirata arched an eyebrow.

"Well?" The single word held a warning, and slowly and wordlessly Tenichi shook his head.

"You still remember nothing?"

"I was trying to piece it together, but no, sir, I do not," at length Tenichi forced the lie from his lips, hoping that his deception was not written all over his face. "I have thought on it much, too, though Fukutaichou told me to put it behind me... but even so..."

"It seems highly likely my son was killed investigating the incident," Hirata said bluntly, and Tenichi flinched, dropping his head.

"Yes... sir."

"He brought back some information, and we will investigate it, but if you remember nothing, there's no sense in my questioning you further," Hirata removed his glasses with a sigh, rubbing his temples wearily, and in that simple gesture, the flow of spiritual energy in the chamber dropped to a dull hum, indicating that for now, the Captain had fought back his hawk's spirit and re-established control over his emotions. "I will have to turn my attention to other leads instead. If the promise you made with my son only related to the Kitsune, then..."

He paused, frowning as he realised he had let the name slip, shaking his head as if berating himself for his carelessness.

"You should not concern yourself with that or them, however," he said at length. "For now, I want you to return to your duties and do your job. We will get to the bottom of your abduction and Souja's murder and, if they be connected, we will find that link as well. You shouldn't concern yourself too much with that, though. If you remember nothing, then you have no further part to play in the investigation and should leave it to others."

"Yes, sir," Tenichi let out his breath in a rush, then, as something else occurred to him, "Taichou, is it true that... someone came back with Souja-dono that night? A... District boy? Someone who... helped him back?"

"As I understand it, though the boy is tight in Thirteenth's custody and I haven't had a chance to pursue that lead myself," Hirata nodded. "I believe he hasn't yet regained consciousness after a run-in with Kikyue's sword. Why? Is there something you think I should know about him?"

The boy is called Koku, and I met him in Rukongai. He's an associate of Urahara Keitarou, the man you want to kill... and a man who might... who might... have been involved in the murder of your son.

Tenichi frowned, pushing the thoughts away.

"No, sir. I have not met with him either," he lied simply. "Just, a close friend of mine has been put in charge of his care, and I was concerned for his well-being. With Souja-dono so injured, if that boy is our only lead..."

"I understand he will live, and shows signs of rousing from his sleep soon, so I dare say we will soon know all we need to from him," Hirata reflected. "Ukitake-taichou is a persuasive man... I have faith that he will get whatever truth the District boy knows and then, maybe, we will know how to tie together all the loose ends my son left me with."

"I see," Tenichi's heart spasmed, and he lowered his head again, not wanting Hirata to see the stricken expression in his eyes. "Then may I ask to be dismissed? I would like to return to help Nakata-san, and..."

"Yes, you can go," Hirata agreed, flicking his hand towards the door, and Tenichi bowed a third time, this time more fervently, before hurrying to carry out his Captain's instruction before the man could change his mind.

Once out in the hallway, however, he dropped back against the wall, closing his eyes and putting his hand to his chest.

Koku. I forgot about Koku. If he talks... to anyone... the game is up. While he's unconscious, there's no problem, but if he were to wake up, that's another matter. Ukitake-taichou is persuasive and disarming when he wants to be... he might just convince the lad to open up. It's not like Koku seemed to care all that much about Keitarou-san, and, even though he took care of me and protected me from that girl's blade, he didn't seem involved with things — certainly not die hard loyal like that creature Kurotsuchi. He might be persuaded to turn witness if it proves to be to his advantage and if he does... if Koku talks about Rukongai, about Keitarou-san... about me...

He opened his eyes, clenching his fists.

I can't let that happen. If something happens to me, then that's one thing, but what if that Kurotsuchi was right and it spreads to Ketsui as well? Kirio, even? I didn't make promises with Keitarou-san to end up like this... but now it's gone this far, I can only protect the people close to me. I can't bring Fukutaichou back, so all I can do... is make sure... that nobody ever gets a chance to talk to Koku about what happened in Rukongai.

Author's Note

Sorry about the confusing AN last chapter. It has zero to do with this story and everything to do with my feelings about the latest chapter of manga. I just didn't want to spoiler for those who hadn't read. Byakuya won't be making any appearances in this story, though. xD He's a descendent of Shirogane's, but Shirogane is not his father, nor his grandfather — as we already know, those are Soujun and Ginrei — so there are some levels between this Kuchiki and that.

Shorter chapter this week. I don't design chapters to be long or short, it just depends on how they flow and where the right cut off seems to be. A Seventh Division orientated chapter. I quite like Nakata ;)

I'm currently writing chapter 39 (this is chapter 30, regardless of what Ffnet calls it xD) so you guys are catching up with me and it may be that updates slow down when I get towards Chapter 40. I am still finalising my Dissertation for my MA, and obviously that takes priority over the writing of anything else right now. For everyone who wished me luck in my exams, too — thank you =D I passed everything just fine =D.

32. Alien World

Chapter Thirty One: Alien World

The room was light, and the faint scent of herbs pervaded air which seemed clearer and more pure than the claustrophobic, dusty atmosphere he was used to in the wilds of the Rukon. There had been voices, too, flecks of unfamiliar spiritual presences darting across his thought patterns like interference across radio waves, but now all was quiet and still.

Images flashed briefly through his mind, hazy and grey as they blurred one atop another. A fight on the outskirts of the village. Sakaki, her blade dripping blood. A fallen shinigami, the cry of a wounded bird of prey circling before falling to shatter like a stone against the ground. The unsteady pulsing of a heart, skipping and jumping so much that to begin with he could not identify it as his own and, overriding it all, the mesh of spiritual presences that had fogged his senses, rendering him helpless as the claws of the kestrel had swooped down...

No, that was wrong. Though to his befuddled wits it had seemed as though he had been attacked by a bird of prey, in fact it had been a young woman, a woman with a sword and as resolute a killer instinct as Sakaki's. Although he tried to picture her, all he could see was a blur of black and white, the glint of silver slashing down towards him, and all around her body, glowing as though lit by the sun itself the aura of a predator's *reiryoku*. Had she been real or an illusion? Dazzled by the unfamiliar bright light of Seireitei's sun, it was hard to be sure.

Koku opened his eyes, staring up at the plain slatted ceiling of the Thirteenth Division barracks chamber. For a moment he lay completely still, allowing the slithers of his consciousness to slide back into place. His last clear recollection was stepping into the *Senkaimon* with Souja, he remembered dully, clutching the shaking, bloodsoaked body of the dying Vice Captain through the empty expanse, his heart pounding loud enough to render any conversation between them useless. Though he had done his utmost to keep his word to the injured man, on their emergence into Seireitei he had been sent reeling by the morass of spiritual matter in the ether. The following moments were a muddle of colours and lights, and, though he remembered Souja's battered body crumpling and sinking to the ground, he did not remember clearly when or how the shinigami had

come on the scene or what had happened to him following the Kestrel-woman's strike. Nonetheless, one thing was definitely missing from his awareness. Though he had been in close enough contact with Souja to be able to pick up his spirit presence, even at a distance, it was conspicuously absent. Perhaps it was the morass of reiatsu that was foxing his usually sharp senses, he told himself, but the empty feeling in the pit of his stomach told a different tale. He had seen Souja's injuries and he had known his companion to be beyond help. He had tried... he had had to... but his common sense had told him it would be a futile gesture and, as he lay there in the strange room on foreign soil, he wondered what had really driven him to make such a desperate, hopeless gamble. His life and everyone else's were now intertwined with a world he neither knew or understood... and yet he felt as though he had seen it before, its multitude of vibrant presences criss-crossing one another, and the bright light that glittered in through the slats in the window blinds all new yet all familiar just the same.

His heart felt heavy.

He had tried to fight against the tide, but had found himself washed out to sea regardless. Souja's death and everything that would follow had been mapped out like the pages of a book by a malign force for which even Keitarou was no match.

Aizen Kohaku. How I hate everything that name stands for, everything it's come to mean. And more, how I hate that we're all trapped by the tendrils of that creature's words... no matter how hard I try to fight against it, it always manages to prevail. The villagers in Rukongai are right... only a demon could have the power to manipulate every missing piece into its rightful place and then string us along after it according to its whims. Souja-dono's life, my life, maybe even Keitarou-san's... we're all at its mercy, and my being here like this is the proof.

He glanced down at his body, registering the thin blanket that covered him and, beneath that, the clean white robes that felt soft and unfamiliar against his skin. His own clothing was nowhere to be seen and, as he moved a hand cautiously to touch the fabric, he paused, sensing the reiatsu of one, no, perhaps two separate shinigami against its surface. His body felt numb and heavy, as though he had been drugged with some unknown substance and, as he drew his mind back towards the unsheathed blade of the kestrel, he remembered the sensation of metal clawing through flesh and blood pulsing from the wound, spilling onto the ground.

Had he felt pain? He couldn't remember, but as his fingers shifted

across his torso he could tell that someone had tried to repair some kind of damage, bandaging his wounds with fresh white wrappings before dressing him and laying him to rest in this room.

He sighed, closing his eyes once more.

Souja-dono's shinigami. Even though I knew he couldn't be saved, and he knew it too... I still made a decision, raised a weapon to Sakaki and ended up here. I wonder whether Keitarou-san or the shinigami would punish me more harshly for skipping from Rukongai into Seireitei without permission. Keitarou-san is probably... no, almost certainly looking for me. Sakaki will have told him... everything, most likely. He'll be worried... maybe confused... probably angry. Still, I couldn't do anything else. I didn't want to see someone else die.

He opened his eyes again, glancing cautiously around him as he tried to read the surrounding atmosphere for any sign of spiritual energy. It was hard, he realised with a jolt, for, as Katsura had often said, Seireitei's atmosphere was far purer and cleaner than that of the abandoned Rukon, yet it was also rich with *reishito* to a degree that Koku had never before had to face. That moment of intoxication upon first entering Seireitei's atmosphere had fogged his wits long enough for him to be cut down by one unwelcome blade — now he knew that if he was going to escape from here without the shinigami finding him, he would have to acclimatise to his new environment with some speed.

People had been in and out of his chamber whilst he had been sleeping — the people who had helped to bandage and dress him, as well as other distinct spiritual patterns of those who had merely stopped to check in on him without making direct contact with his body. Cautiously extending his senses, Koku counted at least eight different spiritual presences that had entered his immediate surrounds. Seven belonged to strangers, but the eighth, he noted with some consternation, was that of one he knew — Kotetsu Tenichi, the shinigami Keitarou had had brought to the Rukon.

I wonder if he recognised me... and if he did, what he's said.

His eyes became thoughtful slits.

Though talking about it would do him no good, either. Probably he's said nothing... and for me, that's for the best.

Some of the reiatsu traces, including Tenichi's, were old, at least two or three days, he reasoned, whilst others were much more recent, and one in particular had left the room less than five minutes before his rousing. That person was probably assigned to watch him, he

realised, and would doubtless be back soon from whatever errand had called him away. That meant that, if he was going to attempt an escape, he needed to do it now — for he had no way of knowing whether if he feigned sleep and waited till nightfall the shinigami would sense his deception and watch over him more stringently.

I don't know what Souja-dono may have told them about me, or where we met. I have to assume the worst for now and reckon that he told them we met in Rukongai and about what he saw there. I only hope that he didn't tell anyone that I knew the woman who attacked him. He promised to protect me if I came with him, but a dead man can't protect anyone. The only way he could keep that promise would be to omit reporting that information... I'll just have to hope that shinigami can be more honourable than Keitarou-san believes and he took that information with him to his grave.

He pushed back the blanket, gingerly shunting his body into a more upright position and wincing as a jolt of pain rippled suddenly through his ripped torso. Clenching his fists, it was all he could do not to cry out at the suddenness of the sensation, and he put a hand to his stomach, fighting to suppress the flickers of panic that the impulse had triggered within him.

What did she do to me? A minute ago I felt fine, but the instant I moved...

He pulled back the folds of the robe, running his fingers over the bandages, but the wound was hidden from view and to his consternation he found that putting any kind of pressure against the white wrapping sent further jolts of pain through his skinny body.

I'm hurt badly. Someone's treated me and whatever they did must have worked, but I didn't imagine the blade or the blood. That was my blood, not just Souja-dono's. The kestrel was real, too... I didn't imagine her. I wonder if I'm going to be able to get up... but I have to, so that's a moot question. I can't stay here, in the middle of a shinigami's nest. Even if I don't know my way around Seireitei, I'll have to trust my instincts and find somewhere more secure to hide. If Katsura's here, maybe I can find him and get his help — if not, well, I'll just have to manage as best I can. After eking a living in Rukongai, I'm sure that I can cobble together enough food or water to survive on while this wound heals... and once it does, I'll find a way to get back by myself.

He swallowed hard, pushing out of his mind the fact that he had never been to Seireitei before and, as such, had no idea how to open a Senkaimonto Rukongai or even where one could be found.

That's all I can do now. Try to get back. Staying with shinigami is a bad idea for all concerned... I have to leave here. I have to go back.

You can't go back.

The voice was so faint Koku half-thought he had imagined it, but from the chill that ran down his spine he knew he hadn't, the mocking, derisive words like drops of ice sending shivers through his body.

You'll never go back. Don't lie to yourself, fool. The door is closed and you know it. You knew it when you stepped into it, and you know it now.

For the briefest of instants, a cold, piercing gaze bored into his, empty and amused at his plight, but then, like a desert mirage it was gone, leaving him once more alone.

His eyes narrowed.

Go away. Nobody asked your opinion on anything.

There was no spoken response, but, from that distant, unreachable place, he felt sure he heard the sound of muffled laughter. Defiance surged through him and he grabbed hold of the wooden bed-head, using it to forcibly pull his injured body into a more upright position. The world twisted dangerously, the throbbing pain through his gut suddenly intensifying until he felt certain he must cry out. Sliding down to his knees, he doubled over, screwing his eyes fiercely shut to prevent the tears of pain from rolling down his cheeks. His panic impulses were flaring all the more now, and his pulse was pounding in his ears again, just as it had in the forest. He had never been hurt like this before — life in Rukongai had been barren and impoverished, but it had been secluded and, with Sakaki prohibited from harming him, relatively safe. In contrast, he had been in Seireitei the shortest of times, but already he was hurt who knew how badly, without any clue of how to get back. Though he had never particularly thought fondly of Rukongai, in that instant a wave of bitter homesickness flooded over him, as he realised how lost and alone he really was in this strange world. His shelter, his books, everything that had formed his entire world for the past twenty one years now seemed so very far away and, had the urgency of escape not been pressing on him, he felt certain that he might've given in to his melancholy and broken down in sobs.

And Katsura says that it would be so much better to live here.

Koku snorted at this sudden recollection, allowing his derision to override the fear and pain. Making a tremendous effort, he uncurled his body, stretching one cautious hand in front of the other as he dragged his heavy form forward. It took four or five ginger movements before he reached the door of the chamber and, using it as a support, he hauled his body upright once more, leaning heavily on

the bamboo wood slats and using his meagre body weight to force the sliding divide back just enough to allow him to slip through.

The sound of voices drifted down the hallway, making him freeze in alarm, for he felt certain he would be discovered, but they passed and faded away, indicating their owners had taken a different turning, and he let out a sigh of relief, forcing his scattered wits to focus. Though he didn't know how he had come to enter the barracks, by concentrating his full attention on the fragments of spirit matter adhering to the walls, he found himself able to follow the tracks of others who had passed this way, half-stumbling, half falling along the short walkway towards the source of light and fresh air. Katsura had often talked about the purity of the atmosphere in Seireitei, but the light of the sun was too much for Koku's gaze, and he shielded his eyes, gripping tightly to the wood panels to prevent himself from tumbling headlong.

The sensation of something soft beneath his bare feet told him that he had made it out into the bright daylight, the unfamiliar harmony of birdsong and insect humming filling his ears. The air was cool and clean, a soft scent of something Koku could not identify tinging each inhalation. Had he but known it, the perfume had wafted onto the wind from the bright flowers that bloomed around the Thirteenth Division garden in which Juushirou took so much pride, but, though he had seen fresh flowers many times in Katsura's memories and in his own dreams, he had never before encountered them in real life. Glancing down, he saw that the carpet of grass beneath his feet was emerald green instead of the dying yellow brown of the patchy clumps that struggled for survival over the border, and for a moment he forgot his pain and his fear, fascinated and bewitched by the overwhelming tapestry of colours. His first steps from the *Senkaimon* had not allowed him the time to really appreciate the peaceful plenty of his new environment, but, though Katsura had tried many times to describe it to him, none of the accounts matched up to experiencing it. *A world of life, not of death. For the first time ever, I'm not surrounded by decay.*

He took a few hesitant, stumbling paces forwards, still dizzy and unsteady on his feet, but suddenly drawn to see and feel more of this living world. The birds above his head were real ones, not the dusky images of his nightmares, their song vibrant and cheerful as they circled in the broad blue sky. A butterfly hovered briefly in and out of his line of sight, its blue and gold wings glittering like jewel dust in the sunlight. Captivated by the vivacity all around him, Koku momentarily forgot where he was and what he had originally intended, wanting only to see more of this strange, technicolour world

that reached out and grabbed at his soul as though waking it from a deep, dark dream.

A sudden exclamation drew him back to himself, however, and he swung around, alarm flooding his young features as he realised he was not alone. A male shinigami, robed in the all too familiar black and white of office was coming towards him, and, in his slipstream was another, more petite figure, who had been the one to give the alert. Flowers and nature forgotten, Koku's panic instincts flew into overload and before he knew what he was doing he took off running, desperate to put space between him and his captors — as he perceived them — before they could pin him down. It was a futile endeavour, however, for his wounded, weakened body would only allow him to go a few steps before pain and giddiness drove him to his knees, his surroundings such a morass of swirling colour that he could no longer determine which way was up and which down. Breathing heavily, with the sound of his heartbeat ricocheting through his skull, he forced shaking limbs to push forward, crawling where he was unable to walk as he sought to escape. The sound of footsteps was growing closer and closer and, as it did, Koku's scrambled senses identified the reiatsu of one of the individuals as someone who had been in his room earlier that day. He tried to evade her, but a shadow fell long over his body as the looming figure of the man reached his side, a strong, determined hand grabbing him by the shoulder and hauling him back.

“Ryuu, don't hurt him! He's injured and probably confused,” that was the woman's voice, growing closer now, but Koku was beyond trying to escape the man's hold, and, as she reached his side, his stomach twisted and spasmed, causing him to cough up scalding blood and bile onto the grass. The man — whose name was Ryuu — muttered something in low tones under his breath, but he did not release his hold, preventing the wounded boy from pitching forward, and the next minute gentle hands were looping themselves around his battered body, carefully taking over from her rougher companion. Carefully she wiped his lips clean of blood with a length of white cloth, then laid him down on the ground, her touch soothing and reassuring and completely unlike the military presence that Koku had interpreted shinigami to be.

“What are you doing out here, huh?” she asked softly, and Koku raised eyes to her concerned grey ones, only just preventing himself from crying out loud as her features came into focus.

“Edo... gawa... Mi... tsuki,” he murmured, his words barely above a whisper, but at the sound of them, the gentle gaze clouded slightly, her lips thinning as though trying to discern whether she had heard

him correctly. Koku's wits were beyond reasoning this out, however, for all he saw was the girl Katsura had shown him by accident, the girl he had failed to kill in the Spiritless Zone. And, judging by her presence here, he had failed to kill her the second time too. Absently Koku wondered what had become of his ally, but his brain was too scattered to properly process the thought. Though he knew he was surrounded, he could not do a thing to move his own body, and his pulse began to race once again as he realised he was completely at their mercy.

As though she could sense his fear, Mitsuki sighed, resting her hand lightly against his chest. She was careful about where she placed it, Koku realised dimly, avoiding the bandaging that concealed the burning slash across his gut and instead running her fingers gently over his ribs, feeling the beat of his speeding heart.

"You have every reason to be scared of us, but I promise, you're in no danger here," she said at length. "We're trying to help you — though I suppose I shouldn't be surprised that you'd try to run away. You're probably miles from your home and your family, injured and confused... still, I thought someone was with you. How did you manage to get this far without anyone setting off the alarm?"

"This is the waif and stray that belongs to Ukitake, is it?" The man's tones, austere and cultured, yet not unkind, broke through the soothing calm, and Mitsuki nodded.

"Right now he's my patient, first and foremost, and he shouldn't be out here, not running around when he's not fit to even stand," she replied, and Koku felt certain he hadn't imagined the concern in her tones. "Will you help me take him back to his room, Ryuu-kun? I don't know how he came to get this far, but until his wound has knitted a little more firmly, he shouldn't be moving about. He's not currently in danger of his life, but I don't want to push it."

This was the last thing Koku heard for, as the man nodded his acquiescence, reaching strong arms to scoop the waif up in his grip, the mix of pain and fear became too much for his traumatised brain and he slipped back into darkness, the scent of the garden blossoms still lingering at the back of his mind.

"You know, I came here to ensure that you were in no immediate danger," Ryuu stood back from the bed, eying the unconscious form of the young invalid with a heavy sigh. "I should have learned long ago that a visit to Thirteenth Division is never quiet or logical, whatever the errand, but I did not expect to be carrying around injured District

children this afternoon.”

“No, I know, and I’m sorry for it,” Mitsuki adjusted the snow white blankets over Koku’s body, pausing for a moment to glance at him before nodding her head. “He’ll sleep a while, now. I can’t use Kidou at present, so I’m not able to do a more permanent fix, but I really don’t think he’ll be running around anywhere again for a while. He pushed himself, but I don’t think he’s done any permanent harm. Hopefully his adventures this morning will dissuade him from any further romps — but I’ll suggest to Juushirou that we lock the door, for his safety as much as anything else.”

She sighed, folding her arms across her chest.

“I’m a little frustrated, to tell you the truth,” she admitted. “While I don’t mind being his primary carer, his injuries could be more easily healed with kidou. However, nobody will authorise anyone else from Fourth to come here and heal him. I sent a message to Unohana-taichou, but she’s up to her eyebrows in paperwork relating to the deaths in the Spiritless Zone and now the autopsy results from poor Souja-dono... in any case, she hasn’t sent a reply, and I get the distinct feeling that people in general don’t consider this boy important enough to help.”

“That’s foolish of them,” Ryuu snorted. “Is this not the young man who returned with Souja-dono? He may be the only witness... and his injury was caused by one of our officers. That being the case...”

“I know, and it’s not that I think people are actively blocking his treatment as such,” Mitsuki ran her fingers through her thick dark hair. “I know Fourth are flat out, so I don’t even blame them — like as not they haven’t even had a moment to think about a random District boy nobody knows anything about. Just, Juushirou’s provided him with shelter here, and he sent for me almost as if he knew things would be this way. Everyone is flapping about the death of a Clan lord — but as you say, this boy may be the one who holds the key to that puzzle, and shouldn’t be particularly disregarded. It’s as though they know his life isn’t in danger, so they’re not hurrying to save him — like whatever I can manage will have to do. Never mind his discomfort or his obvious fear at being here... it’s as though we’re meant to patch him up then leave him in a room and forget about him till he’s needed for the investigation. If not for Juushirou and his Thirteenth, that might’ve happened — as it is, I’m here, and Hikifunesan and Tsukabishi-kun have been helping watch over him. Hikifunesan in particular has proven very adept with changing dressings and so on — so we’ve managed. If I was still in Rukongai, though...”

She trailed off, and Ryuu pressed his lips tightly together at her words.

“It is a sign of the times, and the times are uncertain,” he said candidly. “Your stay in Rukongai has made you forget how things are in a Clan dominated society, which in some sectors are still reluctant to acknowledge the value of District participation. Ukitake has worked hard to establish Thirteenth as a respectable force and has largely succeeded, but even he comes in for direct criticism or derision from a couple of the more traditional Clan Captains. Though things are changing, Seireitei evolves slowly. Although there are no bars on District individuals entering any Gotei squads, most still come to Thirteenth. Cross-Clan membership is increasing, but so far as the Districts go, the Kotetsu boy in Seventh and the handful that exist in the Fourth and Eighth are the exception and not the rule. And, if I may say it, Ukitake, despite his own personal charisma, benefits among the less enlightened nobility by having two Clan-born adjutants to support his regime.”

“What about Sixth?” Mitsuki eyed him quizzically, and a wry smile touched Ryuu’s lips.

“We have no prejudice against it,” he said slowly, “but it seems that most District Academy graduates are too frightened of the Kuchiki reputation to apply to us at recruitment.”

“Well, I suppose that’s understandable,” despite herself, Mitsuki was amused. “Still, I’m glad to hear they’re not one of the Divisions operating with prejudice. If they were, I’d be taking Shirogane-senpai to task about it.”

“Surprisingly, Shirogane-senpai is of the opinion that a few District individuals would be good for the Sixth ranks, and has been diligent in his protection of compensation rights to displaced District shinigami in an attempt to prove the Kuchiki are not indifferent,” Ryuu mused. “As I’ve mentioned before, he has active agents among the traders that travel between Districts, and as Guren-sama leaves the majority of the squad decisions to Senpai and I, I trust that it won’t be long before we number District shinigami among our ranks.”

“Senpai is?” Mitsuki looked surprised, and Ryuu nodded.

“He never has forgotten the assistance he received from District people such as the Ukitake during his time in exile, and it has shaped his philosophies since, both as Clan heir and Vice Captain,” he reflected. “His young son will be indoctrinated into the same line of thought when he is old enough to understand, and I, of course, have

no objection. However, that is not to say full support exists... even given that Shirogane-senpai has made those advances, the Clan recently had to discipline the Ninth for not adhering to the Kuchiki's policy of acceptable compensation and District protection. As I said, change moves slowly. These days, it is not those at the pinnacle of power who provide the opposition. It is those lower down in the Clans, who fear that their position will be challenged. People like Anabomi and the Eleventh Division Captain, whose Clan rank is significantly low, feel threatened by talented District youths gaining promotions in other squads."

"Like Juushirou's bunch, I suppose," Mitsuki sighed, resting her hand against Koku's for a moment. "I see why Juushirou had this boy brought here and not sent to Fourth. Even the Unohana probably have their prejudices, though I've not been here to observe them first-hand. Unohana-taichou is one thing, and Fukutaichou and Madeki-dono aren't bigoted, but lower down..."

She shrugged.

"I don't pretend I like it, though. Rukongai isn't an easy place to live, sometimes, but at least it's lacking in the stifling politics of Clan. Being back here... reminds me of them all over again."

"Such is life in Seireitei," Ryuu agreed. "Am I to understand, then, that you plan on remaining here with this boy for the foreseeable future, and not returning with me to Sixth?"

"Probably," Mitsuki admitted. "I'm certain that in Sixth, my safety would be guaranteed, but honestly, I think I'm needed more here, and if danger threatens, I'll find a way to overcome it. Perhaps I also fit in better among the District squad members, too. I'm a healer, not a fighter, but Rukongai has also made me much further from being a Clan *himethan* I was even before graduation. I was glad to see you, and Senpai, and Father's flying visit made me realise how much I'd missed him, but..."

"I told you a long time ago that whatever path you chose would not affect our friendship," Ryuu reminded her. 'Meantime, to return to the problem of your waif, Clan politics aside, it does appear as though someone is attacking shinigami with deliberate purpose. Your own life was put in danger, so you can't pretend to be oblivious to that potential *modus operandi* or its success rate thus far. Such a threat to security obviously occupies the minds of the Gotei before the life of a District stray. I am not saying they are more important,' as Mitsuki's lips parted in ready protest, "just that they are otherwise understandably occupied. I am also preoccupied by it, if truth be told,

but on a more personal level. I have no idea why you might be a target, and it troubles me that I do not — and equally, I can also not explain the reason for the murder of Hirata's poor son."

His eyes shifted to the boy on the bed.

"I wonder too if people are holding back because so much is unknown," he mused. "I have heard a rumour, Mitsuki — a rumour I did not like. I am reluctant to spread it, particularly in Guren-sama's hearing, since it is supposedly restricted to Council level security... but it hardly seems to matter since everyone in Seireitei seems to be whispering about it. They are talking about Aizen Keitarou, and the very real possibility he is grooming a son of his to usurp power in the Gotei by way of the Endou power vacuum. Whilst solving Souja's murder is important, it cannot bring him back. I don't disagree with your wish to heal this youth, and I hope very much he is capable of providing useful information but... in reality... I think it unlikely to be the case. He was unarmed when Ukitake found him, correct? Yet a sword fighter with enough ruthless power to slaughter a talented Vice Captain was at large. Surely, if he had seen anything of any worth, he would have been cut down too. His injuries are the result of Kikyue's careless blade, not of Souja's assassin, and even without using spiritual techniques, you are more than equal to the task of treating him. That being the case..."

"I know, but it's all we have right now," Mitsuki admitted. "Hirata's my friend as well as yours, Ryuu. True, it's been a long time since I've seen much of him and, in the little I have seen since I came back, I can tell that he's changed. Nonetheless, Juushirou's told me how much he loved his son, and I can't imagine the pain of a father having to bury his only heir. For that reason... I want to help. If all I can do is treat the one potential witness we have, that's what I'll do. At least that way I'm being useful. I prefer that... I'm not cut out to be a sheltered *hime*, even if you and Shirogane-senpai are worried about me."

"Well, worrying about you wouldn't be a new sensation, so I dare say we will survive it," Ryuu eyed her keenly. "I see your mind is made up. When I return to Sixth, I shall convey as much to my Vice Captain and my Captain. You are free to make your own decisions in this, Mitsuki. The Kuchiki do not own you or govern your movements — those decisions belong to your Captain, not to mine."

"Edogawa-san! Ryuu-dono!" At that moment the door of the small bedchamber slid back with a bang, revealing a frantic Tsunemori, whose expression became first relief and then consternation as he registered the room's three occupants. "Oh, you... did you find him?"

How... where? I only left the room for a minute, he was sleeping, and one of the recruits got himself tied up in a *Hainawa* and I had to go rescue him and the next thing I knew..."

"I think he was sleeping less deeply than we thought, so he went for a little walk without our knowledge, but there's no harm done," Mitsuki's initial impulse to scold melted away at the genuine anxiety in Tsunemori's gaze. "It's all right, Tsukabishi-kun. He'll rest for a bit now, I think, and if you'll remain with him, Ryuu and I can go report to Ukitake-taichou."

"I won't leave here again till Kirio returns, I promise," Tsunemori said fervently. "She'd be cross with me if I let anything happen to him. She considers him her own responsibility, now, because Taichou put her in charge of him, and so I'm a little relieved you found him and not her. She... doesn't need to know about it, does she?"

"I had no idea Hikifune was such a forceful individual," Ryuu looked surprised, and Mitsuki chuckled.

"Well, I think since she helped rescue this waif, she feels a certain duty towards his recovery," she said simply. "Don't worry, I won't say anything to her. As I said, there's no harm done. On the contrary, the fact he can rouse up is reassuring. It means he's recovering, and that soon we might be able to talk to him properly about what happened to Souja-dono."

She got to her feet, smoothing down her *hakama* and holding out her hand to her cousin, who followed suit, nodding his head towards Tsunemori who bowed fervently in response before guiding his companion out of the small chamber and down the hall that led out to Ugendou. Once alone, however, he frowned, and Mitsuki cast him a sidelong glance.

"Ryuu?"

"The boy said your name, didn't he?" Ryuu's words were soft, but at the sound of them, Mitsuki bit her lip.

"I thought so too," she admitted, "but I assumed I must have misheard. There's no way he could have known something like that... we've never met before."

"I would rethink that judgement, as I am quite certain he spoke your name and nothing else," Ryuu said categorically. "You must have a prior acquaintance from somewhere... perhaps a village you stopped to tend at one time?"

"How could I have done?" Mitsuki shrugged helplessly. "I've been

in Rukongai, Ryuu. I've not been in Seireitei for twenty five years, and since I've been back, I've been here and nowhere else. That boy... whatever else is clear, he's not old enough to have even been born when I was last in Seireitei long term, and then I was just a student. I didn't go skipping around villages randomly dishing out healing treatment. There's no way. We must have misheard."

"Both of us?" Ryuu arched a sceptical eyebrow. "I think that to be unlikely."

"Well, then he heard my name from Hikifune-san or someone else, during the time I was treating him," Mitsuki ran an absent hand through her thick dark hair. "That's not impossible, now I think of it. I couldn't use any Kidou sedation techniques, and it's possible he was more conscious than we realised when I was dealing with his wound. The pain may have disturbed him, but not enough to bring him to full awareness. He might have heard someone say my name during that time — in which case..."

"In which case, I wonder why it was when he saw your face he reacted so, and not when he heard your voice," Ryuu said categorically. "I shall reiterate, Mitsuki. You should reassess all your possible past acquaintances with the Districts, as it appears that boy knows you by name and face."

"I don't see how he can," Mitsuki frowned. "My explanation is far more likely... he wasn't fully in his wits when we found him just now. You must've seen the glazed, half-dazed look in his eyes? He wasn't really aware of what was happening, and our being there triggered his panic impulses."

"I am not convinced," Ryuu admitted, "but I confess, I cannot find an adequate explanation within logic to account for his words."

"You two look concerned about something," as they reached Ugendou, Juushirou pushed the sliding door back, greeting them with a quizzical glance. "I assume this has something to do with the vague flurry of spirit power I felt a short time ago from the vicinity of our stray?"

"Mm... he roused up," Mitsuki nodded her head. "He was disorientated and decided to take a walk, but we got him safely back to bed. It's fine, Juushirou. Nothing to worry about. He hasn't upset his injury any more, and on the contrary, that he's able to regain consciousness even to that point means he'll soon be well enough for you to talk to him about Souja-dono."

"Then why those expressions?" Juushirou ushered them inside,

indicating for them to make themselves comfortable on the various cushions while he resumed his own seat behind his desk. As Mitsuki settled herself, she could make out the official looking document on the top of the pile as being a recruitment slip, and she cast him a startled glance.

“Thirteenth are taking on new members?”

“One,” Juushirou agreed, letting out a sigh as he gazed ruefully down at the sheet of paper. “It’s a little complicated, but circumstances have indicated she’s better coming to us now than waiting. I expect her to arrive in the next day or two, depending on transport — and so I was finishing up the requisite documentation first. Enishi’s not a real fan of forms, so I said I’d handle it.”

“Another District child?” Ryuu asked, and Juushirou nodded.

“Yes, and a girl,” he agreed. “I’ve been told many interesting things about her ability, but I’ve yet to meet her face to face, so more I can’t tell you. Besides, that can wait for the time being. I’m more curious to know about our stray — and why, if all is well, the two of you came here with such long faces?”

“The boy knew Mitsuki’s name, Ukitake,” Ryuu cast his cousin a glance, speaking before she could prevent him, and Mitsuki sighed, clicking her tongue against her teeth in frustration.

“Ryuu, you’re jumping to conclusions that might not even mean anything!”

“He knew your name?” Juushirou’s brows knitted together in clear consternation. “Mitsuki, what does he mean? The boy can’t be more than twenty at most — how could he possibly know that?”

“I asked the same question,” Ryuu reflected. “It concerns me, given the fact that Mitsuki herself has been the target of assassination attempts recently.”

“You think that boy was sent here to kill me?” Mitsuki’s eyes grew huge with dismay, and Juushirou frowned, holding up his hands.

“One thing at a time. We’ve no evidence to suggest he even came here armed, let alone with the intention of killing,” he said frankly. “When Kirio and I found him, he had no weapon at all, nor had he made any attempt to take Souja’s. He was helpless against Kikyue’s attack, and there’s nothing that indicates he did anything but try and help our wounded comrade to return home. I’m concerned about Mitsuki’s safety too, especially if there was someone following her around the Thirteenth the other day, but...”

“Mitsuki is my cousin, so of course I am concerned,” Ryuu said simply. “Her life is not dispensible to me, and I am sure it is not to you, either. I am well aware, Ukitake, how you viewed the news from the Spiritless Zone, so in those circumstances...”

“Please stop talking about my safety as if I wasn’t in the room?” Mitsuki interrupted, irritation in her beautiful grey eyes. “If that’s how you were thinking, Ryuu, you could’ve told me right away. Koku wasn’t the person following me in the garden the other night. His reiatsu is different. And, Juushirou and his people captured a shadow-spy already, and he’s cooling his heels in Second Division. While I haven’t met this shadow, and don’t know whether he poses me any threat, I don’t see how this connects to Koku in the slightest.”

“How do you believe he knew your name, then, Mitsuki?” Juushirou asked gently, and Mitsuki pursed her lips.

“My only explanation is that he was coming out of his stupor and heard someone call me by it. Hikifune-san, or you, or anyone else who was in that room when I was treating him,” she said at length. “Ryuu thinks it unlikely, but it’s not impossible for him to absorb and retain the information. It’s also possible that his seeing me and calling me Mitsuki was a fluke lucky guess. Mitsuki is a woman’s name, and I’m a woman. It could just as easily have been Hikifune-san or Naoko, and he might have called either one of them by my name instead. It just happened to actually be me... that’s all.”

“There are too many coincidences in that story for my liking,” Ryuu said grimly. “Ukitake, Mitsuki is determined to remain here as long as that boy needs care. I know you probably don’t need asking, but I wish to make a particular request on behalf of Sixth and the Kuchiki that her safety is given paramount importance.”

“Mitsuki’s safety is always of paramount importance to me, Ryuu, wherever she is and whatever she’s doing,” Juushirou glanced across at the healer, whose cheeks pinkened slightly at the emotion in his hazel gaze. “You have my word she won’t be put in harm’s way. Souja was very clear, though — I heard him myself. He said Koku helped him, and was adamant that we protect him from harm. I took on that promise for him and for the Endou, from one shinigami to another. Now he’s dead, I feel an additional obligation to see it through. Koku isn’t here as a prisoner. We’ll keep a close eye on him, but unless there’s any indication of hostile behaviour... I’m not going to try and alienate him. We need his trust, not his fear.”

“When he saw us, he tried to run, not attack,” Mitsuki added. “In the state he was in, he would’ve followed his immediate instinct. He

wanted to flee, not fight — which suggests that he's more afraid of us than he wants to cause us harm."

Ryuu sighed.

"Well, so long as you are aware of the concern and of Mitsuki's safety, then I suppose I will be content with that," he said at length. "In the meantime, while I am here, I wished to ask you — what you know about these rumours relating to Aizen Keitarou? Are they true? I imagine if they are you'd know something of them."

"Mm," Juushirou's expression clouded, "but I'm not sure what I ought to say. I was summoned to a formal Council meeting about it, Ryuu — and while I don't like pulling rank between friendships, we're talking about a man who may have been involved in the murder of a Vice Captain and Clan heir. All I'm going to say is that the name has come up... and that it will be investigated thoroughly."

"If it that way, then I shall wait until Guren-sama's official missive," Ryuu looked resigned. "I thought perhaps you might consider it that way, so I am not offended. I asked only because Hirata is my friend and Souja was his son — but I do not wish to create waves by demanding information ahead of my rank."

He got to his feet.

"I shall return to Sixth and report what I can about Mitsuki to Senpai," he added. "I also hope that your new recruit knows what she's coming into, Ukitake. It hardly seems the most ideal time or place for adding members."

"Normally, I wouldn't choose to accept one, but this is a special case and she has no other place to go," Juushirou replied with a sigh. "Don't worry, though. I won't be too busy to remember my other duties — and Mitsuki will be fine here if that's where she chooses to be, at least until she can return to Fourth."

"Then I shall take my leave," Ryuu inclined his head towards his old friend, then his cousin, before withdrawing from Ugendou, and Mitsuki sighed, shaking her head slowly.

"He worries too much about me because of what happened in Rukongai," she murmured. "I understand it, but honestly, being able to treat that boy is... well, it's returning to me some of my old spirit and sense of self. That's what I'm here to do, and he needs me. Nobody else is bothering about him, and I can't do much else... so I want to keep taking care of him until he's well."

"I have no authority to override that decision, since I'm not a

healer,” Juushirou assured her. “If you’re happy to continue, I don’t intend on intervening. Tell me, though, your official opinion — the boy is on the mend?”

“Very much so,” Mitsuki agreed. “He’s thin, undernourished and he was dusty and grimy when he first came here, but he’s clean and he’s been allowed to rest, which will help. His injury is to his gut, though I’ve mended it as best I can. I want to be careful with what food we give him to begin with, but I see no problem with him taking soup or porridge for the first few days. Kikyue-dono’s sword made a mess of him, but it didn’t actually perforate any major organs, just grazed them and caused them to become battered and bruised about, so I think he should be able to ingest plain foods. Still, running away from Ryu and I prompted him to be sick, so his insides are still quite irritated from everything that’s happened. Rest, gentle food and plenty of fluids... as well as patience. I know you want to talk to him, and I think soon that will be possible — but I really think he’s scared of us.”

She sighed, folding her hands in her lap.

“Ryu thinks he means to hurt me, but I didn’t read it that way at all,” she continued. “He did say what sounded like my name, and he looked right at me when he did it — but it wasn’t guilt or hostility in his eyes. It was fear. Seeing me frightened him, as though I was some apparition that he didn’t expect to materialise before him. I don’t know how he knew I was Mitsuki, or even if he was speaking consciously, but I can’t read any malicious intent from his aura.”

“You think he’s just scared?”

“Yes. Disjointed. Scared. Ill and far from people and places he knows,” Mitsuki agreed. “It will take time to win him over, I think. Time and patience.”

“I’ll try my best,” Juushirou promised. “Us having him prevents any furious interrogations by the Endou, which, given Hirata’s current state of mind, would be a very real possibility. Koku is safest with us out of everywhere else in Seireitei at present... so we’ll do our best to make him realise that we don’t mean him harm. And, maybe, when he is more coherent, he can explain for himself the mystery of your name. In the meantime, I can’t forget Souja’s admonitions to protect the boy. Souja wasn’t a fool... if he said Koku was on his side, I believe it.”

He cast her a sidelong glance.

“You said his reiatsu was different from the person who was tracking you in Thirteenth — would you recognise that presence again

if you encountered it?”

“Yes,” Mitsuki looked troubled, “but if the suspect is in Shihouin custody, that’s not a place I really want to go. Shihouin-kun is one thing, but the rest... Second Division has a feel to it and I don’t really like it. For now, I’d rather focus on Koku. I’m not as important as getting to the bottom of Souja-dono’s death, and since we know Koku wasn’t stalking me, then the matter should be dropped.”

“You seem very unbothered about this,” Juushirou’s eyes became suspicious, and Mitsuki met his gaze with an impassive one of her own.

“I am a healer. I heal,” she said frankly. “I leave the intrigue and the politics up to the rest of you — it’s not my place.”

“Mitsuki-chan?” Juushirou was taken aback, and Mitsuki sighed.

“For a while I’d like to focus on the living rather than the dead,” she said softly. “It’s the only way I can come to terms with Rukongai — by doing what I can to be useful for those who need me. He needs me, so I’ll do what I can. Please understand, Juushirou-kun, that the Spiritless Zone was never a guaranteed safe place. I knew that the whole time I was there, and I learned to live with that uncertainty by helping who I could help and being what use I could to the people as and when they needed me. This... is the same kind of thing. Seireitei is stifling in some regards, but you of all people ought to understand the desire just to get on with what’s right in front of you.”

“I suppose I do,” Juushirou’s fingers brushed the recruitment slip for a moment, and then he sighed, rubbing his temples. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to be insensitive. You do what you need to do to come to terms with what happened — I won’t stand in your way. I probably can’t understand as much as you’d like me to, what it was you faced over there.”

“You don’t need to go that far,” Despite herself Mitsuki smiled, reaching out to put a reassuring hand on the sleeve of his white haori. “So long as you realise this is part of my healing process, that’s enough. I’m grateful for you indulging me as much as you have done, and for just being there, even if it’s been from a distance.”

“I’m bothered that it’s all I can do,” Juushirou admitted. “Things have changed, but my feelings haven’t... balancing that with my duty is sometimes more tricky than I’d like.”

“Thirteenth needs to come first, though,” Mitsuki chided him gently. “I can’t pretend it hasn’t taken a while to get used to, and

maybe I still am, but I don't want to come between you and your vocation. It's more than obvious that everyone here looks up to you and adores you — and whilst I envy that bond a little, I don't want to break it."

"Envy it?" Juushirou stared, and Mitsuki grinned faintly, reaching across to pat him on the arm.

"Perhaps a selfish part of me wants to consider you mine, even though I know as well as you do how we agreed against that," she confessed, her cheeks pinkening slightly. "Especially given recent circumstances, it's inappropriate to even discuss it — but I do appreciate what you're doing to support me. And... I don't want you to worry about my safety. I don't think I'm in any immediate danger, I really don't."

"The Council also think that we should stop investigating the person who helped you, now we've a man in Shihouin custody and Keitarou as a lead," Juushirou grimaced. "Maybe they're right. Maybe it's just because it's you that I can't let it go."

"Maybe it is," Mitsuki said lightly, relief flickering in her heart at these words. "They're right, though. Keitarou is far more important, and so is justice for Souja-dono and for my colleagues. In the meantime, I'm fine. In fact, it comforts me to know I'm not alone here."

"Unlike the young boy Koku?"

"Mm," Mitsuki agreed. "Hikifune-san is very keen on helping him, though. She sees it as a way to help her own friend, that Kotetsu boy, overcome his feelings of guilt over Souja-dono's death. Also, though, I think... there's more to it than that. I don't know her very well, Juushirou — but I wondered if, perhaps, she had been in a similar situation in the past?"

"I believe her family abandoned her out of fear for her spirit power when it first developed," Juushirou replied. "Thirteenth has become her family in many regards, though it's probably true that the Kotetsu boys are as much kin to her as any other. I see what you're saying, though, and I've noted it. Handing the boy to Kirio's care happened by coincidence, because she was with me at the time, but I think I'll maintain it once he's fully awake. Probably she will understand the feelings of an uprooted stray better than I can."

"I think that would be a good plan, especially if you've a new recruit to deal with," Mitsuki agreed. "One other thing, though, about the boy. You said yourself that you sensed a reiatsu flurry — what did

you mean, exactly?"

"What I said, I think," Juushirou rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "It wasn't an aggressive flare, just... I was aware of someone's spirit power going in and out of focus suddenly."

He frowned.

"That was Koku's reiatsu, wasn't it? That's why you can be so sure about it being different from your stalker?"

"Mm," Mitsuki inclined her head, hoping Juushirou could not see the expression of guilt in her eyes. "Koku doesn't have very good reiatsu control. *Reiryoku* control either, I imagine, and I get the feeling he has quite a bit of that. Not that he's tried to use it at all coherently, and I'm not certain if I think he even could. However, it's something to bear in mind. I don't think he has any ill intent towards anyone here, but people sometimes react when they're cornered and frightened — I would advise only high ranking officers go near his room until we've established some kind of rapport with him."

"Then I'll make sure nobody below Tsunemori's rank goes near the chamber," Juushirou decided. "A... A *District* boy with unfettered *reiryoku* is a potential problem, as I know from vivid personal experience."

He patted Sougyo no Kotowari's sheath lightly, and for the first time Mitsuki felt certain there was a deeper level of concern in Juushirou's aura than she had perceived there at first..

"I imagine you're equal to whatever he can throw out, though, Mitsuki — so I'm reassured that I can leave him in your care."

Thirteenth Division had never felt more alien to him than it did now.

Tenichi stood in the front courtyard of the newest Gotei division's barracks, gazing with troubled eyes at his former home. Carved in the wood above the distinctive five slashes that made up the Japanese number 'Thirteen' was the image of a snowdrop depicted simply yet clearly as a message to all who stepped over the threshold and into the first and only District-based division. Tenichi did not know how the snowdrop had come to be associated with Juushirou's Thirteenth, only that it symbolised the hope which, to both new District recruits fresh out of the Academy and the scattered populations across the wider regions of Outer Seireitei was a promise from the Gotei that their words and needs would not be forgotten. During his own student

days, Tenichi remembered with a bitter pang the sense of anticipation and excitement that had filled his young heart upon completing his application for recruitment, safe in the knowledge that he — as well as Kirio and others of their class — would not be debarred entry based on their place or circumstances of birth. It had been a time when he had resolved to put behind him the dubious heritage of his father and the common bloodline of his mother and focus simply on his own future as a shinigami of the Gotei Thirteen. He could hear himself now, telling Kirio how he would forge a new reputation for the Kotetsu name for both honour and bravery in uniform on the day they had first entered these grounds as new recruits, and it felt like an age had passed since then.

Fukutaichou is dead and I have a secret. Urahara blood is thicker than I ever thought it was, and it's not going to let me go.

He swallowed hard, clenching and unclenching his fists as he contemplated what he had decided he must do. It had not been an easy decision, nor one he took any pride in, but the more he had thought it over, the less options he realised he had. There would be no bribing Thirteenth's unexpected visitor, and even if that had been an option, Tenichi had only his basic salary to offer, a reasonable amount for a single shinigami but by no means in the realm of Clan wealth. With the power that the Council had on hand, he knew that intimidation was also not a viable tactic — in most quarters, simply the mention of the Shihouin's Onmitsukidou were enough to encourage a stubborn witness to share their heart, and Tenichi's acquaintance with Koku had been too brief and insubstantial to claim friendly obligation. No, there had been only one choice, and prevaricating over it would do nothing to change that fact.

Koku would have to be silenced, before he had a chance to talk.

Tenichi had never killed anyone before, and the thought of doing so now made him feel sick to his stomach with disgust and self-hatred. Every part of what he was planning was low and cowardly, he told himself grimly, and yet it did not change the necessity of the act. Even spilling blood by crossing swords was unpalatable, but there was nothing more base than the thoughts he currently entertained of sneaking into Koku's sickroom and stifling the life out of the young man before he could wake and reveal their connection.

Crossing over from Rukongai is a capital offence, anyway. His life is already forfeit — really, I'll only be doing what the court would do if they knew. Only if they knew, I'd be in trouble, so I can't let them find out.

Tenichi pressed his lips together, trying to convince himself of this

fact.

If I'm careful, they'll think he died of his injuries. Shock, infection, something like that. If I'm careful, they'll never know anything else happened. Why am I still hesitating? This is to protect me, protect Ketsui, protect everything we've ever worked for. Surely I care more for my brother and my own reputation than I do whether one Rukongai vagrant lives or dies?

The sound of voices made him start, darting into a wooden alcove and hoping against hope that he had not been seen. His heart thundered in his chest, its rattle loud enough that he was convinced the two young division recruits could hear him a mile away, but, engrossed in their conversation about their sword training, neither one of them paid him the slightest bit of attention, and he let his breath out slowly, relieved that they had not been officers of higher rank. Although he had suppressed his reiatsu down as much as possible, he knew that such a skill was not infallible, and that there were individuals within the Thirteenth with enough ability in reiatsu detection to unmask him before he reached his destination.

Tenichi's lips thinned, and he pushed this thought aside. He knew that Juushirou was not on site, for he had watched the Thirteenth Division's Captain leave a short time before making his own entrance, a rolled up document in his hand and a preoccupied look on his face. Whatever had called him away, it was the best chance Tenichi had to slip in and out undetected, and he only hoped that the division's sharp-witted, sharp-tongued Third seat was also otherwise engaged. *I can't wait any longer, though. Taichou spoke as though Koku's on the verge of waking. If that's the case... then I don't have much time left to act. I'll have to take my chances with Naoko-san and hope she's not on the prowl today.*

He checked that the coast was clear, doublechecked and then slipped around the back of the division, tiptoeing across the cobbles until he reached the storehouse which held the division's supplies. Once a month this was replenished according to the orders placed by Enishi or Naoko, and in years past Tenichi had been given duties here, fetching and carrying and ensuring everything was in order in between recruit drills and mission dispatches. He had not enjoyed the mundane nature of the task then, but now he felt grateful for it, inching along the wall of the storehouse until he reached the middle door. This one, he knew, was loose at the hinge, for it rattled when the winds were high and yet with Thirteenth's limited personnel, nobody had found the time to spare to fix it. A half-inch's gap was all he needed to slide his fingers between the slats of wood and jiggle loose the metal fastening, opening the door as quietly as possible and

slipping into the darkness beyond. Once inside, it was an easy task for him to navigate the heaps of rice sacks, salted fish and ink stones to reach the door that connected this outflung place to the heart of the division barracks and he eased the divide back cautiously, checking both ways to ensure he was alone before crossing the threshold.

His heart was still pounding fit to burst as he crept along the hallway towards the small back chamber where he had seen Koku asleep those fateful days before. As he approached, he filtered out the different reiatsu presences that had been nearby recently, his brow creasing as he struggled to identify each. One was Kirio, he was certain of that, but there was another one too which he realised with a jolt belonged to the healer that had been brought back from the Spiritless Zone. Tenichi had not met her himself, but knew she was some kind of acquaintance of his former Captain and Vice Captain, and therefore had been given free reign of Thirteenth despite not having an official division rank. As he drew closer to the chamber, however, he realised that she was not there, and, though his friend's reiatsu was the most recent, Kirio too was absent. The room was empty except for his prey, and he extended a cautious hand, before pausing, grimacing ruefully at his foolishness.

Rummaging in his *obi*, he pulled out a strip of cloth which he wrapped around his hand as a makeshift glove, using the cloth surface as a protective barrier between his fingers and the door. At first contact he realised it was locked, but Tenichi had come prepared for that, and after a bit of manipulation he heard the lock click loose. Inwardly thanking his lucky stars once again that his former Division did not boast the expensive high security measures of the Clan divisions, he pushed the door back, stepping into the sunlit chamber.

As he had expected, the room was empty save for the motionless, pale figure wrapped in blankets on the bed by the far wall, and Tenichi approached the young patient cautiously, convinced each step he made would give him away to his potential target. Koku's eyes were closed, and if it had not been for the slow rise and fall of his chest, Tenichi would have thought the skinny youngster had already left this world for the next but, as he drew closer, he realised that the pallor was simply a sign that the grimy youth he had met previously had been thoroughly washed before being treated, his unruly hair brushed and tied back neatly for the first time.

He seemed somehow fragile, and Tenichi's heart lurched slightly as he realised how vulnerable his companion was.

In Rukongai, he seemed self-possessed and unruffled. Older, too. Here he looks like a thin, pale boy, barely out of his teens. I wonder which is the

real Koku.

His eyes narrowed, and he shook his head.

It doesn't matter. None of it matters. I didn't come here to think of him as a person. He's from Rukongai, not Seireitei. He shouldn't be here. He's a threat and that's all. I have to deal with it — to protect myself, to protect Ketsui, to keep everything as it should be. This person is a stranger to me and I don't know him. I can't hesitate now. There isn't a lot of time.

Glancing around him for something suitable to use as a weapon, Tenichi's gaze rested on a crumpled blanket and two spare pillows that had been tossed aside in the corner of the room, clearly discarded when Koku's bedding had last been changed. Perhaps Kirio was engaged on that errand, he thought absently, bending to pick up the nearest pillow in his cloth-wrapped fist and examining it critically. It was thin and moth-eaten, but substantial enough, he realised, to stifle breathing without leaving too much of a permanent mark, and he rallied his courage, gripping it more firmly and turning back towards the bed.

"I'm sorry, Koku," he murmured, the words barely more than the faintest of whispers dropping from his lips as he prepared to lower the pillow over the sleeping boy's face.

I'm really sorry. I have no choice though. I don't want to, but I have no choice. For the sake of everything I hold dear... I can't let anything link me back to what happened in Rukongai. No matter why you came here or what passed between you and Fukutaichou, I can't let you ever speak about it. For the sake of everything... I have to have you die.

Author's Note:

The other presences in Koku's room were Juushirou, Enishi, Naoko, Kirio, Mitsuki, Ketsui and Tsunemori ;) all of whom have spent some brief time within the chamber, or hovering in the doorway. Just in case anyone cares!

Oh yes, and there's Ryuu-kun. See, he still exists ;)

33. The Burden of Guilt

Chapter Thirty Two: The Burden of Guilt

“I was waiting for you to come,”

The sound of Koku’s voice made Tenichi’s body freeze, his arms going rigid. Shock flooded his body, followed by revulsion as he realised what he had been about to do. His fingers gripped tightly onto the pillow, his knuckles whitening from the pressure, and for a moment he stood there, unsure whether to flee or to try and talk his way out of the situation. At his clear uncertainty, there was a faint chuckle from the bed, and then a pale hand reached up, calmly pushing Tenichi’s arm aside so that for the first time the two men met gazes.

Koku’s dark eyes were no more than shadows in an ashen face, yet there was no lingering confusion in their depths and more, as Tenichi’s wits slowly began to return, he realised with dismay that of the two of them it was he and not the young stray who looked the more discomposed.

“Put the pillow down,” Koku spoke softly, his tones soft and tentative, yet there was no anger nor indignation lacing them, and, wordlessly, Tenichi did as he was bidden, sinking back against the wall as both the pillow and the protective slither of fabric slipped from his fingers onto the tatami mat floor.

“You... I... you were supposed to be...” The words stuck in his throat, and Koku’s lips twitched into a faint smile.

“Asleep?” he asked archly, and Tenichi reddened, lowering his eyes as a flood of genuine shame flooded through his body. There was a moment of silence, then Koku stretched out his arm a second time, brushing his fingers against the dark fabric of Tenichi’s *shihakushou*.

“Sit,” he murmured, and Tenichi eyed his companion hesitantly, making no move to obey. Koku met the gaze, a faint flicker of weariness mingled with resignation crossing his face, then he nodded.

“You’ll be glad, later, that I stopped you,” he said matter-of-factly. “You don’t want to hurt me, and you’d have regretted it if you did. There’s no killer instinct in your aura, Tenichi-dono — just a lot of confusion. If you sit, we can talk it out — but if you don’t want to, that’s fine too. I’m tired... and it does me no good either if people

realise we've met before."

"No good...?" Tenichi echoed the words numbly, and Koku snorted, derision in his dark eyes.

"Do you think I'm a fool just because I came from Rukongai?" he asked quietly, and now Tenichi could hear the mocking edge in the younger man's tones. "I know as well as you that I'm not allowed to be here. More, we both know someone very dangerous... to both of our lives, don't we? Why would you think I'd tell them anything about it? Silencing me does nothing to help you and it certainly doesn't help me."

"You... aren't going to talk to the people in Thirteenth?" Tenichi latched onto this, as though waking suddenly from a daze, and Koku shook his head in disbelief.

"Why would I?" he demanded. "The penalty for crossing into Seireitei from Rukongai is death for people like me. Right now they're calling me a District boy — and I have absolutely no reason to correct their misassumption."

"That's... true." Tenichi acknowledged, sinking down on the edge of the low-slung pallet bed as the strength drained from his body. "I suppose... I should have thought..."

He paused, burying his head in his hands as if trying to gather his composure, then, at length, he raised his gaze.

"I'm sorry," he said honestly. "You're right... I'm not the type to sneak in and kill anyone. I just... with things... and people said... you'd come to Seireitei with..."

"Souja-dono," Koku agreed pensively, and Tenichi flinched, biting his lip.

"Why?" he whispered, and Koku's brows knitted together at the question.

"I'm surprised you asked me that," he admitted. "Wasn't he your Vice Captain? Surely you wanted him to come back alive?"

"Of course I did," Tenichi snapped. "Of course, I never wanted... I never meant... but you're... Kei... *he* is associated with you, and we both know that. And, given that..."

"Idiot," Koku's voice was growing stronger with each moment, and he cut across his companion with a grimace. "Do you think *he's*so foolish as to order that kind of assassination? Don't be crazy. He had nothing to do with it. Nothing at all."

“Nothing?” Tenichi’s eyes widened. “Then... did he send you to... help...?”

“He didn’t send me to do anything,” Koku said impatiently. “He didn’t know anything about it. Maybe he still doesn’t — I don’t know, and I can’t read minds. Even if I could, there’s a great big wall of that demon rock between us, so I couldn’t tell you what he’s thinking at the moment. Most likely he’s just cross with me — probably very cross, in fact — for getting myself involved in a shinigami’s problem.”

“Then...” Tenichi’s mind was whirling. “If he doesn’t... if he didn’t... why did you...?”

“Another strange question, considering you knew the murdered man personally,” Koku’s voice held a faint note of censure that once again made Tenichi feel ashamed. “If you see a person crumpled and bleeding on the ground, and they call to you for help, do you ignore them and walk on by? Is that what shinigami are trained to do? Don’t be stupid. I helped him because it was what I ought to do. Just because I come from... *there*... and because I’m known to people this place consider no better than hell demons doesn’t mean I don’t have a sense of right and wrong.”

“I’m sorry,” Tenichi bit his lip. “I didn’t mean to suggest... I just... I don’t know what to think about anything at the moment, and when Taichou reminded me that you were here, I immediately assumed... but it was wrong of me to do that, wasn’t it? If it wasn’t *his* order, and you didn’t come here because of that or because of me... then...”

“I have absolutely no interest in anything you’re doing, and I never did before,” Koku said bluntly. “The one who’s interested in you is *him*. It doesn’t really concern me either way — providing you pull yourself together and keep your mouth shut, you can guarantee that I’ve no reason to talk to people I don’t know about someone else who’s little more than a stranger. I don’t like death — it’s not attractive and I certainly don’t believe in getting people killed for the sake of it. But... that said...”

His gaze strayed to the fallen pillow,

“I don’t intend on lying back here and getting killed, either.”

“I’m sorry,” Tenichi repeated. “I panicked, but I won’t... you have my word, I won’t do it again. It’s not like me... I don’t know what I was even thinking. Kurotsuchi came to me the morning we discovered Fukutaichou had disappeared and... all of the things he said, I think they distorted my thoughts and made me paranoid. I was sure that, if Souja-dono came back here and talked about Rukongai, and if it was

because of *that man* that he died, that I... and then the people I cared about too..."

"Well, I suppose I can't begrudge you that last sentiment," Koku pressed his lips together, shifting his body slightly and wincing at the discomfort. "I'm not really in a state to fight for my life, either, so I'm grateful for your forbearance. I promise that I won't tell them anything about you. I have no intention of telling shinigami anything. I came back here because Souja-dono wanted to go home to his family, and I felt he should... but that's all. I wanted to save him, but I failed. I have no obligation beyond that, and, if I could stand for more than a few seconds without passing out, I'd have left here already, believe me."

"Left... and gone home?" Tenichi asked, and Koku's expression became clouded.

"Who knows?" he replied eventually. "That's not your problem — it's for me to resolve. I know there are few pathways back there, and I don't know how *Senkaimon* work... but I'd figure something out. For now, though, since they seem so frantic about healing me... I'll let them do that and bide my time. Since this injury was because one of your shinigami friends strikes first and asks questions later, I might as well. I've been monitoring the situation for the past few hours and I can't sense anyone with the wish to hurt me, so I'll let them patch me up at the very least. You should use the opportunity to pull back from it completely. This has nothing to do with you, nor with *his* instructions, and especially not with what you promised him. All right?"

Tenichi paused for a moment, digesting this, then,

"If you know Souja-dono died, you must have already talked to someone," he realised, and Koku shook his head.

"I've only just started to regain my senses," he responded. "This morning, I tried my physical strength and pushed it beyond its limits. Since then I've had nothing to do but slowly put back together bits of my memory, listen to the conversations of those sent to watch me and, of course, wait for you to come here. I knew you would — it was only a matter of time."

"You really were expecting me?" Tenichi was taken aback, and Koku offered him a strange, humourless smile.

"I might be from the Rukon, but I'm not bad at sensing people's spirits," he said blithely. "I know Souja-dono died because I can't sense his presence any more, and if he was alive, I'd be able to find

him. As for you, your reiatsu has been bubbling to a point of explosion. It was only a matter of time before it spilled over. When I first opened my eyes, I knew you'd been here. I knew you knew I was here — so of course you'd come at some point."

"Mm," Tenichi glanced ruefully at the pillow, bending to pick it up and tossing it across the room to rejoin its fellow and the crumpled blanket beside the door. "The less said about it the better."

"Well, cornered animals are often the most dangerous," Koku reflected pensively. "If Kurotsuchi got to you, I'm not surprised your head was in a twist. You shouldn't listen to him. He doesn't have any shred of humanity left in him, and he'll twist things to suit his own purpose. He probably said whatever he did to you to scare you and make sure you kept quiet about a certain acquaintance we all share... that's all."

"Perhaps," Tenichi gazed at his hands, then, "Souja-dono came back here... and he said something about Kei... about *him* to the Taichou. I don't know exactly what — but I know that Seireitei are in a flurry about it and that something will happen. I'm going to ask you, therefore — what really did happen in Rukongai? If you found him... you must know something. There's all kinds of whispers about Eirakihime and a girl who looks like her and... it made me think... of the girl... the one who tried to slit my throat."

"As you say," Koku sighed, weariness once more marring his young features. "That stupid kill-crazy saw a *shihakushou* and didn't stop to think about the consequences. Never mind that all hell would be let loose if she killed a Vice Captain — not to mention someone who was the son and heir of a Clan..."

He sighed, shaking his head as if to clear it.

"If I were more ruthless, I'd have killed her myself," he said regretfully. "But I can't, and it's not time."

"Then it was... that girl who did it?"

"Mm." Koku agreed. "But she did it on her own. I only picked up the pieces, Tenichi-dono — I didn't do anything to harm your superior. More, when they ask me about it, I won't even tell them that much. Even though she's a nuisance, I won't betray her."

"Then why tell me?"

"Because you, like me, are tied," Koku said simply. "We're both bound by secrecy for our own sakes and the sakes of people we care for, aren't we?"

"I suppose we are," Tenichi rubbed his chin ruefully. "All right. I guess I hadn't thought you were all that bothered about protecting... you know who... but maybe there's more to it than I understand. Maybe..."

"Without his involvement, everyone in that village would long since have died," Koku said categorically. "Whatever you think of him in other respects, their lives are in his hands. If the Gotei took him prisoner, those people would die. I told you — I don't like death. I don't necessarily agree with everything he does — but because of him, people are able to live their lives. Therefore I don't interfere with him — and I certainly am not going to betray him, or anyone connected with him, just to please some black-clad death gods."

"I guess that makes sense," Tenichi felt a flood of relief wash over his heart. "I misjudged you, and I overreacted, but I'll remember what you've said. It's strange but more than anyone else, talking to you has helped me put it into perspective. A loose cannon killed Fukutaichou. I'm not involved with that at all. I was taken against my will and I did what I had to to get back here. I want to help the people in Rukongai but..."

He paused, his eyes widening.

"Rukongai," he murmured, and Koku cast him a quizzical look.

"Tenichi-dono?"

"There's talk that the Captains are planning a mission to Rukongai," Tenichi whispered, twisting his hands together in sudden agitation as he remembered. "The Council had a meeting, and bits and pieces have filtered through about it. I don't know specifics, but I know... they want to find out where Souja-dono went. He told Taichou that he'd been to Rukongai, and that he'd met that crazy girl there. I know that... I heard bits and pieces of it through the wall of the sick room when he was speaking to Ukitake-taichou and Endou-taichou, before he died. Therefore..."

"It's not your problem to worry about," Koku cut across him, shaking his head.

"But what if... you just said, if the Gotei took Kei... took him prisoner..."

"They won't," Koku said simply. "Sakaki will have reported her kill to him in lurid detail by now. When they find no body, and when he investigates the *Senkaimon* and finds it was opened, then he'll take action. The Gotei might go to Rukongai, Tenichi-dono, but they won't

find who they're seeking. Most likely they won't find anyone — or anything at all."

"But..."

"He's a master at hiding from them," Koku shrugged tentatively.

"But where?!"

"I've been here, so I wouldn't know that much," Koku replied dismissively. "Better that I don't, probably. Perhaps, better he doesn't know where I am either, right at present."

"Would he... hurt you?" Tenichi asked hesitantly, and Koku snorted.

"What, you mean, smother me with a pillow?" he asked archly, and Tenichi flinched, sending him a troubled look. "No, he wouldn't. He knows I won't speak to them, so he won't do anything rash. He'll probably want to find me, though. Better for the Gotei that he doesn't... better that I heal and get out of here before he decides to mount an expedition."

"You'd be bothered if that happened?"

"I told you. I don't like death," Koku said simply. "I don't care which side of the battle it occurs on... it doesn't suit me. Things are better left in peace. Rukongai is Rukongai, here is here. Mixing them is a bad idea from both sides... so I'm not going to do anything to hasten an encounter between them."

"You and me both," Tenichi decided, getting to his feet. "If that's the case, then we have an accord, don't we?"

"I imagine for very different reasons, but we do," Koku agreed. "If it means you stop behaving in a crazy way then I'll let you look at it like that. You're in no danger from me, Tenichi-dono — and I'm in no danger from someone who can't even wield a pillow to ruthless effectivity."

"Shut up," Tenichi muttered, and despite himself, Koku laughed.

"I don't know what his interest is in you, but I think you're an honourable person and I'd like it if you stayed that way," he reflected. "The best way you can do that is keep away from this, from me, and most of all, from him. He has ideas and sometimes they're bad for him and everyone else — it would be nice if you didn't get caught up in the flow of his madness. I don't say everything he does is for bad purposes — but he's a man with many faces, and you'd be foolish to choose only to see the good or the bad. Do you understand?"

“I’m not sure,” Tenichi admitted, and Koku sighed.

“You said you had people here you wanted to protect,” he pointed out. “Worry about them first. If it becomes a situation, let me handle it. I can handle it. Probably there’s only me that can, so let me do it.”

“Even if he’s cross with you?”

“He will be cross, probably very cross,” Koku said resignedly, “but I’m not afraid of him, and he won’t hurt me. I’m not the one in danger — you should watch out for yourself first and foremost.”

“Meaning...?” Tenichi’s eyes narrowed, and Koku paused, then lowered his voice.

“Someone is coming, so I’ll make this quick,” he murmured. “I don’t know who it is, but Keitarou-san has a spy here in Seireitei. Someone who reports things to him that other sources can’t... someone on the inside. It’s that person you need to be wary of. If it seems like you’re cracking, or you’re going to betray what happened in the Rukon, it could lead in a bad direction. It’s not my problem or my business, but I think it would be a shame if you got killed because of idiocy — so I wanted you to be aware.”

“A spy? Within the Gotei?” Tenichi paled, and Koku nodded.

“Yes,” he said frankly. “Someone who sympathises. I don’t know who this person is, and I’m not going to try to find out. You shouldn’t either, but just be on your guard. There’s more than just Kurotsuchi.”

Tenichi chewed on his lip for a moment, mulling this over, then,

“All right,” he said at length. “Thank you for that, at least. You’ve no reason to tell me those things — but even if it’s just a pact of silence, I feel reassured that you’re more my ally than my enemy.”

“What did you just say?” Koku’s brow creased in consternation, and Tenichi frowned.

“More my ally than my enemy,” he repeated. “Why that face? Does the idea disgust you so much?”

“No... no, I think you’re probably right,” Koku sighed, and Tenichi saw the pale fingers twitch as if trying to suppress a sudden sense of apprehension. “Never mind. It’s all right. I think you’re probably all right to have as an ally... at least so far as this goes. I just... didn’t expect to hear you say it, that’s all. It reminded me of something... but I think it’s not important.”

“Well, whatever you say,” Tenichi shrugged his shoulders. “I ought

to clear off out of here, if someone else is coming to see you. It might be hard to explain my presence here otherwise.”

“Too late for that,” Koku offered him another humourless smile, gesturing feebly towards the sliding door. Tenichi turned in alarm, seeing it begin to slide open and instinctively jumping back from the bed as though it had suddenly turned into a raging inferno. Koku let out a soft chuckle, then closed his eyes, reposing his body as if in sleep as the door opened to reveal Kirio, her arms full of towels and fresh dressings. At the sight of Tenichi she let out an exclamation, almost dropping her burden, and Tenichi muttered a curse, hurrying forward to help her before the clean white cloths went flying all over the dusty floor.

“Edogawa-san isn’t teaching you very well, if you’re at the stage where you throw stuff at your patients,” he teased, finding that despite the compromising nature of his position, a huge weight had been lifted from his chest at Koku’s words. “Here, you shouldn’t try to bring so much at once — your arms are only little stubby things, even now you’re fully grown.”

“It’s your fault, you startled me!” Kirio objected, dropping her armful down on the end of Koku’s bed and wresting the remaining ones from her friend’s grasp. “What are you doing here? Nobody’s meant to be in here — the door’s supposed to be locked, and Taichou’s orders, nobody ranked below Tsukabishi-san is allowed in here without special permission!”

“Mm,” Tenichi turned, glancing at the bed, then gathered his resolve as he prepared to deceive his friend. “I know, and I’m sorry. I’m completely breaking and entering and I apologise for it. I suppose I was being too eager. Taichou asked me some questions this morning and it reminded me that someone had been brought back with Souja-dono. I thought, if I came to speak to him...”

“You idiot,” Kirio grimaced, swiping him across the back of the head lightly with the flat of her hand. “He’s in no condition for that... as you should be able to see by looking at him. Edogawa-san said he roused up this morning, but nobody’s been given leave to question him yet. I know you want to get justice for Souja-dono, Tenichi-kun, but you’ll get disciplinary warnings if you start invading other division space without permission. Even given that it’s you, and even in the circumstances — Taichou’s orders are firm ones and not to be disobeyed. You’re lucky he’s gone out to finalise some new recruit paperwork, else you’d be for it.”

“I know,” Tenichi acknowledged, rubbing the back of his head

absently. "You still hit like a girl, by the way. As you can see, your patient is still fast asleep, so I didn't get anywhere with my initiative. I was hoping to get out before anyone caught me — but I'll go quietly now, I promise. I'd rather you didn't report me to either your Captain or mine so... since I've left the guy still in one piece, will you put this down to madness on my part and pretend it didn't happen?"

"Tenichi-kun..." Kirio gazed at him for a moment, then she sighed, slipping an arm around him and hugging him. "You are an idiot, but I like this idiot better than the one who was here the night Souja-dono died. Even if it was crazy, coming to interrogate Koku without clearance, it's more positive and more like you than you've been since it all happened. You weren't replying to my messages... I was worried, but clearly you're fine."

"I feel all right," Tenichi agreed. "Better... as though I've... found peace with myself over it a little more. I'm all right, Kirio. Really. And I'm sorry I've worried you. It was such a shock, and then... well, things at Seventh are a bit all over the place. We've no adjutant, Kikyue-dono's none to stable at the moment, and Taichou's trying hard not to unleash the Wind Hawk and kill us all over the smallest thing, so everyone's on eggshells. Hajime-dono's trying to hold things together, but our Fifth seat has his head up his backside about his Clan position, so Nakata-san and I have been roped in to do a lot more than we'd usually be asked to do. It's a lot, but I can't say no."

His gaze flitted back to Koku for a moment, marvelling how convincingly asleep the youngster looked, then,

"I still feel some of the guilt for this lies with my being abducted, and Taichou said Souja-dono was investigating it when he was killed," he said softly. "That means I need to do whatever I can for Seventh right now. Even if it's thankless, or hard, or I don't get much sleep... I have to. That's my division... I have to help keep it together."

"I know," Kirio patted him lightly on the arm. "It's all right. If it's like that, we get it. Just, seeing you in a state... then hearing nothing... but it's fine. Do what you need to do — Ketsui and I will see you when you've a moment to catch your breath."

"It might be a while, but I'll hold you to that promise," Tenichi assured her. "For now, I'll leave you to your duties and go get on with mine. I've wasted enough of both our time for one day, and someone is almost certain to be shrieking for me back at base."

He grabbed her hand, squeezing it for a moment, and offering her a smile, he ducked out of the chamber, making his way swiftly through

the familiar halls and corridors towards the least frequently used entrance of the Thirteenth Division barracks. Though he was no longer a resident here, such things were emblazoned onto his memory as though he had never left, and he was soon in the outer courtyard, feeling the sun on his face and appreciating for the first time since Souja's death the gentle scent of blossoms on the breeze.

Koku is my ally, he's not my enemy. Keitarou-san didn't kill Souja-dono. Kurotsuchi was wrong. It was a case of Souja-dono being in the wrong place and meeting that crazy woman, but that was just bad luck. Nobody knows what happened in Rukongai, about my promise, or anything else. Taichou believed me when I said I knew nothing earlier, and when he realised all that Fukutaichou told me to keep quiet was those silver people, he calmed down. Whoever they are, I don't care. They're nothing to do with me, and I'm not going to think about them or it any more. What I said to Kirio is right... I have to put my guilt in this into perspective and do what I can for my division. It's a hard blow, losing a family member. It's no good if I fall apart too.

With that he slipped through the main gate and out onto the concourse, sliding his hands into the white folds of his obi as he walked slowly back towards his home base. Though the wind blew more harshly around the Seventh Division barracks than anywhere else in Seireitei at that present time, it was with less foreboding that Tenichi stepped over the threshold, hurrying across to the main building in search of Hajime and Nakata.

Nobody knows I remember what happened in Rukongai. Nobody knows I even went to Rukongai. Fukutaichou didn't find that out, and if he did, he didn't get a chance to tell anyone. I'm not glad he's dead, but it's beyond changing and I can't help him. Better to look forward, do as Koku says and protect the people I care about instead. If Koku says Keitarou-san won't be caught, then he probably knows better than me, and he isn't worried about the shinigami finding out who he is or where he came from. It's all all right. It's all going to be... all right.

"Tenichi? You're back."

A voice from the window of one of the nearby offices made him paused, snapping to attention the next minute as he recognised the weary features of his patrol leader, her dark hair in a loose tail behind her head and her eyes dark and smudgy, lined with black shadows that indicated a lack of sleep. She was robed in her usual smart black *shihakushou*, though the sash at her waist remained in the dark colours of mourning, and a thin cloak of muted brown hung over her shoulders as though protecting her from the chill in the atmosphere. It was the first time they had met face to face since the funeral; the first time they had exchanged words since that fateful day in the forest,

and Tenichi was struck for the first time by a sense of vulnerability about the young *hime*. Kikyue-dono was younger even than his brother, he remembered, perhaps, yes, perhaps no older than Koku, yet the burdens of the squad now hung heavily on her shoulders, cast deep in the shadow of her brother's untimely death. It had been no secret that Kikyue had adored and idolised Souja, looking to him for guidance whenever the path ahead was unclear. Now, Tenichi realised with a faint pang of regret, she would have to find her own path. When mourning was over, would Hirata follow the convention of other Clans and appoint his daughter as Vice Captain, or would the pressures of the Endou require him to name a more experienced male adjutant? Looking at her now, Tenichi found it hard to imagine the Vice Captain's badge adorning Kikyue's slender arm, and more, he realised with a jolt, he could not visualise her accepting the role with anything more than reluctance.

I've been meandering to myself about this, yet she's carrying a far heavier burden, and I'm not doing a thing to help her out. Tenichi, you suck. Your first duty is to Captain and patrol leader, so suck up and do it right.

"Kikyue-dono?" he asked softly, and the young woman pursed her lips.

"I'll tell you now, before I forget," she threw back the shutters further, resting her hands on the sill and meeting his gaze with a hint of her usual predatorial intensity. "A Hell Butterfly came for you, from Second Division."

"A... Hell Butter... from *Second* Division?" Tenichi gaped, his eyes widening in surprise, and Kikyue nodded.

"I have no idea what it's about, but you'd better answer it," she said briefly. "It was directed to Father but it asked for you and he told me to tell you when you came back. You'd better snap to it — it came from Kai-dono, and he outranks both of us. Besides, I don't want him to think Seventh are falling apart at the seams. Go, and go quickly, then come back and report to me. Understand?"

"Yes, ma'am," Tenichi's heart skipped a beat at the thought of venturing into the Shihouin's forbidding territory, but he nodded his head. "I'll go at once."

Back in the small back chamber of the Thirteenth Division, Kirio had rearranged her burden more neatly into some kind of order, pausing pensively to rest her gaze on the face of the sleeping patient.

"You look so peaceful," she murmured with a half-apologetic sigh,

crossing the chamber and moving to open the window slightly to let a faint breeze stir through the sunny room. "I only wish I could promise it was going to stay that way."

She looped the window lace around the notch to keep it from banging, returning to the bed and pausing to brush the back of her hand against Koku's brow. It was cooler, she realised with relief, despite his morning's exploits, and as she settled herself back down in her sentry's chair at the bedside, she reflected ruefully on how involved she had become in the life and death of a complete stranger. *I can't help it, though. He's so young, and he's hurt, and it shouldn't have happened like this at all. He looked so scared, and I just wanted... Naoko-san said I should be careful, but he doesn't seem threatening. And he was so afraid...*

She frowned, her gaze darting back suddenly to the stranger's features. Had she imagined it, or had the eyelashes quivered slightly, the eyelids twitching as if preparing to open?

"Koku?" she murmured softly, reaching down to touch the boy's pale fingers lightly with her own. "Can you hear me? If you can, please, open your eyes and look at me. I want to speak to you."

There was no response, and she chewed on her lip, once more remembering the expression on his blood-spattered, grimy features when they had first met in the forest.

"Nobody will hurt you here," she tried again, sliding her fingers around his and squeezing them reassuringly. "You don't have to be afraid, or try and run away. Nothing bad will happen now, I swear. Please, open your eyes and look at me. If you know I'm here, I'd like... I'd like to be able to apologise to you properly for what happened with Kikyue-dono in the forest."

She gazed at him expectantly, as one second dragged into two and then three without any kind of reaction from the still form on the bed. Then, just as she was beginning to believe she truly had imagined it, the lashes twitched a second time, and, very slowly, they began to lift, blinking open and shut as they revealed two hazy brown eyes that seemed to struggle to bring his surroundings into clear focus. His eyes rested on her, and Kirio saw the sudden flash of self-preservation that flared in their chocolate depths, but this time he did not try to move away from her. Instead he stared up at her, his eyes full of questions and accusations, but his lips remained still and he did not try to speak. At his expression, guilt flooded Kirio's body yet again, and she frowned.

“I’m so sorry,” she murmured. “We must seem like demons to you — the enemy, dressed in black, swords waving, cutting people down before asking any questions. I know there’s no reason why you should listen to me, or trust a word I say, but really... we don’t mean you any harm.”

The boy blinked, but he still said nothing, and Kirio squeezed the thin, pale fingers, then released them, setting his hand back down on the bed covers.

“My name is Kirio,” she said softly, “and Souja-dono told us your name was Koku, but I don’t know if that’s true. I’d like it, if you’d tell me — I’d like to know for sure who I’m talking to. You were very brave, helping a shinigami in distress, and you’re not in any trouble, I promise. We want to help you — and to find your family, so you can go home — and so we need to know who you are.”

There was a long, heavy silence, then the boy drew a deep breath of air into his lungs, letting it out in a heavy sigh.

“You were there,” at last he formed words, and to Kirio’s surprise, despite the tentative nature of his speech, his response did not seem as fragmented or frightened as she had expected. “When I fell, in the forest... you were there.”

“Yes, I was,” Kirio nodded her head eagerly, reddish curls bobbing over her shoulders. “My Captain and I came to help, and I was the one who brought you back here so that you could be treated. I know Kikyue-dono hurt you, but she misunderstood, and she didn’t mean it. She’s sorry and so are we... we know you tried to help Souja-dono, not hurt him.”

“He died,” Koku said flatly, and Kirio nodded again, her expression sad this time.

“He did,” she agreed. “He was very badly hurt. But that wasn’t your fault — you shouldn’t blame yourself. He didn’t blame you. He was grateful — he wanted to make sure we took care of you, and Taichou promised that he would. This is our Division, and you’re safe here. Really. You have nothing to fear from me or from anyone else.”

Koku did not respond for a minute, then a faint smile touched his lips. It was gone in a moment, but Kirio had seen it and she returned it with a warm one of her own.

“Your name is Koku?” she pressed, and slowly, the young man inclined his head.

“And your family? You have family we can send for? We’ve been

wanting to do that, so you weren't here alone and abandoned when you woke, but none of the villages around the region of Seventh we found you knew anything about you."

Koku's eyes darkened for a moment, then he shook his head.

"Nobody... will look for me," he said sadly. "There is... nobody for you to find, K... Kirio-san. I am alone here."

"I see," Kirio's gaze softened in compassion. 'I guess I wondered about that, to be honest. You're skin and bone, and it looked like you'd been wandering for a while... I mean, I hope you're not offended by my saying that,' she added hurriedly, her cheeks pinkening slightly, "because I don't mean it in a bad way. It's just, when I was younger, I was in that position myself. I know... how hard it can be to find food when you're young and don't have a trade or a way to make ends meet."

Koku's brown eyes became thoughtful, as though he was digesting this, and his fingers twitched slightly towards the black fabric of Kirio's sleeve.

"So... you became a shinigami?" he asked, and Kirio shrugged.

"I was lucky," she admitted. "I found my calling, and it saved my life. Yes, I suppose that it happened that way. I... found a family I could belong to, and now I wouldn't be anywhere else. But I know what it's like, being alone and abandoned. I won't ask you about your family any more, I promise. If it's like that... if it's painful... I won't pry. I only wanted to know so we could find them, but if there's nobody to find..."

"Not a soul in Seireitei would care if I lived or died," There was no bitterness in Koku's tones, but the words struck through Kirio anyway, and she sighed, running her fingers through her reddish hair.

"But you tried to help Souja-dono, I know that," she said at length. "When your wound is healed, I know the Taichou will do what he can to help you, because you did that."

"I don't need shinigami charity. I can manage on my own."

"Mm," Kirio tapped her fingers absently together, then shook her head. "You might think so, but it's not about charity. Taichou made a promise to Souja-dono, and therefore he needs to keep it. This is what Souja-dono wanted, and after you got hurt, it's only fair we help you get back on your feet. Don't push it away, Koku-kun. Even if you're used to managing on your own — everyone can use help from time to time. Even the strongest of us."

“But your friend died. What use is it to reward me for failure?”

“You brought him home to his friends and his family, who loved him,” Kirio said evenly. “The best healers couldn’t save his life, so nobody expected you to. To take time to help him and bring him home... that was enough. That and... if you remember... when Souja-dono was hurt, and... if you know anything about that...”

“I thought so,” Koku let out a humourless chuckle, and Kirio was stricken at the bitter note in the young man’s tones. “You want information from me, so you’ll feed and clothe and treat me and try and be my friend. Shinigami who slash first and ask questions later, just to avenge the death of one of their own.”

“Koku...” Kirio faltered, genuine emotion in her greenish eyes as she gazed at him in dismay. “It’s not like that, I promise it isn’t. Maybe it’s true that people want to ask you questions about Souja-dono, and if you can help us find his killer, then all to the good. But... well... it’s not just... I mean... we don’t all...”

“I hurt your feelings,” Koku seemed startled by this revelation, and Kirio nodded.

“I told you. I was on my own once too,” she replied. “Taichou assigned me to look after you, but I wanted you to be all right, regardless of whether you could help the investigation or not. It was a shinigami who hurt you, so I know it must be hard to believe any of us care anything for people outside of Inner Seireitei, but really, a lot of us were just like you—we know how hard life can be, and we... we care about what happens in the Districts.”

“In the Districts,” Koku let out another weary sigh, pursing his lips. “I’m sorry, Kirio-san. Maybe that’s true. I don’t know. I never met a shinigami before I encountered Souja-dono. I only know what I’ve heard... and it hasn’t always been good things.”

“Thirteenth Division never hurt or abandon people in the Districts, whatever else you might have heard,” Kirio said frankly. “We’re most of us District born, and we do what we can to help. We’ll help you too. When you’ve met Taichou, you’ll understand. He’s not the kind of person to use and discard anyone for any purpose, regardless of the situation. He was close to Souja-dono and to Souja-dono’s father, but he’s not tried to hurry us in waking you up, and he’s said he’ll only try and speak to you when the healer in charge of your care says you’re ready. We really do want to help. You can believe me or not, but it’s true.”

“I believe you,” Koku acknowledged reluctantly. “But your friend...”

the man who was here before... I heard what he said. He woke me up, ranting at you about things I know nothing about. He wanted to interrogate me, even if your Captain doesn't. And I don't trust shinigami. Even if you're telling me the truth — it doesn't mean others will honour your standards. I've heard things about shinigami interrogation — and I don't like it."

"Tenichi," Kirio grimaced, but nodded. "Yes, he was out of line. I'm sorry. Souja-dono was his Vice Captain, and I think Tenichi thinks it was his fault that this all happened. It's crazy, of course, but that's the bond of loyalty between officer and subordinate. He won't come and bother you again, I promise. I won't let him. This is Thirteenth, and nobody is going to force you to do anything until you feel up to it."

"You'll force me then, instead?"

"Koku-kun?" Kirio blinked, and Koku closed his eyes briefly, faint lines of pain crossing his brow.

"It doesn't matter, anyway," he murmured. "I don't know the information you want. I found an injured shinigami, and helped him. I didn't see how he came to be felled, and I never met him before that day. I certainly didn't fight off any killer. I have no weapon, and wouldn't know how to use one of those strange sword things of yours. I don't even have a knife to cut food with. I found him, and helped him, but he was bloody and hurt and we didn't spend a lot of time small-talking. He did something with his sword, but I don't know what it was, and that's all I can tell you. The next thing I knew, a kestrel was sharpening its claws on my body, and you were grabbing hold of me."

Kirio opened her mouth to respond, but then frowned, gazing at Koku in confusion.

A kestrel's claws?

"Well?" Koku opened his eyes, staring up at her with a challenge in his dark gaze. "Now you know that, will you still fuss and flap over me, or will you turn me out? I can't help you avenge your officer's death. I'm just a useless vagrant who was in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Kirio's eyes narrowed thoughtfully, then she shook her head.

"In an hour or two, we'll change your bandages," she said matter-of-factly. "Edogawa-san will be back then. She's the healer in charge of you, and we have to make sure you don't get infected. For now, it's not a good idea for you to get up, or worry too much about Souja-

dono. I'm not here to ask you questions about him, or anything else. I'm here to make sure your condition doesn't get worse and to ensure you don't need anything. You can tell all those things to Taichou in a few days when you're better — but I know you weren't very well earlier this morning, and Edogawa-san will be cross with me if I push you beyond your limits."

Koku's expression became unreadable for a moment, then he smiled faintly, and this time it briefly touched the dark brown eyes.

"All right," he responded grudgingly. "You win, this time. I'll believe you mean it, and let you look after me."

"Good choice," Kirio's eyes twinkled slightly, and she got to her feet, reaching for the ceramic jug of water and the mug that stood on the shelf beside the bed. "In that case, see if you can drink some of this. Edogawa-san thinks you should be able to eat something mild, later, if you want it — but water's good for you too and it will help if you're still feeling unsettled. She has herbs she can give you, if your injuries are hurting — but I can't give those, since I don't know much about them. I'm not a healer, just an ordinary shinigami — but I want to help, so I'm afraid you're stuck with me."

"I guess I could do worse," Koku murmured, as, with his companion's help, he pulled himself a little more upright, taking the mug in a shaking grip and drinking its contents. Despite the fragility of his injured body and his wariness for the unfamiliar environment, his thirst won out, and he quickly drained the vessel dry, handing it back. "If you're going to talk to me even on, though, you're going to wear me out. I'd like to sleep some more now, please. If you don't mind... I don't want to talk any more."

"I'll not take that personally, even though I'm sure I was meant to," Kirio said astutely, helping the youngster to lie back down, and pulling the blankets up to cover his body once more. "Sleep is good for you, too, so I'm not going to complain. Until Edogawa-san comes back, you're my responsibility, and nothing bad is going to happen to you on my watch."

"Mm," Koku grunted, but his eyes closed, and, as his breathing evened out, Kirio set the mug to one side, folding her arms across her chest as she considered their conversation. It had mostly been unremarkable — but one thing stuck in her mind and, despite herself, she could not shake it loose.

He definitely described Kikyue-dono's sword as a kestrel's claws.

Her eyes became near slits as she processed this.

I didn't know what nature her sword took until I heard Taichou talking to Kyouraku-taichou about her attack on Koku. It's not something that's in general knowledge — I don't know if even all of the Seventh Division know what kind of sword spirit Kikyue-dono has. Even given that all Endou have hunting birds possessing their swords...

She glanced back at Koku, who was now clearly lost to the world once more.

Yet a District boy who knows nothing of the Endou or shinigami described her sword as the claws of a kestrel without anybody telling him anything about it. A boy who shouldn't even be able to tell a zanpakutou from an asauchi discerned the nature of a stranger's sword in their split-second confrontation. That shouldn't be possible... so why is it?

The Second Division barracks were quiet when Tenichi stepped apprehensively through the gateway, glancing around him for any sign of an officer to whom he could report his presence. His conversation with Koku still foremost in his mind, he could not think why the Gotei's shadow division should have summoned him so randomly, yet even so he could not quite suppress the prickle of unease that ran up his spine as he stood in the middle of the pristine courtyard. Second Division was always like this, he knew — on the surface quiet and efficient, apparently harmless, yet the vast majority of its operations were carried out behind closed doors, justice dispensed in ways even the Council probably did not know.

"Kotetsu Tenichi."

The voice made him jump, and he swung around, registering the fact that from somewhere the division's Third seated officer had materialised silently, watching him with an even expression that gave nothing away. Hurriedly he bowed his head, and the young woman inclined her own in acknowledgement, then raised her arm to indicate the main entrance.

"Thank you for coming so quickly. Kai-dono would like to speak to you," she said simply, and Tenichi frowned, nodding his head.

"Kikyue-dono gave me the message, and I came as soon as I received it," he replied politely. "I don't know why Kai-dono might want me, but I'm at his disposal. Will you show me the way? I haven't been inside the Second before."

"I will. I think it's best," Saku's expression flickered thoughtfully at this. "It's probably better you don't get yourself lost. We don't get many visitors, so it's better I come with you. Some areas of Second are

highly secure, and it would be a problem for everyone if you were to stumble into them by accident.”

“No kidding,” Tenichi glanced up at the proud Shihouin badge that hung heavy over the building, above the horizontal slashes of the number two, and stifled another shiver. “I’m not going to wander off, don’t worry.”

“Then it’s this way,” Saku crossed the cobbles purposefully towards a side-door set into the wood panelling, not far from the main entrance. Tenichi’s eyes widened slightly in surprise at the unexpected detour, but Saku took no notice, pulling a key from her belt and unlocking it before sliding it back and stepping aside to allow her companion to pass.

“This door is always locked,” she explained, as Tenichi hesitated, then bowed his head, stepping cautiously into the narrow tunnel beyond. “I have to lock it behind us, so if you don’t mind waiting at the end of the hall, I’ll be with you in a moment.”

“Of course,” Tenichi said quickly, hurrying to do as he was bidden and, as he did so, he realised what Saku had termed a ‘hallway’ was really little more than three feet of stone plinth which broke away at the far end into a long winding spiral staircase. Momentarily reminded of his visit to the strange underground lair of the silver-haired Kitsune people, Tenichi drew breath sharply into his lungs, turning to send Saku an anxious look, but the young woman was already returning the key to her waist, running elegant fingers along the wall to activate the series of kidou lamps that glittered to show their way down.

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” she said softly, stepping neatly past him and indicating for him to follow her once more. “Kai-dono is down here, and asked me to bring you to him. The steps are quite safe, but there’s a rail to your left if you’re unsure of your footing.”

“Where exactly are we going, Etsuo-san?” Tenichi asked hesitantly, but Saku did not answer, merely disappearing into the curve of the stair, and Tenichi hurried to keep up, not wanting to be left alone in this dark, claustrophobic place. Though the kidou lamps illuminated the stairs clearly enough to prevent accidents, they glowed and hummed with an eerie greenish light which did nothing to calm Tenichi’s jumping heart, and he was almost relieved when they found themselves in a small four-by-four foot plain stone chamber, a big door carved from old wood separating them from whatever lay beyond. This chamber was more brightly lit, and dispelled some of the ghoulish ambience that had shrouded them on their way down, and, as Saku moved to rap sharply on the wood divide, Tenichi took a

moment to catch his breath and re-assemble his composure.

“Saku? Ah, Kotetsu, you’re here too.” The door swung back to reveal the Second Division’s Vice Captain and chief of Onmitsukidou, robed entirely in black except for the silverish adjutant badge that adorned his upper left arm and the thin band of gold at his waist that replaced the normal white obi of a regular service shinigami. Kai’s hair was knotted back in an utilitarian warrior’s tail, his golden eyes full of preoccupation, but he managed a slight smile for his guest, pushing the door back further and ushering him inside. “Thank you, Saku. You can leave Kotetsu with me and return to your other duties — I know my sister had plenty of things for you to do this morning, and I’m eating into them. Kotetsu will be fine with me, and I’ll see to him getting safely back out.”

These words washed like a wave of relief over Tenichi’s apprehensions, and the young woman bowed her head respectfully, withdrawing into the darkness as silently as she had come.

“I apologise for the suddenness of this,” Kai offered Tenichi an apologetic smile. “I feel guilty sending to Seventh for anything at present, with things in as much confusion as they must be, but it was unavoidable. Kikyue-dono’s been most gracious in sparing you — I promise not to keep you longer than I need.”

“Yes, sir,” Tenichi agreed. “Kikyue-dono told me to come and help in whatever way I can. How can I be of assistance?”

“Maybe you can, maybe you can’t,” Kai admitted, fastening the big wooden door behind them once more and leading the way along a longer, more brightly lit hallway. “It’s something of a long shot, but we had a prisoner delivered to our cells not so many days earlier. You might or might not be aware that my Onmitsukidou have been involved in investigating both the massacre in the Spiritless Zone and the more recent tragedy in your own Division, and I’m trying to pull together or discard loose threads that don’t seem to tie together.”

“Massacre?” Tenichi stopped dead, eying his companion in alarm. “I understood that a Hollow went on a rampage there — is there something to investigate other than that?”

“Ah, you must’ve been held hostage at the time that occurred,” Kai realised, shaking his head regretfully. “Two officers were killed by a Hollow, it’s true, and another took serious injuries — but the majority of the deaths in the Spiritless Zone were not carried out by Hollows at all.”

“Not... Hollows?” Cold dread settled in the pit of Tenichi’s

stomach, and Kai sighed, shrugging his shoulders.

“Well, we’re still investigating what happened,” he said vaguely. “I wouldn’t say it’s a secure subject, but I don’t think it has any particular relevance to you or your being here. I’m more interested right now in the night you were abducted — if you can remember anything about it — and most specifically, the way in which you were taken.”

“My abduction?” Tenichi’s brow creased in consternation. “I’m sure you know, Kai-dono, but I don’t really remember...”

“I was told you recalled being pulled into a dark Gate, at least,” Kai cut across him, reaching to pull back a side door and leading the way into a further chamber, one wall of which was formed of thick metal bars separating a section at the back into a holding cell. As Tenichi entered, the cell’s sole occupant raised his head from the dogeared book he had been reading, and as their gazes met, Tenichi forgot all about the Spiritless Zone, staring in abject horror into Kurotsuchi Masaya’s empty golden eyes.

“He’s not a pretty specimen, I grant you,” Kai pulled the door shut behind them once more, “but he was captured in a border region by members of the Thirteenth Division and delivered to us as we have a past... shall we say, interest in him and his activities. I’m sorry to bring you so deep into the unpleasant part of the Second — normally, it wouldn’t happen, since this isn’t where we invite visitors, but we didn’t have much choice with this one. We were holding him in a glass-framed cell, but since he somehow managed to shatter the window from his side, we’ve had to move him down here where it’s a little more robust. We think that there’s a possibility he was the man who abducted you — and I wanted to know whether or not you thought you’d ever seen him before.”

By this point, they had drawn to within two feet of the cage bars, and the prisoner set aside his book, his gaze flitting from Kai to Tenichi expectantly.

“I... don’t really know... who took me, sir,” Tenichi was the first to drop his gaze, unable to meet the penetrating stare. “It was all a blur... and... even if you ask me now... I...”

He faltered, stealing a half-glance at Masaya’s thin, peaked features through his lashes, clenching and unclenching his fists beneath the sleeves of his *shihakushou* as he tried to stop himself from shaking. He had always been a poor liar, but, he reflected to himself grimly, in the past week he had had to do so so many times that he was beginning to

lose track of what he had said and what he had not. And now, the demon who had haunted him in his own room with threats and promises was the prisoner of the Gotei's Onmitsukidou, staring at him through steel bars as though waiting for him to step out of line and break his composure.

Whatever I do, I cannot say I know him or anything about him. I must not. To do that would be to incriminate myself. I must do as Koku said, and distance myself from everything. It's the only thing I can do.

"I don't know," he said at length. "I'm sorry, Kai-dono, for wasting your time, but I really... don't know."

For a moment the spy remained silent, his strange, golden eyes running over Tenichi's features, a mocking glitter in their amber depths. Then, at length he spoke, his words soft and dripping with derision.

"Knowledge is power," he murmured, as though remembering something both important and ironic, and Tenichi stiffened, staring at him in apprehension.

Now what was he going to say? Would he give their secret away, to barter for his own freedom?

"Knowledge?" Kai arched an eyebrow. "If you think we're going to play games with you, Suzuki, you've another idea coming. I may have ridden to hear your case once, but unless you choose to cooperate and explain why you attacked members of a squad on patrol with no obvious motive, then..."

"Obvious motive." Masaya's eyes narrowed to slits, and his eyes slid across briefly to the Vice Captain. "You continue to call me as though we know each other, Shihouin Kai-dono... but I assure you, nothing could be further from the truth. Suzuki Naoto is dead. He died ten years ago. Your Clan had him put to death... and I will not answer questions put to his name."

Kai sighed, drumming his fingers impatiently against the bars of the cage.

"Kotetsu, I'm sorry. It seems bringing you here was a waste of time," he said wearily. "I thought maybe, if he was the one who took you from Inner Seireitei, you might recognise him, but I suppose not."

Masaya's eyebrows twitched, his head cocked quizzically in Tenichi's direction, and slowly, Tenichi shook his head.

"I didn't see them," he said firmly, keeping his tones low and even

as he forced himself to meet the questioning gaze. “They grabbed me from behind like a coward, and put cuffs on me before I could react. It was dark, so I didn’t see anything, and the cuffs meant I didn’t get a sense of their reiatsu... I’m sorry, Kai-dono. All I know was that hands grabbed me and pulled me into something that felt like a Gate... otherwise... I don’t think I... I can be any more helpful. I don’t know... anything about anyone called Suzuki Naoto, and... and I don’t know this person, either. He looks odd. I think I’d know... if I’d seen someone like him before.”

A snort of derision came from the captive at this point, and it was all Tenichi could do to continue to meet the spy’s gaze impassively.

“I see,” Kai paused, pressing his lips together, then, “There’s no reason for you to have heard of Suzuki... that’s a Second Division matter which doesn’t concern you. If this can’t be identified as the person who kidnapped you, then it can’t. It doesn’t change our reasons for holding him — but those reasons no longer connect to you.”

“Then... can I go?” Tenichi looked hopeful, and Kai frowned.

“One more thing, before you do,” he said at length, and Tenichi hesitated, eying the Onmitsukidou leader warily.

“Yes, sir?”

“Have you heard the name Sakaki before?”

“Yes sir,” Tenichi spoke quickly, forcing himself to maintain his even, steady tone, “but only as a rumour. People are saying the person who killed Souja-dono was a girl called Sakaki, but I don’t know if it’s true. I’m only an Eighth Seat, so nobody’s told me anything officially. It might not be true at all.”

“I see,” Kai pressed his lips together, then, “and the name Kohaku... what about that one?”

“Ko... haku... sir?” Despite himself, Tenichi felt his face drain of colour as he recalled the hut and its surrounds of death, and it was as much as he could do to keep the dismay out of his tones. “I don’t... is... where might I have...?”

“Kohaku... huh.” Before Kai could respond, Masaya let out a chuckle, folding his arms across his chest and dropping back against the wall of his cell with a self-satisfied smirk on his face. “That’s a dangerous question, Shihouin Kai-dono. It’s one you’d do better not asking.”

“I see,” Kai’s brows knitted together, and he turned away from

Tenichi, leaning up against the bars and fixing Masaya with a long, hard stare. “You’ve heard that name before. You’re not willing to talk about anything else, but when I ask Kotetsu about Kohaku, you suddenly want to give all the answers? You don’t think that’s a little suspicious?”

“I don’t care,” Masaya said dismissively. “And you’re wrong... I don’t intend to give you answers. I’ve no reason to make your job that easy... besides...”

He smiled, a cold, sinister smile that made Tenichi realise with a jolt that the spy was not only unafraid of his current situation, but to the contrary, rather enjoying baiting the Shihouin Vice Captain with snippets of information.

“You’d do better not asking questions about Kohaku,” he said silkily. “That’s all.”

“Why would that be?” Kai demanded, and Masaya chuckled.

“Pray you never find out,” he said forebodingly. “Knowledge is power... but some knowledge brings death instead.”

“Are you thinking to threaten me, here, in my own territory, whilst you’re a prisoner in my cell?” Kai snapped, and Masaya’s amusement seemed to grow.

“I’m not afraid of you,” he said frankly. “I shattered one cage, and I can shatter another, even if it is made of stronger material. If you believe me to be Suzuki Naoto, it means your Shinigami operation is so inadequate it can’t even execute its own prisoners successfully. What is there to fear from that? And if I was him, and somehow I escaped your first assault, don’t you think I’d be confident of escaping a second? I’m not here because you want me to be. I’m here because, for now, it’s fun to see you scramble around. I won’t be here forever... so I feel no obligation to tell you anything. You had your chance to listen to Suzuki’s story ten years ago, but you never did. Now, in his place, I choose not to talk to you about insignificant little details. Why I was in the forest. Why I attacked the shinigami. Aizen Kohaku. All those things... are uninteresting to me.”

“Aizen Kohaku.” Kai latched onto this at once, and Tenichi froze, staring at the spy in abject horror.

“What did you just say?” He demanded, only just keeping from running to the cage himself and banging his fists against the steel. “Aizen? Did you just say... Aizen?”

“Kotetsu, calm down.” Kai sent him a dark look, and Tenichi bit his

lip, distress still in his gaze.

“But sir, he said...” he murmured, and Kai nodded.

“He’s told us that he knows enough for us to keep him alive a little longer,” he said with a sigh. “Tidbits, useless by themselves, but enough to prolong his worthless existence a while longer. A dead man should stay dead, Suzuki — you know that, too, don’t you? That’s why you’re playing this game with me.”

“On the contrary,” Masaya got slowly to his feet, moving to the bars of the cage until he and Kai were a mere inches apart, separated only by the divide. “You mistake me. My reticence about Kohaku is a mercy, not a game. And you’re wrong about another thing. *That...* is no ally of mine. *That...* is no ally of anyone. Kill it, if it pleases you. I don’t care what you do. But I’m telling you... if you find it... and it hasn’t been hidden away somewhere beyond the reach of shinigami... if you find it, it will probably be your death first.”

“Meaning?”

“I’ve said enough,” Masaya shrugged his shoulders, moving to pick up the discarded book that lay against the pillow. “If you think you have shinigami to compare with power like that, then be my guest. There might not be much left of Soul Society when you’re done, but you know, noble sacrifices in the name of valour are always celebrated, aren’t they?”

He smiled unpleasantly, flicking the book open and thumbing through it to find his page.

“It might yet prove that here is the safest place for me to be. Well, wouldn’t that be an irony, if Second Division’s hospitality provided me with shelter from the fallout?”

Tenichi’s mind flitted back to the decaying landscape around the forbidden hut, and he swallowed hard.

He’s taunting Kai-dono, but he... isn’t lying. Keitarou-san said it too — that the one inside the shed was a monster... and that he was kept locked away because he was dangerous. But... Kurotsuchi definitely said Aizen Kohaku. Which means... that the one in the shed isn’t just another Plus soul on the verge of Hollowfication. Keitarou-san didn’t tell me that much... but... if Kurotsuchi’s telling the truth about that... it means... doesn’t it mean that the creature is Keitarou’s son... and the brother of the girl who killed Fukutaichou?

He drew a long, slow breath into his lungs, attempting to calm his racing pulse, for he was sure that across the chamber, Kai could hear

his heart pounding in his chest.

Koku told me not to get involved with him any further, but this changes things. Kurotsuchi is a prisoner. Koku doesn't know that. More, if he's willing to drop hints about Kohaku, surely that's a message to me that he's willing to drop them about me, too, and maybe Koku into the bargain? Something has to be done about it... before that can happen.

His gaze flitted to Kai.

Even if I was given to killing people at whim, Second Division isn't the kind of place I could break into to do it -and Kurotsuchi's expression tells me he knows that too, damn him. So long as he's at the Onmitsukidou's pleasure, and they don't intend on executing him, he's probably in the safest place Inner Seireitei has to offer. Koku said Keitarou-san had another spy in the Gotei — but it's this one that's causing me the most trouble so far!

34. A Black Prophecy

Chapter Thirty Three: A Black Prophecy

The moon had risen to its full height, sending its gleaming silver haze over the rooftops and courtyards of the Gotei division barracks as a silent figure slipped from alley to alcove, crossing the streets with a nervous glance behind him as night patrols passed their assigned checkpoints unaware. It was a dangerous gamble, he knew that better than anyone, but even so, it was better than tossing and turning in his bed, and at length he reached his destination, passing through the rear pathway of the Thirteenth Division and making a bee-line for the small chamber in which slept the one person who would understand.

Kurotsuchi's empty golden gaze still lingered in Tenichi's memories, burned into his conscience and it had seemed forever before Nakata had fallen asleep, his soft snoring confirming that he would not easily wake. Leaving Seventh had not been a problem, for the Division was still not running night patrols, but it had not been easy to avoid the zealous squads from Ninth and Eleventh that had almost cornered him as he had reached the intersection in front of the Tenth.

Now, even though he had broken through into his former division stomping ground once more, he was on maximum alert. Thirteenth's security locks were not as fancy and expensive as those deployed in the more paranoid, financially buoyant Clan divisions, nor were the patrols as numerous due to the smaller number of personnel, but that did not make them inattentive to danger, and even though his was a familiar reiatsu, it did not mean that his presence there would be overlooked.

Still, he had come too far to turn back, and so he gritted his teeth, hunkering down by the wall of the small room and pulling his *zanpakutō* from its sheath, ignoring the indignant protests of his blade as he used the sheer silver edge to pry loose the lock on the window. It did not come free immediately, but Tenichi persisted, and at length he was rewarded by the sudden give of the wood, the shutters creaking slightly in the gentle evening breeze. Grabbing the edge to prevent it from making any further sound, he prised it open more firmly, pushing back the unlocked glass divide until there was enough space for him to squeeze through and into the room beyond.

"I thought I told you not to come here?"

Koku's words were soft-spoken and sleepy, as though he had been drowsing until Tenichi's reiatsu had penetrated his senses, and the shinigami paused, glancing around him cautiously before approaching the pallet bed and dropping down at its side.

"I know, and I didn't intend to," he muttered. "If I'm caught here a second time, I won't talk my way out of it, so I know I'm taking stupid risks."

"I trust that this time you didn't come armed with a pillow?"

"Shut up. This isn't time for smart remarks," Tenichi snapped. "I needed to talk to you about something, and I don't want to hang around longer than I have to. It's something that affects you and something that affects me."

"I see," Koku stifled a yawn, and in the dim light of the moon from the window, Tenichi saw his companion reluctantly pull his body up into a seated position, reaching for the over-robe that lay discarded across the bedcover and pulling it over his shoulders to keep out the night wind. "Then say it quickly and go back to where you belong. I wasn't kidding about the spy, you know. I don't know where they are or who they are. It could be someone in this division, or it might be someone far far away. It's not worth the risk."

"Kurotsuchi has been captured." Tenichi said quietly, and Koku sat back against the wall, folding his arms across his chest.

"So?"

"So? You don't think that's a big problem?" Tenichi only just remembered not to raise his voice, and Koku let out his breath in a heavy sigh.

"Kurotsuchi won't talk. He daren't talk... apart from the fact he's *that person's* lackey and won't hear or do a word against the orders he's been given. You've no idea how hard it is to convince him to do anything else... he owes his existence to that person, so he won't say anything. You're overreacting again, and..."

"He already did," Tenichi cut across him, and despite himself, Koku faltered, turning to stare at his companion in consternation.

"What?"

"I was called to Second to identify him by the head of the Onmitsukidou," Tenichi adjusted his position, agitation clear in his demeanour. "Second is a fortress... the one place in Seireitei that you don't go to unless you really have to, so being called there was out of

the ordinary. I saw Kurotsuchi... and I heard what he said to Kai-dono."

"About you?" Koku's brows knitted together in consternation, "or about... that person?"

"Neither," Tenichi said grimly. "He looked at me in the kind of way that meant if I dared say anything he'd add his side of the story, but I didn't, and so he kept his mouth shut... about that. But Kai-dono asked me about Kohaku... and..."

"You know about Kohaku?" Now there was no mistaking the concern in Koku's voice, and Tenichi nodded.

"*That person* told me," he agreed darkly. "Or rather, I saw the hut and asked. The Rukongai people were obviously frightened, and I could see why... even with my *reiryokuseal*, I could tell it was a place of death. So I asked him about it, and he told me about Kohaku."

"I see," Koku was silent for a moment, then, "How much did he tell you?"

"That there was a monster sealed inside of it — a creature close to madness whose raging spirit power killed the surrounding wildlife and even a person in the village, so Kei... *that person* told me he'd banned anyone from going there."

"A monster? I see," Koku let out a humourless laugh. "I suppose that's one way of describing it. Yes. Perhaps that sums it up quite nicely. But you didn't see inside the hut... that person didn't take you to see it?"

"Why would he have?" Tenichi grimaced. "More, why would I have wanted to go? It seemed like a place nobody should go near, so I didn't. I didn't see the creature inside for myself, so I don't know any more. I figured you probably would, though — being that you lived in such close proximity."

"Mm," Koku's response was evasive. "That's not important right now, though. I'm more concerned about Kurotsuchi. You say he told this Kai-dono shinigami person about Kohaku?"

"Yes," Tenichi's lips thinned as he remembered. "He was baiting Kai-dono — taunting him with slithers of information, about how Soul Society didn't have anything to match the power of this Kohaku and that they'd all be killed trying, or some such thing... I don't know. But he wasn't the one being asked, Koku. Kai-dono was asking me about Kohaku, but Kurotsuchi decided to pipe in anyway. And more, he let

something else slip — maybe by accident, maybe on purpose. He said... he said..."

He lowered his voice to a whisper, then,

"He said Aizen Kohaku, as though this Kohaku creature was... somehow Keitarou-san's son."

"*That person*," Koku corrected reprovingly, and Tenichi faltered, then nodded.

"Yes. Yes, that's what I meant. That person."

"Hrm. I see."

"Is it true?"

"Is what true?"

"This Kohaku... is it... I mean, is he... *that person's* son?"

"Telling you the answer to that might be worth more than my life, even if we are allies," Koku said ruefully. "We're not allowed to talk about it. None of us are and especially not here. Suffice it to say that *that person* considers this a project worth his scientific interest... that's all. I can't say any more about it... really, you'd be better off not knowing about Kohaku at all."

"Then he really is that person's secret weapon?"

"A weapon? Mm, I suppose that's so," Koku reflected, "but not one that's about to be unleashed on Seireitei any minute if that's what you're thinking. The trouble is what to do about Kurotsuchi. Did he happen to say anything else while he was making a nuisance of himself? He didn't mention any other people or any other names..?"

"Kai-dono called him Suzuki, as if he knew him from before, and Kurotsuchi denied it," Tenichi remembered thoughtfully. "Otherwise, I don't think so. Just Kohaku. Nothing else. Oh, and knowledge is power... but I think he said that to... Koku?"

For the younger man had muttered a curse, his grip on the robe around his shoulders suddenly tightening.

"So *that's* why," he murmured, more than half to himself, and Tenichi shot him a quizzical look.

"Koku? That's why what? I don't follow."

"Does Kurotsuchi know I'm here?" Koku asked, and Tenichi shrugged.

"I don't know. He didn't say anything about it either way, but he was taken prisoner before you were brought back here, so I guess probably not. I don't think anyone's connected him and you in any way, so it wouldn't be relevant. Why?"

"He doesn't like me very much," Koku admitted, "and the last time we spoke, well, it wasn't really cordial. I told him that I knew a little too much about him, and I think he took it the wrong way. I half wondered if he'd sent you to me with a message — but if he didn't know I was here... still, the effect is the same."

"But like I said, he didn't say anything about you. Just the creature from the hut. That's all."

"Yes, but I know... more than most people about that particular subject," Koku said simply, "and if your shinigami friends knew that, I'd be in a lot more trouble. Kurotsuchi is a jealous man and petty, too. He's fixated on serving that person's will but he's possessive of his right to be useful and he wouldn't mind eliminating other people who are close to that person in order to make himself the most indispensable. What he said to your Kai-dono is effectively a declaration of war... well, if he wants to play it that way, it runs both ways."

"I still don't see how, but all right. You know better than me," Tenichi shrugged. "The problem is, what to do about him?"

"Right now, nothing." Koku said pensively. "If he doesn't know I'm here, and if he didn't say anything about you when you were right in front of him, I think you're probably safe for now. Kurotsuchi might risk annoying me but I don't think he'll cross *that person's* wrath so easily, so for now the less reaction you provide the better. That includes coming here to see me, by the way. If it was bad before, it's now even worse... if he does drop any hints to your superiors, you want to make it look as though he's making up false claims to create ructions rather than speaking truth. Your flapping around in panic won't help you. The shinigami know you and mistrust him... well, what they know about him probably gives them more reason to mistrust him, if I'm honest. Therefore, your best bet is to act normally and deny anything with confidence. They are far more likely to believe you than someone who was supposedly executed for crimes against Seireitei once."

"Suzuki Naoto died ten years ago," Tenichi murmured, his eyes widening as he remembered the cryptic exchange between Kai and the prisoner, and Koku nodded.

“Suzuki Naoto is his real name. His birth name,” he agreed. “He was a shinigami, just like you were... only some bad things happened and he was suspected of involvement. He got arrested and appealed his case, but before it got a proper hearing, he escaped and was hunted down by the Onmitsukidou. They allegedly killed him — though they didn’t do as good a job as they thought. *That person* found him, retrieved what was left and fixed him so that he could make use of the skills and knowledge of one of Seireitei’s spy division.”

“So he’s a fallen shinigami?” Tenichi pondered.

“Nothing is ever that simple,” Koku smiled bitterly. “Suzuki Naoto was framed, Tenichi, by corrupt superior officers who used his past as a petty thief in Seireitei to scapegoat him for their own smuggling. They had his mother murdered because she tried to speak out on his behalf, and others who tried to defend him also got killed. The officer responsible was struck from his duty and locked away... but Suzuki was dead, so that was all that could be done.”

“How do you know that?” Tenichi demanded. “You said you never left... oh...”

He faltered, and Koku smirked.

“*That person* has a spy within the Gotei,” he repeated, “and of course, Kurotsuchi gave his own side of events, too. He’s always maintained his innocence. I hate the man, but I believe him. Ten years ago Seireitei turned him into an enemy... no wonder he took such pleasure in baiting that Onmitsukidou officer. Most likely it was as much for his benefit as for yours — two birds with one stone, or some such.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Because knowledge is power,” Koku said simply, “and, if Kurotsuchi speaks out against you, well, you can now say that he’s trying to smear your name because you discovered his real identity and there’s still a warrant out for Suzuki Naoto, because the case was never finally settled.”

“And Kohaku?”

“Whatever you do, don’t let on to them you know anything about that,” Koku said flatly. “It’s far, far more dangerous than you realise.”

“Then that... the monster is really capable of driving people to death with madness?”

“Oh yes,” a humourless smile touched briefly against Koku’s lips,

and he inclined his head in agreement. “That rumour is quite true, I’m afraid. You were lucky that that day you found the hut, you had your spirit power sealed. Otherwise, with your shinigami sensitivity, it might have had a worse effect on you. You never know... it’s polluted ground, and twisted spirit power, so best left well alone.”

“But you said you knew more than most about it,” Tenichi objected, and Koku sighed.

“I do,” he agreed wearily, “but believe me, that’s not by choice. And I don’t intend on telling you anything else about it. It’s not information you want or need to have — believe me.”

“So you expect me to do nothing? Ignore it? Just hope he decides not to leak anything else?” Tenichi’s eyes became indignant slits. “I don’t want to know about any monster in a hut, and I didn’t ask to be dragged to Rukongai, but now with someone like that potentially about to spill everything... even if you’re right, even if they do believe me, it’s going to raise questions, and...”

“Shh,” Koku lifted a pale finger, pressing it to Tenichi’s lips as the older man’s voice threatened to rise. “Stop panicking. That doesn’t help anyone. Tell me instead — where is Kurotsuchi now?”

“I told you. With the Onmitsukidou.” Tenichi pushed Koku’s hand away, looking wary. “Why? What do you imagine you’re going to do about it? You can’t even get up, and even if you could, that’s not a place people break into.”

“I’m not doing anything,” Koku’s eyes widened in surprise. “Just gathering information, in case it’s useful at some point later. I thought we were allies, Tenichi-dono. I shared data with you, and now it’s your turn. Kurotsuchi is a former Onmitsukidou and it doesn’t necessarily follow that he can’t escape from their prison, not if he once worked there in some capacity. Therefore it might not be you and your pillow I need to fear, but...”

“I see,” Tenichi’s expression darkened. “You think, if Kurotsuchi finds out you’re here, he’ll come and...”

“It’s not impossible. He doesn’t like me, and probably knows too many things that I’d rather he didn’t — about *that person* and about me,” Koku twisted his fingers together absently. “Well? If I knew where he was, I might be able to sense his movements. My senses are quite sharp, I told you. If I knew what range I was dealing with...”

“Pretty sure you’d never find him, not where he is now, but it’s at the base of the Second Division,” Tenichi said with a sigh. “A door

leads down there, but its locked and he's behind bars. The Onmitsukidou are trained as assassins and secret operatives. They're drilled to kill first and ask later if someone invades their territory, because they base their work on absolute secrecy. You might call them the Gotei's secure squad... I don't imagine Kai-dono is about to let Kurotsuchi out of his sight."

"Perhaps not. Not if there's a past between them," Koku said thoughtfully. "I feel happier, though, knowing where he is. I might not be in a fit state to escape, but if he makes a move, hopefully I can sense him before he does and raise some kind of alarm."

"For a minute I thought you planned to go after him and kill him," Tenichi admitted, and Koku snorted.

"With this body?" he demanded derisively. "As you said yourself, I can't move. I don't have weapons, nor training in how to use one. Do you rate my chances against a former secret agent? The only reason I could stop Sakaki from killing you in Rukongai was because of *that person's* influence. Without that, here, I'm more vulnerable than anyone. Don't be stupid. Unlike you, I don't immediately think of killing problems that get in my way."

Tenichi flinched, looking ashamed, and Koku tapped him lightly on the arm.

"Go, now," he murmured. "I'll remember what you've said, and you remember what I have. And no more of these clandestine meetings. We can't see one another again, under any circumstances. I mean it, Tenichi. For both our sakes — go."

"All right," Tenichi got to his feet slowly. "I just thought you should know... since we're allies, albeit in silence."

"I wish you hadn't ever called us that," Koku looked pained, "but since it's true, I have to honour it as well. Just don't make it more complicated than it needs to be. You panic easily and it's not pretty. You'll destroy more than your own life if you carry on like that... you need to get it in check."

"You sound like an old man, lecturing me like that," Tenichi objected. "I'm a good few years older than you, you know."

"Age isn't in numbers but in knowledge, and when it comes to death, I know more than any other, believe me," Koku rubbed his temples. "Now go, before someone walks in on us again. And close the window. I'm getting cold."

Tenichi shot his companion an indignant look, but did not make

any retort. Instead he refastened the window, then slipped into shunpo, dropping out of the lightstep on the outskirts of the Thirteenth Division. For a moment he stood beneath the sign, gazing up at the snowdrop with a heavy heart, then he turned, preparing to make his way back home.

“Tenichi-kun?”

The sound of his former Captain’s voice made him freeze in his tracks and he swung around, half-frightened, half relieved that he was on the street side of the division boundary and no longer within Thirteenth’s compound.

“You’re out late. Did something happen — did you bring a message?”

Juushirou’s *haori* flapped around his shoulders, but in the dim glow of the moon Tenichi could make out the night robes that he wore beneath, and realised with a jolt that his former superior had been sleeping. Something — perhaps his own reiatsu — had disturbed the Captain’s rest, and he chewed on his lip, mutely shaking his head.

“I... know I shouldn’t be out by myself, not given what happened before,” he admitted softly. “Just... I’m not finding it easy to sleep tonight. I thought I’d come this way. I was sure that Kirio had said that Ketsui was on night patrol, so I thought I might see him and speak to him, but...”

“Ketsui?” Juushirou looked surprised, then shook his head.

“No, not tonight,” he replied pensively. “I see. So this wasn’t an official visit, but a personal one? A late hour, my boy, to be making inter-divisional calls. Particularly, as you said, given your previous experiences.”

“I guess that’s why I came, sir,” Tenichi mumbled. “I was worried... if he was on night patrol... that something might happen to him.”

His tongue fumbled out the lie, but even as he spoke it, he realised how much truth the deception cloaked. Though it hadn’t been Ketsui’s duty that had drawn him here, it had been a deep rooted concern for his brother that had pushed him to seek Koku’s advice a second time, and at his words, Juushirou sighed, compassion flickering in the kind hazel eyes. He rested gentle hands on his former subordinate’s shoulders, offering him a smile.

“You know, if things are troubling you, the best thing is to speak of them,” he said quietly. “I know that Seventh has had a good deal going on since Souja’s funeral, and that you’ve been busy there, but

even so, one man can only take in so much before he breaks. You need your rest, too, and I am sure there are scarce few hours available for it at your barracks right now. Ketsui is quite all right, I promise you. Nobody here will let harm befall him — can you trust my word as your former Captain that I will keep him safe?”

“I do trust you, sir,” Tenichi admitted truthfully. “I always have, and always will. I know Ketsui is safe here, I just... sometimes...”

He paused, turning his gaze towards the barracks, then,

“Sometimes I think it would’ve been better if I had never left Thirteenth,” he murmured. “If I hadn’t, I wouldn’t have been abroad that night. If I hadn’t, Souja-dono wouldn’t have gone investigating, and wound up becoming hurt. If I hadn’t...”

“Ah. Souja.” Juushirou’s eyes became troubled. “Yes, Enishi and Kirio both reported to me how badly you reacted to his death. I’m sorry I’ve had no chance to address it with you sooner — but you must know, my boy, that it was none of your doing. What Souja was looking for the night he died may or may not have been connected to your case, but you didn’t ask to be abducted, and so have no blame to bear in the aftermath.”

“Taichou said he thought Souja-dono was following up a lead about me,” Tenichi said miserably, a sudden, overwhelming urge to confess all flooding his body as he met that gentle hazel gaze. “I respect Taichou, and I didn’t mean it, but I feel like I took his son away, and that somehow I’m cursed... because of those people... because of what they said to me...”

“People?” Juushirou’s eyes widened, and Tenichi’s hand flew to his mouth, colour draining from his features. Hurriedly he shook his head.

“I mustn’t tell,” he whispered. “I promised Souja-dono, and I promised Taichou. I wasn’t to talk about them... otherwise...”

“Hrm,” Juushirou’s eyes narrowed to near slits, and he pursed his lips together pensively. “Would these be silver-haired people, by any chance?”

“Sir?” Tenichi blinked, staring at his former superior with incredulous eyes. “You mean... have you... seen them too?”

“I don’t think it’s something we should be discussing, certainly not here like this,” Juushirou chided gently. “I know they were the ones who found you, yes. And I hadn’t realised you remembered them, but I think you’re wisest keeping your word to your Captain and Vice Captain and not discussing it — with me or with anyone else.”

“I will. I didn’t mean to. I just... before I left, one of them said something about curses, and then Souja-dono died... and... and I’m so tired,” Tenichi stifled a yawn, shaking his head as if trying to clear it.

“I can see that, which is why you should go home and get a proper night’s rest. Tomorrow, Hirata and Kikyue will need you on the ball, and you owe it to them to be there,” Juushirou said gently. “But before you do, let me set your mind at rest. Nobody has cursed you. Those people are just people, like you and like I. They’re not people we talk about, but they don’t have the power to curse you or Ketsui or Souja or anyone else. Souja’s death was a horrific murder carried out by a ruthless individual armed with a sword. That person will be caught and justice meted out — but it had nothing to do with them, and more importantly, nothing to do with you. You understand? You’ve been through a lot and I realise that — but if you keep blaming yourself, you’ll only do yourself harm.”

“I suppose I know that, sir,” Tenichi let out a heavy sigh, feeling half comforted, and half as though he had betrayed his former mentor by keeping so much still a secret. “Thank you. I’ll go back now. And I’ll remember what you said, I promise.”

And what Koku said, and try to find the balance of logic between them.

“Good lad,” Juushirou’s eyes twinkled. “Leave the difficult decisions to us Captains, and get on with what you can for your division. That’s the kind of shinigami I sent to Seventh, so make sure you prove it, all right? Don’t let me down.”

“Yes, sir,” Tenichi saluted, then turned on his heel, hurrying off into the night before the Thirteenth Division Captain could see the stricken expression that had flooded his gaze at these words of trust.

I’m sorry, Ukitake-taichou. I should’ve stayed in Thirteenth and all would’ve been a lot less complicated. But now I belong to Seventh and I have a whole lot of different things to consider. Neither Koku nor I can do anything about Kurotsuchi right at the moment, so I’ll have to hope for the best... but even if Koku isn’t willing to kill him, I know now that I am. If there’s an opportunity... if he should break loose of the Onmitsukidou’s clutches... he’ll find a sword waiting for him. Maybe Koku has no training and no weapon, but I’m not that way. And I’m sure I’ve spent enough time now in an Endou division with Kikyue-dono as my commander to know how best to carry out a kill.

Just past dawn.

Kikyue ran a weary hand through her tousled dark hair, fumbling at

her belt for the key to her brother's office. It was still early and most of the division were not yet fully risen, yet since Souja's death Kikyue had regimented her days with late finishes and early starts. When she was busy, barking orders or sorting papers, she could channel her grief into more positive activities, but during the night hours, alone in her chamber it all returned, and even in the short time following Souja's funeral, she had learned to dread the restless nightmares that dogged her sleep.

Before they had left the Endou manor, her grandfather had taken her over to one side and, his pale eyes unusually sombre, he had rested a hand on her shoulder, meeting her gaze full on.

"Pain is a fact of life, and grief comes to the Endou more than any other Clan," he had said softly, his words even and calm despite the emotion that lingered in those eyes. "I know, and I have learned in my lifetime that those who live through that pain and continue to move forward are the ones with the strength to overcome it."

"Are you telling me to forget about it? Pretend it didn't happen?" Kikyue had demanded, throwing her usual respect for her grandfather out the window in her indignation. "Souja-niisama isn't someone I can just sweep away and forget about, Ojiisama! His death was murder... and murder by members of our family! I need... we need... Father and I, we must... we're the only ones who can chase this down and bring those people to justice. I must do that... Souja-nii would want it most of all!"

"Souja would want you to live on and support Hirata in his absence," Misashi's eyes had softened slightly at this, and he had sighed, sliding his arm around the young woman in an uncharacteristic show of open affection. "It hurts me too, Kikyue... the hunter sleeps inside of me more deeply than it does within you, but it is still there, crying out to avenge the hurt done to my Clan. He was a fine lad — the finest heir the Endou could have had, and nobody here would dispute it. Hirata and I both had high hopes for peace in District Seven if it were to be left in his hands — but this isn't a family where you can let down your guard for even a moment. Not even to bring back the head of his killer — you understand?"

"What other use am I?" Kikyue had demanded sullenly. "I'm a girl. The Endou won't recognise me. They didn't like me training with swords, and if Father and Niisama hadn't pushed it so hard, I never would've been able to enter Seventh and be like they are. I'm not prissy enough to be a pampered Clan *hime*, and I'm not male enough to inherit. What else can I do for the Clan than avenge my brother,

Ojiisama? What else is there left for me to do but that?"

Misashi had been silent for a moment, then he sighed, a deep, heavy sigh that seemed to draw on emotions that Kikyue had not known the older man had possessed.

"When your aunt chose to abandon her family and flee with that man, it hurt your grandmother and I to the core," he said quietly. "We have never forgotten — the pain remains even so long after the event. For one of her children to have struck down my grandson brings me further grief — grief I hoped I would never have to feel again. But you're wrong if you think that because Souja was a boy and you are a girl, your purpose here is irrelevant. On the contrary, Kikyue, you are all Hirata has left. Just as he was all Sumire and I had to cling to — Hirata has you."

"I'm still a girl."

"And so was my mother, Lady Yayoi, your Great Grandmother and one of the most fearsome warriors ever to fight for this Clan," Misashi had told her firmly. "It is harder for a woman in the Endou, but you are strong and Hirata needs that strength. Sayuri is just a child, and she isn't ever going to fight and kill for her Clan the way you can and do. The only one left who really understands Hirata's hunting spirit is you, my girl, because it's awake inside you just as surely as it is inside of him. I want you to remember that, and go back to Seventh with it in mind. Your grief will always be there, but your life is still important to this Clan and I don't want you putting it at risk to avenge your brother's murder. We are dealing with dangerous enemies with ruthless hearts — remember that, when you return to Inner Seireitei."

Ojiisama.

Kikyue sighed, closing her eyes briefly and leaning up against the wooden divide.

I understand, and yet I don't. Be there for Father, which I will — but walk away from Oniisama's death — which I can't. I know you survived an Endou Clan whose members slaughtered each other for fun, and I know you and Father have tried to stop that... but to hunt is still our instinct, and now we all have someone to hunt.

"Kikyue-hime?"

The sound of Ohara's aloof tones made her start, opening her eyes and turning reluctantly to face the Division's Fifth Seated officer and her own patrol second in command.

"Ohara..."

“You look tired, *hime*. Is there nothing I can do to help?” Ohara bowed his head in acknowledgement, offering her a sympathetic smile that Kikyue greatly suspected had been constructed and carefully practiced to perfection just for this kind of encounter. “I am your second-in-command, and so if there is anything...”

“Onii... *Fukutaichou*’s office is mine to sort, and I will finish doing it today,” Kikyue cut across him, shaking her head. “Thank you, but I am quite all right. I had heard Father was looking for you, however — maybe you should report to him first, since his orders do outrank mine.”

“In that case, I had better go and see what *Hirata-sama* requires,” Ohara bowed again, fashioning another perfect smile. “But please, if you need anything from me... anything at all... don’t hesitate to send word. I am at your disposal — as a good second should always be.”

“Indeed,” Kikyue kept a hold on her temper, watching the young man turn on his elegantly polished heels and stalk away back down the corridor, clearly intending to cut an impressive figure as he withdrew towards the Captain’s office.

Maybe you were right about him, Oniisama. I thought he was just being a loyal second, and following orders, but you did used to tease me about his attentions and warn me to watch him. I know he’s ambitious — and maybe he sees me as the next divisional Vice Captain who might speak up for him with Father about rank, but there was something else in that look just now, and I didn’t like it.

Her eyes narrowed to slits.

It was the look of an Endou chauvenist sizing up the best prize to drag to the marriage market in order to advance himself within the social circle. Well, he’ll have a shock, if that’s what he thinks. An Endou *hime* loses all her rights and her freedoms when she marries, and I don’t have time for that, especially not now. And besides...

She frowned, pushing open the door and slipping inside the still cluttered office.

Besides, I have no aspirations for Niisama’s rank and badge. They’re stained with blood and I don’t want them. Father will have to give that honour elsewhere... I won’t be Vice Captain with Oniisama only just cremated and gone. Even if the Clan expect it — even if Father does — I won’t do it.

She turned to face the room, her eyes resting on a wrapped parcel that sat on the edge of Souja’s desk, a scrawled note pinned to the top in the spidery script of the Fourth Division’s Vice Captain, Unohana Eriko. She sighed, returning the key to her belt and rubbing her

temples as she moved towards it, touching the brown paper wrapping gingerly as though it might jump up and bite her fingers. It had sat there for the past three days, gathering dust as she had copiously avoided anything that had had any personal connection to her brother's death, but even without removing the neat, clean wrapping, she knew that within were the folded remains of Souja's final uniform, returned to Seventh Division following his autopsy. Ruined beyond repair and with no master to claim them, Kikyue had not wanted to open the parcel, knowing that by doing so, she would be accepting that the office no longer belonged to Souja and her brother was never coming back.

Although I saw you cremated, Oniisama, I still can't let you go. Even though I know you're gone beyond my reach, I still don't want to face it and deal with it head on. Living my life without your guidance scares me too much... you never called me a coward, but I really know, now, how much of one I am.

She rested her palm against the brown paper, removing Eriko's note and glancing at it before setting it aside.

I wasn't there to help you when you needed it, and worse, I attacked the only person who was... the only one who tried to do something for your sake. He might have been a beggarly vagrant who didn't even have a weapon, yet he managed to bring you home and I thanked him by cutting him open. I wish you hadn't seen me do that, Oniisama. I wish... I could take it back. Even though everyone says he'll be all right... I still... I wish...

She faltered, fingers curling into the creases of the wrapping until her nails bore through to the fabric beneath, and in a sudden burst of frustration and rage she tore it open, tossing the ripped shreds aside as she surveyed the black and white uniform with a sense of bitter revulsion. It had been folded carefully and fastidiously, but even though Eriko had taken great pains to conceal the worst of the damage, it was not possible to ignore the ragged tears across the front of the fabric, nor the patches which, caught at the wrong angle in the light of the still-climbing sun, appeared darker from the saturation of blood. Souja's place of attack had still not been discovered, but Kikyue could tell from the uniform that wherever it had been, it would bear the stains of the encounter for a long time to come.

Oniisama.

Tears blurring her vision, she scooped the tattered clothing up in her arms, holding it tightly to her body as she allowed her emotions free reign over her body for the first time since the night of his death.

In the seclusion of her brother's office, where, if she closed her eyes, she could still picture him filing this report or giving her that gentle, chiding piece of advice, she let the tears fall, hugging the *shihakushou* as though by doing so she could reach the kinsman she had loved and admired so much. It smelt of herbs and Fourth Division, the stained sections stiff beneath her touch, and though she longed to bury her face in it and locate some shred of her brother's reiatsu, she knew that there would be none there left to find. Instead she dropped down into Souja's seat, her hold on her burden not loosening for a moment.

Why did you do this?

Anger and frustration welled up to drown her grief, as she pictured again her father's frantic behaviour the night Souja had vanished, and the sight of her brother, broken and bloody, crumpled on the forest floor.

Why didn't you tell someone where you were going? Why did you go alone? Who is this Joumei person you spoke to Father about? Why didn't you trust me? I would've come with you, and if I had... if I had...

She screwed up her eyes, throwing the *shihakushou* with some force across the room and watching with little pleasure as it thudded against the wall, sliding down onto the ground. As it did so, the *obi* fell from the centre of the bundle, its tattered ends proof that the healers had cut sections of it to send to Third Division's scientific team for analysis, yet it was the brownish smears that dotted the maltreated fabric that caught Kikyue's attention most of all. Whilst against the black it was harder to discern the bloodstains, against the white *obi* it was not so easy to conceal, and Kikyue got unsteadily to her feet, bending to pick up the expensive length of white silk.

They hurt you so much. What you must have gone through — yet you still came back to report to Father. Unohana-taichou said that it was only your will that got you back here. You kept going long enough to do what you knew you must.

She sighed, crossing her legs and leaning back against the wall, winding the *obi* absently around her fingers, folding and unfolding the crumpled cloth as her anger faded into a dull, empty ache.

I'm sorry. I shouldn't be angry. If you didn't trust me with something, then it was probably because you didn't think me old or sensible enough to know it. I wasn't reliable enough, and the fault was with me. I'm not angry with you, Oniisama. But I will find the one who killed you — I have to at least do that. I...

She frowned, as her fingers brushed against something other than silk and she glanced down, squinting at the battered sash as she tried to make out what she had touched.

Oniisama?

At first nothing was apparent, but as she held it up to the light, Kikyue realised with a jolt that pressed against the fabric was a scrap of torn parchment, soaked in blood to the degree that it had fastened itself to the inside of the *obicloth*. The healers who had stripped his body for examination and then embalming had not bothered to go over every inch of his clothing with a fine tooth comb, as personnel had been limited and the cause of death had been apparent from the state of the corpse, so after being removed, Souja's uniform had simply been folded and set aside on a shelf, waiting to be sent back to its Division of origin.

Waiting, and concealing something that, to Kikyue's eager eyes, looked like some kind of a clue.

Suddenly intent on her discovery, Kikyue tried to prise it free but the edge that was bloodsoaked was stuck fast to the inner crease of the obi. It had clearly been pushed there out of sight by her brother himself, she realised with trembling hands, for only he could have placed it so deep beneath the folds of his sash at a time before the attack had begun.

Pulling her sword from its sheath, she slid the silver blade against the scrap of parchment, cutting it free as cleanly as she was able and pulling it away from the obi, unfolding her prize and smoothing it out against her knees as she tried to make out what it said.

The script was unfamiliar, not her brother's, nor that of anyone else she knew, and though it was an educated hand, the note looked like it had been written in a hurry. The top corner was torn away, and sections of it were soaked through so thickly with dried blood that the characters had blurred into illegibility, but even so she persevered, squinting to work out what it said.

“Silver treasure... sleeps... branches... crimson... hunter... shadow... shroud. Bonds of life severed by a bitter blade, the wrong tree falls in a foreign forest, once uprooted, it is gone.”

She read it aloud, brow creasing further in confusion.

Oniisama? I've found your clue, but I don't understand it. I'm sure it's important, but I don't know what it means. It's all right, though. I'm sure it connects to Keitarou and Eiraki-basama and what happened to you.

She scrambled to her feet, her duties forgotten in light of this new tidbit of information.

I'm going to Father now, Souja-nii, so sit tight and watch over us, all right? You kept this because it was important somehow, so we'll figure out how. I'm sure we will — we must!

To think was to act, and she flung back the door of the office, not caring that her face was still glittering with tears, nor that she had left the remains of her brother's uniform scattered all over the floor. In her fingers she clutched the precious piece of paper as though it were made of gold, tearing through the halls towards her Father's office. As she reached it, Ohara was just leaving, and he cast her a concerned glance, clearly taken aback by her sudden, dishevelled appearance. He opened his mouth to speak to her, but she shoved past him, rapping eagerly on the door and pushing it open without waiting for her Father to summon her within.

"Kikyue!" Hirata's voice brought her to a sudden halt, and she swallowed hard, realising that her father was not alone. In the office's far corner sat the familiar figure of their neighbour, the gaudy pink *haori* that he generally wore absent in respect for their Clan's period of sober mourning, and despite herself she flushed red, bowing her head awkwardly towards the two Captains.

"Otosama, K... youraku-taichou. I'm sorry. I didn't... I thought... I should have waited outside."

"Kikyue-chan, what's wrong?" Shunsui eyed her keenly, getting to his feet and moving to brush the tears from her lashes. "You look shaken up — is Hirata making you sort that office by yourself? If so, you should get that idiot that was just here to take his share of the work. He seems very keen to offer his services, so you might as well take him at his word."

"No, sir. It's all right. I prefer to do it myself," Kikyue shook her head respectfully, bowing once again. "I just... I came to make report to... to the Captain. I didn't know he had a visitor."

"Report?" Hirata cast her a questioning glance, and Kikyue could tell by the lines of weariness that crossed her father's brow that he had probably had as much sleep as she had the night before. "Something important you think I should know?"

"Yes, sir," Kikyue agreed eagerly, taking a step forward and holding the mangled parchment out. "Fourth Division returned Oniisama's uniform, and when I was... was sorting it for disposal, I discovered this, tucked into the *obi*. It's not complete, sir, and it's not in great

condition... but I think Oniisama brought it back with him and I think he wanted us to see it. I don't know what it means, but I thought you might... there's words written on it, and I think Oniisama thought them important."

"A clue from Souja?" Hirata looked startled, taking the scrap and peering at it through the lenses of his spectacles. "The Fourth didn't locate it? That was lax of them."

"I imagine they have their own problems, with eight officers dead and two out of commission," Shunsui pointed out. "Besides, Kikyue-chan's found it now, so no harm done. Possibly it's better that it's got straight to the people who knew Souja best — if it's a message from him, you'll be able to understand it more quickly than a stranger would."

"My son didn't write this," Hirata shook his head, holding the parchment out for his friend to take. "I don't understand it either — it looks like some kind of a riddle."

"A riddle, huh?" Shunsui squinted at it. "Hrm, I see what you mean. A coded message, maybe?"

"That would be my guess," Hirata agreed. "Kikyue, you're sure this was all of it?"

"Yes, sir," Kikyue agreed, looking crestfallen. "I'm sorry. I tried to cut it free as cleanly as I could, but..."

"No, you did well to find it," Hirata sighed, moving to rest his hand briefly on her head, and despite herself, Kikyue felt vaguely comforted at his touch. "If we don't know what it means yet, then we will. If Souja brought it back — and he must've, for it to have been where you found it and so stained with blood, then he wanted us to see it. If it's a code, we'll break the code. If it's something else, we'll work it out. You did the right thing, bringing it straight here. It was good work."

"It's been rough on you too, hasn't it?" Shunsui cast her a friendly smile. "I'm sure Souja knew you'd find it, though. He thought you were a smart kid, Kikyue... clearly he was right."

He tapped the note against his hand.

"Tomorrow is the Captain's meeting, and they'll decide who's going to Rukongai," he added, addressing this remark to Hirata. "You're still observing mourning, so I'm assuming you won't be there. Will you let me take this and see if I can get anything from it before then? If not, I can always report it there and get everyone's take — it might be

significant considering where we're going. If Souja brought this back from there, then..."

"It might connect to Keitarou," Hirata's eyes blackened, but he nodded. "Yes. I must follow family convention, though it would be so much easier, I swear, to be able to fly free and fight this the way a shinigami should. Please, Shunsui — take it and do what you can. If you don't come up with anything, though, I want it back again after the meeting — understand? It's Souja's evidence, so it belongs here — with Kikyue and I."

"Understood," Shunsui offered a lazy salute. "I'll do my best and you have my word it'll be returned safely."

"Will I be able to go to Rukongai, Father?" Kikyue asked hesitantly, and Hirata cast her a stricken glance.

"Do you think mourning doesn't apply to you?" he demanded, and Kikyue shook her head hurriedly.

"No, sir, it's just..."

"I won't lose you too," Hirata spoke softly, but Kikyue could hear both fear and pain in his voice. "Even if it wasn't an Endou tradition, I wouldn't let you go anywhere near it. I know how you feel, but I won't let you. Souja went there without my permission and he paid for it with his life. Understand that, Kikyue. I can't and won't lose you too."

Kikyue was silent for a moment, then she bowed her head in contrition.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I won't do anything rash, sir. I promise. I'll stay here, just like you said."

"You can trust it to me, it'll be all right that way," Shunsui assured her. "Don't look so down — I promise that I'll do my best. Juushirou and I are your allies through thick and thin, remember? He's looking after the young stray, and now I've got something to follow up on, too. It's a step forward, even if it's only a little step so far."

"Shunsui's right," Hirata agreed. "For now, I want you to go back to Souja's office and finish what you need to do there. If you find anything else, bring it to me at once — otherwise, do what you can to get the sorting completed today. Tomorrow, I want to start talking about patrols and drills and how things are going to operate — at least in the interim — so I don't want anything hanging over us."

"Yes, sir," Kikyue saluted sharply, bowing her head again and

withdrawing from the office. She closed the door behind her, leaning up against it as she considered what had been said inside.

I want to be doing something useful, but if all I can do is sort Nuisama's stuff and stay alive, then for now, it's what I'll do.

She clenched and unclenched her fists, then,
Shunsui-dono, please, crack Souja-nii's secret message. Find out what it means and why he had to be hurt... and please, lead us to his killer!

“Are we completely sure it's supposed to mean something?”

Sora set the scrap of blooded paper aside, casting her Captain a plaintive glance. It was later that morning, and Shunsui had retreated to his own Captain's office, calling on Sora's help on the way, but despite the best efforts of the both of them, as yet the scrap of parchment had refused to give up any of its secrets.

“It looks like a lot of random words to me,” the Vice Captain continued now, “maybe something poetic, but... I don't see what on earth it has to do with anything. I don't recognise the handwriting, and I don't know why you're so fixed on it, Shunsui. We've been at this for an hour, and we both have other things we could be getting on with.”

“I know, and I'm sorry to drag you in here too, but I needed a second brain to bounce mine off,” Shunsui groaned, loosening the tie of his long unruly tail of hair and running his fingers through it before winding it up behind his head and haphazardly looping the expensive pin through it so that ends stuck out every which way. “Kikyue was adamant that this came from Souja's uniform — the one he was wearing when he was killed — and so she thinks it's a clue but... if it is, it's an obscure one and I can't make any of it out. It would help if there wasn't so much blood all over it, but even without that...”

“Well, it's torn across here, to begin with,” Sora extended a slender finger to tap the edge of the sheet. “I think this word might have said guardian, but it might just as easily say something else. We don't know if this is the beginning of a sentence or not. Even if Souja-dono was carrying it, what use is it to us if we don't know what it means? Even if it is a coded message...”

“The idea occurred that Souja might have intercepted some kind of exchange of information, and that's how he got himself into trouble,” Shunsui reached across to pick up the sheet once more, screwing up his eyes as he tried to make out the characters smeared beneath the blood.

“You’re going cross-eyed!” Despite herself, Sora giggled. “And your hair looks like a *hime* after an encounter with a bush. You shouldn’t pull on it so much when you’re thinking — you’ll knot it and then you’ll have to go to the Captain’s meeting looking like an old crone.”

“You’re always so flattering and deferential when we’re alone,” Shunsui shot her a wry smile. “Fix it for me, would you? I’ll try not to pull it askew again, but this is driving me crazy. If it wasn’t that I thought Juu had enough on his plate with looking after our sole witness to this whole business, I’d send a Hell Butterfly his way, but I’d like to figure this one out on my own if I can. I can’t let him have all the excitement — but all I’m doing is twisting my brain in knots.”

“Well, your hair resembles your brain, in that case,” Sora said smartly, nonetheless getting to her feet with a sigh and reluctantly coming to fix the long wavy hair. “Honestly, I’m sure that hairstylist isn’t in the Vice Captain job description.”

“I’ll add it,” Shunsui offered blithely. “Being Captain allows me to do that. Although I think you’ll find in the small print that there’s an ‘any other duties’ clause. And you don’t want me to shame the Division by stepping out of doors like a scarecrow, so therefore this counts.”

“You should just cut it,” Sora snorted, pulling the pin loose with more force than was necessary and causing her Captain to let out a very undignified yelp.

“I won’t need to if you scalp me!” he protested, and Sora laughed.

“True, but it would save us both time in the morning,” she bantered back, looping the long waves over her hand and smoothing them down. “Why don’t you just cut it, anyway? You never used to wear it this long when we were students.”

“No, but I have a bet on with Juu as to who can get their hair the longest without resorting to the shears,” Shunsui admitted ruefully. “I didn’t think he’d take it this far, but now it’s a matter of pride. I won’t cut till he does. My honour depends on it.”

“Seriously?” Sora arched an eyebrow. “Sometimes I worry about the Gotei, considering the kind of things its Captains consider important.”

“Well, if you don’t have a certain amount of frivolous idiocy, you go nuts and start acting as poe-faced as Minaichi,” Shunsui pointed out. “Especially in a dark time like this — something has to lighten the mood, else none of us will feel motivated to do anything

worthwhile.”

“Perhaps so,” Sora sighed, pausing to glance at the note again. “Shunsui, how is Hirata really? I haven’t been... right now, it’s difficult to know what to do regarding Seventh, because of the Clan and stuff there, but...”

“As good as can be expected,” Shunsui’s eyes became shadowed and he pressed his lips together pensively. “That’s another reason I want to resolve this for him. He won’t be at the meeting, because official Endou mourning demands he follow procedure, but I can tell that he’d rather be there taking action. I think... the idea of bringing Souja’s killer to justice is the only thing that’s keeping him focused and on track. His temper is short and he’s having to work doubletime to keep the Wind Hawk under wraps, but he’s hanging on in there. It’s still very raw, though. Kikyue — who I’ve never seen so subdued, by the way — was all for going to Rukongai herself because of this note, but Hirata forbade her to go anywhere and entrusted it to me. He’s lost one child, and I don’t think he could cope with losing another. They’re very dear to him — all of them — like small sparks of light in a dark and gloomy Clan full of death and ritual, and with one of those lights snuffed out prematurely...”

“I see. That makes sense,” Sora bit her lip. “I feel bad, not being a better friend, but Captain protocol doesn’t allow me to go flitting in and out of foreign divisions, not Clan ones. I’m glad you and Juushirou are able to.”

“Me too, though he knows that when Juu’s there, Enishi’s thoughts are with him, and when I go, yours are with me,” Shunsui assured her. “He’s said once or twice that having people’s support has stopped him from going out of control and launching himself into a do or die battle with Keitarou, wherever he is. That, and not wanting to give his poor wife more reason to grieve. Ai-hime isn’t a soldier, and Souja’s death affected her extremely badly... even though it was an arranged match, Hirata’s fond of her, and wouldn’t want to put her through more.”

“Which leaves us with the cryptic note,” Sora wound Shunsui’s hair neatly into its usual tail, fastening it with the expensive pin which had been a gift from his sister-in-law at the official inauguration of Eight Division, twenty five or so years earlier. “There, you’re done. Smart and Captainish once more. Don’t mess it up again, all right?”

“I’m lucky to have you, Sora-chan,” Shunsui observed. “Hirata’s loss makes me realise that even more. Not having a Vice Captain would create a huge amount of paperwork backlog.”

“Only because you leave it for me to do,” Sora dropped back down into her seat. “Right, so, back to the note. Read it out again— the bits you can — and I’ll try thinking on it afresh.”

“All right,” Shunsui nodded, smoothing the sheet out before him on the desk. “If we assume the first word is ‘Guardian’, then... of the... I think silver... treasure? Sleeps... on... something...”

“That character is red.” Sora squinted over his arm. “I’m pretty sure. Whatever this guardian is sleeping on, its a red something.”

“All right. Guardian of the silver treasure sleeping on a red thing,” Shunsui pursed his lips. “Some kind of branches hang... crimson... is that rain? I think it’s rain. The reflection? Or shadow?”

“Shadow, I think,” Sora’s eyes narrowed thoughtfully. “The shadow... something something something hunter’s passing something shroud.”

“And then the last line, which is intact,” Shunsui sighed. “*Bonds of life severed by a bitter blade, the wrong tree falls in a foreign forest, once uprooted, it is gone.*”

“Nonsense,” Sora groaned, flopping on the desk top in defeat. “No matter how much we read over it, Shunsui, it doesn’t make sense.”

“It doesn’t, but that makes me even more certain it means something,” Shunsui admitted. “I don’t know if this has anything to do with Keitarou, nor do I know what his writing looks like... but if Souja had it and it was with him when he died, chances are he died retrieving it. That makes it important... and Souja must have thought it so to keep it with him.”

“But he didn’t mention it before he died?”

“No, he didn’t,” Shunsui conceded reluctantly. “He was too focused on seeing to the stray and telling Hirata about the things he’d seen. The sword... Rukongai... the girl who looked like Eiraki. I guess he didn’t have enough strength to get to this.”

“Pity,” Sora grimaced. “If he had given even a clue about it...”

“I know, but he’s gone and that’s a closed road, so it’s left to us,” Shunsui responded. “Let’s try looking at it backwards. See if that helps.”

“Backwards?” Sora looked doubtful. “I don’t see how...”

“I mean, starting with the end line,” Shunsui offered her a lazy grin. “*Bonds of life severed by a bitter blade.* If we take that at face value, it

implies death by sword. Yes?"

"Yes, but we don't know it means that. It's written so funny, and what about the treasure and all of those other bits?" Sora objected. "It's no use, Shunsui. I don't think we can read it so plainly. It's obviously a coded message... but we don't have the code, so we aren't going to get anywhere with figuring it out."

A knock on the door prevented the Captain from responding, and he glanced up, raising his voice to call in the visitor. The divide slid back to reveal Kaoru, her arms full of folders, and at the sight of both Vice Captain and Captain, she faltered, glancing from one to the other uncertainly.

"I'm sorry... did I disturb something?"

"Only us slowly losing our minds," Shunsui gestured casually for her to come in. "Put them down on the side there, Kaoru-chan. I'll sign them later, unless there's anything urgent to handle."

"No, sir. Most of them are from Eighth District, and Tokutarou-sama's messenger said they needed to be looked over by the end of the week, if possible," Kaoru looked relieved, doing as she was bidden with a grin. "I said I'd tell you, so you know, and well, now I have."

"Then that's fine," Shunsui returned the grin with one of his own. "And now you can help me with a puzzle of mine."

"Shunsui?" Sora looked startled, and Kaoru cocked her head on one side, cheeks pinkening in surprise.

"Taichou?"

"Well, we're not getting anywhere," Shunsui shrugged. "Kaoru-chan, what do you know about trees and forests? Your spirit power manipulates plant matter, so you're as good a person as any to ask."

"I beg your pardon?" The Fourth seated officer's eyes nearly bulged out of her head. "I don't understand, sir — what about trees?"

"*The wrong tree falls in a foreign forest*," Shunsui read the line from the scrap of paper. "What do you think that means?"

"A *foreign* forest?" Kaoru looked more and more bewildered. "Is this some kind of riddle, Taichou?"

"If it is, we can't figure it out," Sora shrugged in resignation. "It makes no sense to us either, Kaoru-chan — so don't look so worried. If you haven't any ideas, then it's fine. It doesn't make us any worse off."

"Or any better," Shunsui intoned darkly. "Well, Kaoru-chan? Any

input?"

"Not really," Kaoru admitted apologetically. "Only, I think it sounds kind of strange, that's all, sir. Just... even if my sword can manipulate tree branches, it doesn't usually make them fall down. And if it did, I don't see how it would be in a foreign forest. Because a tree would be native to the forest it grows in, wouldn't it? Trees don't just up sticks and cross boundaries into different forests. They seed and grow in the same place. So it can't fall in a foreign forest... it must have grown there in the first place and then been cut down."

"Shunsui, now look. You've made the girl babble nonsensically about trees when she should be doing a thousand other things," Sora scolded. "I'm sorry, Kaoru-chan. You can forget about this and go do your scheduled duties. Leave the trees with Shunsui and I... it's our job to worry about them, not yours."

Kaoru hesitated for a moment, looking confused and uncertain, and Shunsui offered her an indolent grin.

"Sora's right. It's fine. Go," he assured her. "I'm sorry to have bothered you with it. Really, it's fine."

"She's going to worry about your trees for the rest of the day, now, most probably." Once Kaoru was gone, Sora shot her superior a reproving look. "You know how she hangs on your word — you should think before piling stuff on her like that."

"But what she said was interesting, and true," Shunsui pointed out, tapping his finger against the damaged fragment of paper. "Trees can't move between forests. They fall where they grow. Yet this one clearly says the WRONG tree in a FOREIGN forest. That's odd — it jars — and it reminds me of something else. Of another... wrong tree... in another... foreign forest."

"What now?" Sora stared, and Shunsui's grin widened, though his eyes were still clouded.

"Souja was in the forest when he fell, wasn't he?" he said softly. 'He was cut down by a blade, a blade held by someone who had a connection — probably — to Eiraki-hime and therefore to Keitarou. Murdered from Clan bitterness, perhaps. Juu always has some metaphor from his childhood about people growing into trees — the strong ones, the weak ones, and the ones who need support. What if that's the metaphor here? If we're dealing with Keitarou, then it makes sense to think that way, since the last pseudonym he adopted, when murdering his way through Niisama's district, was 'Masaki', which means something like "true tree'. I don't know if he got that

from Juu, but he and tree-names link together. And here we have the wrong tree. The foreign forest. What if that tree is Souja?"

"Souja fell in District Seven. That's not foreign to him," Sora objected, but Shunsui shook his head.

"He wasn't attacked there. He fell somewhere else, and was brought here, through *Senkaimon*, with the help of the District stray Juu's protecting," he said grimly. "He was found in his forest, but he fell in a foreign one. And if we assume the last line refers to that, then the first..."

His eyes darkened.

"Souja was an Endou. A bird of prey, a hunter," he murmured. "I can't explain the first part, but I do think that the hunter refers to Souja, and that he was struck by the bitter blade of an exiled kinswoman from a broken branch of the Clan. Probably... probably in Rukongai, which means that the boy... Juu's boy... might have come through from there with him."

"From Rukongai?" Sora looked horrified, but Shunsui dismissed that with an impatient gesture.

"Not the thing we should be focusing on now, though it's obvious and common sense when you think about it. Souja opened the gate in Rukongai — *foreign* land — with the help of the lad. Come to think of it, it's just as possible that the last line of this could refer to Kikyue's cutting *him* down — the *wrong* tree, in the *foreign* forest. The Rukongai boy who was mistaken for her brother's killer and cut by her bitter sword in Seireitei, where he didn't belong. Yes, I think that fits. I think that makes sense."

"I'm glad it does to you," Sora muttered. "What about the rest? The silver treasure? What about that?"

"I don't know about that bit, but all the red references probably relate to blood, judging by the state of Souja when he was brought back. And, if I squint at it, I can maybe make out the bit about the tree branches." Shunsui's brow creased in concentration. "The character for 'tree' is very clear, but... this one before it... I think it's the character 'kami', deity."

"God's tree?" Sora blinked, and Shunsui shook his head, reaching for a blank sheet of fresh parchment and grabbing his writing brush from where it had been discarded at a haphazard angle, teetering over the edge of the ink stone.

"*Ki. Kami.*" he said softly, sweeping the two characters across the

paper in his familiar scrawling script. “Or if you squash them together into one character, Sora-chan, what do you get?”

“Tree God, then.” Sora pouted. “Or... or wait. *Sakaki*? Is that what you mean? Are we being specific to tree genres now — the Sacred Evergreen?”

“I didn’t hear much of Souja’s last words, but I did catch snippets when I was organising Tenichi and the others, and one of the things Souja said — one that’s so far been ignored, because everything else was more important, was *Sakaki*,” Shunsui nodded his head, setting the brush down. “Juu’s mentioned it too, so I’m sure I heard right. It might be a coincidence, but I don’t like those. Here we have a sacred tree and a fallen hunter. From Souja’s lips we have the name of his assassin — ‘Sakaki’. And if the wrong tree in the foreign forest is the boy, somehow, then...”

“Even if that did make sense, you realise what you’re saying?” Sora demanded. “Souja had that on his body when he died. It’s covered in his blood, so it couldn’t have been planted there after. It was with him and he brought it back. *Before he died*. Before he got to Seventh’s forest, before all the things you’re theorising about happened. Therefore...”

“I know,” Shunsui’s expression was grim, and he nodded his head, lifting the scrap and holding it up in front of him as if seeing it properly for the first time. “This isn’t a coded message, or some kind of secure assignation invite. It’s something deeper... darker than that. Something that maybe explains why so far Keitarou — if it is him, and I’m sure it is — has been a step ahead of the game. He doesn’t *need* a spy among the Gotei, not if this is anything to go by. Somehow — and I dread to think how — he’s got hold of a power that we hadn’t even dreamed he could.”

His eyes narrowed.

“This note is a *prophesy*,” he murmured. “A prophesy, outlining the events around Souja’s death. I don’t understand all of it, and if I did, maybe it would be clearer still how it patched together, but if the last part is how I think it is, it’s chilling enough. It means somebody knew, before Souja even got there. Someone knew who he was, and that he was going to be in Rukongai, even before he did. And more, that someone knew *exactly how* he was going to die.”

Author’s Note:

Those few of you who have read Mirror Flower Water Moon may see

something familiar about the title of this chapter... o.O

Sakaki's name. If you don't speak Japanese, that might've been kinda confusing. I know I gave the meaning before, but if you assume the sentence in the prophesy is 神の木の枝(Kami no ki no eda) = Branches of the Holy Tree), then what Shunsui wrote down for Sora was as follows: 神 (kami — deity, God) + 木 (ki, tree) = 榊(sakaki, sacred evergreen). I don't know if you can see it, but the left hand side of the character is the tree, and the right hand side is the deity.

Finally, Juu really needs to invest in some better locks...

Oh, and whoever wanted Shunsui — here he is. One Shunsui, free of charge. Well, except for the sake tab...

35. Past Shadows

Chapter Thirty Four: Past Shadows

“And you’re quite sure this information is accurate?”

Keitarou leaned up against the wall of his shack, casting a cursitory glance around him at the barren environment he had left behind. His notes, his books, all his research had already been packed up and taken away by an apprehensive Katsura earlier that day, when his children and wife had gathered up the last stragglers amongst the local villagers, promising them food and fresh water if they followed to premises new. It had taken some persuading, Keitarou reflected, to convince such downtrodden people to venture outside of their native space, but Eiraki’s trust among them had finally won through, and at dawn that morning the last remenants of the Rukon community had crossed the divide into the Spiritless Zone. Keitarou alone had remained behind, mindful of the need to cover their tracks. It was not only security that had caused him to linger, however. His gaze flitted to the wooden box on the floor at his feet, and he frowned. The box contained the sword that Sakaki had retrieved from the scene of the shinigami murder, and its very presence made him think yet again of the missing Koku.

The haze of spiritual energy that connected him to Seireitei fluctuated slightly as his concentration threatened to break, and he furrowed his brow, forcing himself to focus back on the matter at hand.

“You’re sure the shinigami intend to meet this morning and that a trip to the Rukon is imminent?”

“That’s what I believe to be the case,” the voice of his contact, harried and unsettled flittered back across the divide. “It grows risky, Kei-dono. I don’t know how much longer I can keep contacting you like this. If it were to be known that I was feeding you information...”

The voice trailed off, and Keitarou sighed.

“There’s something else you’ve not told me, and I think it’s time you did,” he said frankly. “I can tell by the pitch of your voice that something serious has occurred on the other side of the *Sekkiseki* wall. You tell me abruptly that shinigami are planning to come here, but offer me no background or rationale for this sudden decision. I

promised that you would not be implicated in anything I do, and I will keep that vow — but I need you to keep your side of the bargain. If you don't..."

"You didn't tell me that murdering a Vice Captain was on the cards," the voice came back accusingly, and Keitarou's eyes narrowed to slits.

"A Vice Captain?"

"Yes. Endou Souja of the Seventh. He was brought back here in some state and died of his wounds not long after."

"I see," Keitarou inwardly cursed Sakaki's hasty blade, then, "And you're grieving, are you, for the loss of a Vice Captain shinigami? You mourn his passing — he was known to you?"

"Barely at all," the voice snapped back impatiently. "I have no opinion of the Endou and had nothing to do with the boy himself — no, that's not my implication."

"An unpleasant reminder, then, perhaps?" Keitarou asked softly. "An officer's corpse in the Rukon is a little too close to comfort for you, even after all these years?"

"That's neither here nor there," the voice retorted, though Keitarou felt the ripple in the spiritual connection and knew that his contact's feelings were more unsettled than they were trying to let on. "A Vice Captain was attacked on your side of the divide, and then allowed to escape back here, bringing information about you, your daughter, and goodness knows what other facts and figures. If he had gone much further, would he have found out about me? Did he find out about me? I thought you at least had the weapons there to make sure that silencing an enemy was done swiftly and without mess. Then this happens, and all hell is let loose."

"I thought you told me you'd put your faith in me... that you were happy to find someone else who shared your vision of Seireitei," Keitarou challenged. "I thought we forged an agreement in light of that — was I wrong?"

"We made such a pact," the voice agreed flatly, "but Endou Souja was the only male heir of District Seven's Clan, and so his death isn't going to be ignored. You've hyped up the whole of Seireitei by letting him come back here in the way he did — and that makes me worry that you can't protect me after all. That was also part of the deal... my safety and rank preserved even when the rest of Seireitei comes crashing down. A lightning strike in the darkness, that was what you

said — and why I entrusted you with so many secrets. Now this happens. You must understand my apprehension. Unlike you, I live here. If my real intentions were to be known...”

“Endou Souja,” Keitarou clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth pensively. “I’m sorry, but the death of the boy wasn’t by my order. Unfortunately it was a vigilante killing... and I was unaware that it was going to take place, so could do nothing to prevent it.”

“I thought you had ways and means of finding out important information like that!”

“So did I,” Keitarou admitted, “but apparently I was mistaken.”

“Well? The boy made it back here and his dying words implicated you. Is there anything else I should know about what he discovered — what he might have told Endou Hirata?” The voice was bitter and wary, and Keitarou rubbed his temples wearily.

“I didn’t meet with him, so any connection to me is entirely circumstantial,” he said gravely. “Even my wife doesn’t know your name, nor do my children, so there is no way that any of this could be traced back to you.”

“You are sure about that?” The voice was tinged with doubt. “Time has passed and people have forgotten, but it wouldn’t take much to revive a memory, and maybe even more than that. If people started asking questions, they might put pieces together and realise... so if Souja-dono might’ve found anything that connected you to me...”

“If you have not already been slashed down by the Wind Hawk, I imagine your secret remains safe,” Keitarou said acerbically.

“Perhaps, but his people remain in mourning. I have barely seen anything of him... it’s hard to know what District Seven are planning and I wanted to be sure.”

“What could possibly connect you to me?” Keitarou’s voice was bitter. “Don’t we belong on opposite sides of the divide? You told me that the first time I met you — that you believed in my vision for the future, because it was a vision of chaos, death and revenge, and it suited you well to be aligned with it — but that was all. Why would anyone suspect you and I of working together? You’re becoming jumpy and paranoid — and it’s that behaviour which will create suspicion, nothing else.”

“Fine,” the voice conceded, and Keitarou was sure he heard a note of relief. “If it’s that way, then I’ll have to believe you. It’s true, you haven’t let me down yet... but this vision of yours is slow coming and

now it seems to have hit a snag. It's your mess to clear up, not mine — but I just want to be sure that, when we strike... everything will be as you promised it would be. I've waited more than twenty years for the perfect moment to settle the loose ends, and I won't be happy if you let it slip away. Especially since I entrusted so much to you."

"Such brazen words from one so concerned about losing their own position," Keitarou said sarcastically, "especially from one in such a poor position they cannot act decisively for themselves."

There was a snort from the other end of the line.

"You know and I know that everything rests on you not screwing up," came the retort. "If you really mean to change the world, Keidono, letting Clan sons be murdered is a careless way of giving the Gotei undue warning and sending them scurrying into your territory looking for clues. I'll trust you to fix it — this time — but my position here is not a bargaining chip, and if I think it's under threat, I will pull out. We are not kin, and I am not one of your errant offspring. I owe you no loyalty, whatever you might think."

"You are grumpy today," Keitarou sighed. "I'm as aggrieved as you are that this happened the way it did. I have taken measures this side of the divide, and I trust they will be enough — but I have taken damage from this all the same. I am not worried about what the Endou boy might have said to his father, nor really afraid of Hirata-dono's Wind Hawk, not now. I am perfectly able to meet and tackle these threats head on, if need be, and have confidence in my ability to defend the Rukon territory alone, if that's what it takes. At present, other things concern me. Tell me, if you can, the circumstances surrounding Souja-dono's return to Seireitei? I am missing two of my agents and I would like to know what has become of them... perhaps you know."

"Two?" A humourless chuckle trickled across the connection. "That was very careless of you."

"I don't have time for you to mock me," Keitarou could not keep the impatience from his voice. "One of them matters little to my operation, and if he dies, so be it — in fact, it might be better should he do so, if, as I think, he has been captured by Seireitei's forces. I learned from Katsura that they had been tracking him — if he's become a liability, the sooner he's silenced the better. But the other..."

"The liability... the Onmitsukidou?" The voice became thoughtful. "I have heard that Second Division have such a creature in their care."

They claim to know him, though the Onmitsukidou are by nature reluctant to reveal information to outside authorities. I believe he was captured by Ukitake Juushirou, though, and things have slipped through the Thirteenth Division channels as a result.”

“As I thought,” Keitarou grimaced. “Ukitake Juushirou is going to be a problem for me... never mind. But you say the man was captured?”

“The same night that Endou Souja disappeared. Seireitei believe he was sent as a decoy to distract the shinigami from the attack on Souja-dono. Is that not the case?”

“Not at all,” Keitarou said blackly. “If I had meant to kill Souja, he would not have made it back to Seireitei. In fact, he would not have made it anywhere. I have made people disappear before, and I could have done so again. This was not my doing, and I am simply trying to limit the damage that the event left in its wake.”

“So your Onmitsukidou was working on his own?” The spy was startled, and Keitarou sighed.

“I don’t know what happened,” he said honestly. “He disappeared from Rukongai three, maybe four days before I noticed he was gone. I’m not worried that he’ll talk in captivity, nor that they will identify him, since that cannot be traced back to me directly. It just makes my job a little more difficult without him on the other side of the divide. I know I can’t rely on you to become actively involved in the things he did.”

“Decidedly not,” the voice spoke emphatically, and Keitarou’s lips twisted into a dry smile.

“So the Gotei have Kurotsuchi, and that’s all you can tell me?” he asked softly. “I said that two of my agents were missing — and one of them still has some material value to me. I would like to retrieve him — preferably unharmed — before the Gotei find him.”

“Another agent,” the voice mused slowly, then, “you believe him to have come here — but also not on your orders?”

“I haven’t a damn clue,” Keitarou muttered, fighting the flickers of uncertain rage that threatened to build up within his heart as he remembered Sakaki and Katsura’s accounts of the crime scene. “The last information I have of him is that he was in the vicinity of the Endou boy and that was all. I know he was there, and it’s possible the Endou took him as a hostage, but...”

“A peal of derisive laughter rippled across the connection, cutting

Keitarou off mid-flow, and it was all the scientist could do not to explode the kidou communication link with a flare of exasperated *reiryoku*.

“A hostage?” the voice was faintly amused. “I didn’t see the Endou boy when he was still alive, Kei-dono, but I saw him when he was dead. I know full well that he died of his injuries which were horrific to say the least. He was savaged — and in no fit state to stand up on his own, let alone take any of your people hostage. But there is something I might be able to tell you. It won’t please you to know it, maybe, but I’m only an informant, and I can’t help that. Like I said, cleaning up the mess is your problem — if you haven’t spoken to anyone about me, then the aftermath is no concern of mine. A young boy was with Souja-dono when he was found. Seventh’s Third Seat carved her blade into him, but he still lives. He is tight in shinigami custody, though... could that be the agent that you seek?”

“Maybe,” Keitarou responded cautiously, but his heart sank into his sandals at this confirmation of his deepest fear. “You say he was with Souja-dono? In what respect, with?”

“I don’t know all the particulars,” the voice reflected, “but I believe the Council decided he came as an ally. He helped the Vice Captain return here alive. That is why I hesitate to call him an ally or an agent of yours — but it is the only other individual I know anything about.”

“Does the lad have a name?”

“I believe they call him ‘Koku’.”

“I see,” Keitarou closed his eyes, pain rippling across his brow.

So it was you, Koku. Katsura was right. You are sicker than I thought — and that sickness drove you to attack Sakaki and follow a Shinigami home. I wish I had been more perceptive to the signs. That day I found you beating your fists on the wall till you drew blood, it should have told me that things were running more deeply inside you. Your fear of death has driven you to do something reckless and foolish — and if they discover who you are...

He opened his eyes.

“Did you say the boy was hurt?”

“He was, but he’s been treated and he will recover,” the spy responded thoughtfully. “I believe he’s in the care of a healer called Edogawa Mitsuki, within the Thirteenth Division compound.”

“Edogawa... Mitsuki?”

Ice trickled down Keitarou's spine at the sound of the name. *I tried so hard to kill you, and yet now I owe you Koku's life? But at what price? And Thirteenth Division... dammit, Juushirou, what do you think you know? Are you really going to be as much of a problem for me as Kohaku's predictions said you would? All these things that are coming together in an ugly kind of pattern... but without Koku, without every piece in its rightful place, the whole plan will unravel. Bad enough the shinigami are coming here... I must do everything I can to divert attention from the Spiritless Zone whilst I work out a way to get Koku back.*

Out loud he said,

"And that's all you can tell me?"

"All?" the voice snorted. "It seems plenty for now, don't you think?"

"Maybe," Keitarou pursed his lips. "All right. Then I'll break off the link — but I want you to promise me that if anything... significant occurs in the meantime, either within the Gotei or specifically with the Thirteenth Division's unexpected guest... you find a way to let me know. Without Kurotsuchi, you are the only source of information I have there... and it's important that I know what's going on."

"Thirteenth's boy does belong to you, doesn't he?"

"I'm very afraid that he does, and that he might be in very grave danger," Keitarou admitted. "I don't have time to explain more about it now — if the Gotei are coming, I have a lot of work to do. I'm grateful for your information, as ever."

He spread his hands, watching the glimmer of light fragment and fade as the connection broke, and for a moment he just sank down onto the ground, rubbing his temples as he processed everything the spy had told him.

Koku is in Seireitei. Koku is in Seireitei, with Ukitake Juushirou. And, worse than that, in close proximity to where the foxes are.

He buried his head in his arms.

Sakaki, I wish you'd kept your blade to yourself. Even had the Vice Captain escaped intact, that would've been better than this. Koku's phobia of death drove him to do something he shouldn't have done, and this is the result. I'm sure Katsura sees it too, although he hasn't said it in as many words. Koku's condition has been getting slowly worse, ever since the deaths in the Spiritless Zone. Since then, he's been more and more erratic, and seeing a dying shinigami before him on the ground must have proven too much for him to ignore. I should have seen it more clearly... should

have protected him more carefully... but now all I can do is cover our tracks here and work out a way of getting him safely back before Juushirou realises...

He took a deep breath into his lungs, forcing himself back to his feet.

First things first. The sword, and then, the Senkaimon. Enough to buy us time... enough to allow the villagers we've protected to settle and integrate into the Spiritless Zone. We can swell our forces by extending our protection to the people there, and so we will. Some of them will know Katsura, anyway, and that will help. Koku is my problem to solve and I will think on it as I work... there are no problems without solutions, and if I think on it hard enough, I'm sure I can work this one out!

He pulled back the cloth door of his hut, stepping out into the weak light of the Rukon sun and pulling Chudokuga pensively from his belt, glancing at his reflection in its clear blade for a moment.

You allow your personal feelings to sway you too far. You will never triumph over the shinigami if all you do is fret over the loss of one or other of your pawns.

The spider's hissing voice scuttled across his thoughts, and Keitarou's brow creased, shaking his head impatiently.

That's not it, Chudokuga. You know... you understand why I can't sacrifice Koku to the Gotei. You understand what I would be giving up to them — if they knew...

It is not like you to put all your reliance on one individual.

Chudokuga's voice carried censure, and Keitarou's grip tightened around the hilt of the tantou knife, resisting the urge to throw the weapon in frustration against the trunk of a nearby dead tree. As though sensing his thought processes, Chudokuga let out a low chuckle, and the scientist was aware of the spider's shadow falling heavily across his consciousness.

You can act all you like. We both know that your reason for protecting that boy is more than just a matter of experimentation.

I need him. That's all.

Do you? I thought you and I needed nobody but each other.

Chudokuga was derisive.

First the hime, then the mewling brats and who knows what else? You foist your attention off on those who surround you and it weakens your resolve. You could have rent deeper wounds in Soul Society the last time, by tearing apart the Kuchiki, but instead you

chose to retreat and protect your woman and as a result you almost died. True, in the long run those events proved unexpectedly beneficial to both of us, but after taking the effects of that Kinnya's blade, it's only the devil's luck that allowed you to scramble away with your life. Your ruthlessness is failing you, and if you lose that, you lose your only advantage over their swords and spells. You are not a shinigami like them — attachment is weakness. Trust is only a shade away from reliance, and only the weak rely on others to do their duty for them.

True, but this is a battle where numbers matter.

Keitarou rubbed his temples, a dull ache beginning beneath his skull.

I understand, Chudokuga. I haven't forgotten the emotions that summoned you, nor the hatred that forged my blade. But Koku is important. Retrieving him is important. He is the key... to whether we win or whether we lose.

Can you trust him? You only have those cryptic scraps of paper to suggest you are right.

I can't risk not trusting them. Even when I don't understand, all I can do is push forward and believe in them.

Keitarou raised his right arm, carving Chudokuga's blade through the atmosphere, slicing through the heavy air and splitting it into a yawning black divide.

For now, though, I must go to other places and prepare other plans. The Shinigami will come here, and then they must go somewhere else. I need your help in creating that smokescreen, and then I'm afraid we need to go somewhere else.

Ah.

Chudokuga's glittering, arachnoid eyes bored into the scientist's mind.

That's more like it. I thought you had put all your eggs in one basket, but it seems I was wrong. You intend on using them, then, even after all this time?

I had hoped there would be no need, but it seems that I was wrong.
Keitarou sighed.

We go to the Real World, Chudokuga... and then, with your help, I'm going to unseal Kusakawa's vault.

So, Keitarou had the power of prophesy.

Shunsui walked briskly along the wooden walkway that led to the big chamber given over to the Captains for their meetings, his brow furrowed in deep thought as he ran over the deductions of the previous day in his mind. Although Sora had pointed out to him all the weaknesses in his logic, as the hours had passed from evening into night, Shunsui had become more and more convinced that his hunch was correct and that the ripped, blood-stained piece of paper Kikyue had discovered in her brother's mangled uniform was something far more sinister than a list of apparently unconnected words.

The only trouble was that Shunsui could not work out how Keitarou had come by such a talent.

Chudokuga is a manipulative sword, and it can make other people do things at his whim, but I can't imagine him pushing it this far.

His eyes became slits as he pondered over the possibilities.

Hirata said he took reidoku and used that to enable him to escape with Eiraki, but according to the descriptions of his cousin Seimaru fighting under the influence of that potion, it only enhanced natural spiritual ability, it didn't create entirely new ones. More, the effect was only designed to be temporary — although there's no accounting for the advances he might have made in the formula in the two or three years between Seimaru's death and the murder of Kuchiki Ribari. It's also possible that the solution Seimaru had was deliberately dilute... without a sample for the Urahara to run tests on, all I'm working on is assumptions. But I'm sure I'm right. The whole idea seems crazy and farfetched, but I can't help but think it's the core clue to this whole business. What exactly am I going to bring up to the Captains this morning, though? My evidence is flimsy and it's all theorising and supposition. Still, I daren't keep it to myself. If it's important... if Souja died for it... then the other Captains need to know and quickly.

"You look deep in thought this morning,"

Juushirou's voice made him glance up in surprise, his expression becoming one of rueful sheepishness as he registered the fact that he had reached his destination without even realising it. His friend had clearly waited for him, and from the weariness etched into the other's pale features, Shunsui was sure his former classmate had also passed a restless night trying to patch together fragments of information. His mind flitted to the injured boy in Thirteenth Division's care, and he frowned.

"I had some things to think about, things I'll mention later," he said

frankly, leaning across to pull back the divide and gesturing for his companion to follow him. “What about you? You learn anything from your waif and stray?”

“He’s regained consciousness, but I haven’t had a chance to speak to him yet,” Juushirou shook his head with a tired sigh. “Kirio has, and apparently he says he found Souja already injured and didn’t see any assailant — but she thinks there’s something he’s not telling us, and wants me to talk to him myself when Mitsuki gives the go ahead. She’s still trying to win his trust — but apparently the lad is understandably wary of shinigami at present and she thinks he’s holding back in case we hurt him.”

“Because of Kikyue’s strike?” Shunsui questioned, and Juushirou shrugged.

“Possibly that’s a part of it,” he agreed. “However, even if he is keeping something back, it’s possible he told Kirio the truth. I don’t see how he would have had a run in with a homicidal swordswoman who slew a Vice Captain and not pick up any injuries. Kikyue’s blade strike was the only wound on his body... so it suggests he wasn’t involved in any fighting before he encountered her.”

“Which means we don’t have a witness at the scene of the crime?” Shunsui asked.

“I wish I knew what we had,” Juushirou admitted. “Kirio said that the lad referred to Kikyue as a ‘kestrel’...and it startled her enough for her to report his exact words to me when she came to tell me he was awake.”

“A kestrel?” Shunsui pursed his lips. “Now how would he know that, after one brief encounter?”

“No idea, but apparently he said it quite naturally, as though he hadn’t realised it was strange that he should know, so I’m not sure what to make of it,” Juushirou sighed. “That coupled with the fact he apparently called Mitsuki by name the first time he saw her...”

“I see,” Shunsui’s eyes darkened. “That is peculiar. One might say conveniently coincidental.”

“I think so too,” Juushirou admitted, “and yet Mitsuki is adamant that there’s no aggression in his aura. More, he was frightened by her presence, as though he thought she would hurt him, not the other way around. As for the kestrel, I can’t explain how he knew that, especially since Kikyue didn’t release her sword when she took him down. All in all he’s proving confusing and that confusion is costing me sleep. I

want to figure out what's what before I meet with him, but it's proving hard."

"Well, maybe the information I'm bringing to the meeting will help, though I doubt it," Shunsui sighed. "Between you and me, Juu, I don't really understand what I've found — or think I've found. If I'm right about it, the whole idea is terrifying. But the things you've just said to me about your waif... make me think about it all the more. I just wish I knew if I was veering off on an odd angle."

"I'm all ears," Juushirou shot him a curious look, but the other man shook his head.

"I'll share it inside, before the others," he said evenly. "I think it's better that they think this particular insanity is all my own."

"That bad, huh?" Juushirou asked, and Shunsui inclined his head in a sad nod.

"Fraid so," he confessed. "I don't know how they'll take it. Even Sora's not fully convinced of it."

"Well, there's a lot going on, so even wild guesses are better than blank faces," Juushirou observed. "Especially now there's this meeting. The trip to Rukongai worries me. It could be dangerous, it could be a trap, and..."

"A trap?" Shunsui arched an eyebrow. "You think Souja's murder was an invitation for the rest of us to 'come and get slaughtered'?"

"Like I said, I don't know," Juushirou rubbed his temples. "It's all too bitty and we don't know enough. Which brings me back to your news — at least tell me it has some kind of foundation?"

"It's about something disturbing Kikyue gave me, that she found on Souja's uniform," Shunsui said grimly. "I have a hunch about it and it's a hunch I don't like. I'm not sure if I'll convince the other Captains, but I can't think of it in any other light. Even if you don't agree with me when I explain, Juu, do me a favour and back me up? It is insanity, and terrifying insanity, but I can't shake the feeling it's important, and if you second it, it might prevent the others from rolling over me roughshod."

"Well, I'll try. Your hunches usually pan out," Juushirou looked surprised. He moved to enter the big meeting chamber, but Shunsui grabbed his arm, pulling him back.

"Shunsui?"

"You know what a dangerous game you're playing, don't you?" The

Clansman murmured, and Juushirou's eyes widened in consternation.

"Dangerous... what do you mean?"

Shunsui glanced about him furtively, making sure that nobody else was around, then lowered his voice.

"You realise that kid of yours... your stray... is probably from... the other side?"

Juushirou's expression clouded, and Shunsui nodded his head.

"I thought so," he muttered with a sigh. "You do know, only you're playing like you don't because you know that crossing the Rukon divide is a death sentence."

"This is a bad place to talk about it," Juushirou retorted. "I don't see why raising that subject matters right at the moment. Yes, I'm pretty sure the lad's from the Rukon, and that's why Souja was so hot on protecting him... but it's not like he came here to break the law. He was helping one of ours — in those circumstances..."

"Agreed, but it makes what I'm going to tell the Captains a little tricky," Shunsui grimaced. "I'm sure it hasn't escaped you either that there's a possibility he knows about Keitarou, and that's what he's holding back?"

"Yes, but that doesn't automatically make him Keitarou's ally," Juushirou pointed out. "He tried to save Souja, and from Souja's own words, the one who killed him was probably Keitarou's daughter. If anything, if Koku did know Keitarou in any capacity, he put himself in a lot of danger to help a shinigami. If he's holding back, and he's afraid, then that's just as likely to be the reason."

"Even despite the information he seems conveniently in possession of?"

"Yes..." Juushirou pressed his lips together, a troubled look entering his hazel eyes. "I don't know. My angle on it at present is that he stumbled into something he shouldn't and it frightened him enough that he's unwilling to talk too much to us in case it lands him in danger. Mitsuki was in Rukongai, don't forget. True, not the same part of it — probably — but if the killer of Souja was as Unohana-taichou believes, the same as that who killed Mitsuki's enemies, it's possible information trickled over the divide. And I'm growing more and more convinced that the wasteland Rukon isn't as abandoned as we've been led to believe it is."

"We agree on that point, at least," Shunsui grimaced. "I only hope

that habitation doesn't indicate that Keitarou's set up his own kingdom within a jurisdictional loophole."

"It looks that way, doesn't it?" Juushirou rubbed his temples. "Or he imposed himself on the people who were living there, and subjugated them, knowing we weren't looking his way and wouldn't show up to defend them. Maybe Koku is one of those people and he helped Souja for that reason... but right now, there are still more questions than answers. I just can't believe he's an enemy, when he took such a risk coming here."

"You don't think he's a spy?"

"A clumsy kind of spy, to be sliced up by someone's sword the moment he appears in Seireitei."

"True," Shunsui conceded. "I admit it does seem a little haphazard. Maybe you're right."

"In any event, his actions shouldn't be ignored and I gave Souja my word that Thirteenth would look after him," Juushirou concluded. "I'm sure Souja knew just as sure as you or I where he came from — I'm sure they met in the Rukon. That's why he was so adamant, and why I won't let him down. It's all I can do for him, so I'll do it right."

"I can see you've taken this on principle, and I won't change your mind, so all right," Shunsui sighed. "If I worked it out, though, I think it unlikely others won't come to think of it, too. I'll try and bluff it out for now, because what I have I can't hold back — but Juu, be careful, all right? You know there are Captains who will pounce on you for any irregularity they can find, just to shunt you out of office and shielding a Rukongai interloper is a pretty serious thing."

"I know, but right now he's the only witness we have and I'm going to protect him," Juushirou said simply. "I appreciate your concern, but it'll be all right. If there's a storm, I'll ride it out. It won't be the first time, and I'm sure it won't be the last."

"Well, just be careful. Not all storms live inside your blade," Shunsui reminded him, nonetheless releasing his grip on his friend's sleeve. "Then if your mind is made up, we should go inside. The sun's getting higher in the sky and I imagine we're some of the last to arrive, judging by how quiet it is out here."

"You're usually the last to arrive, so its almost certainly the case," a wry smile touched Juushirou's pale lips. "Come on."

As Juushirou had surmised, they were the last Captains to take up their positions in the long, high-ceilinged hall, but although Atsushi

shot them a grim glare at their entrance, he was given no opportunity to voice any petty grumbles. The mood of the chamber was sombre, made all the more so by the fact there was no representation from the Seventh Division, and once the two late comers had made their apologies and taken their places, Urahara Nagesu stepped forward. As leader of the Council he was also currently in authority over the Captains, as no formal agreement had been made regarding divisional seniority, but Shunsui could tell the reluctance with which the quiet, pragmatic man took the floor. He removed his glasses, rubbing them on his *haori* absently before returning them to their perch atop his nose, and then let out a heavy sigh.

“There’s no point beginning this with niceties,” he said grimly. “We’re here because of Souja-dono’s death, because of his evidence and because of the matters discussed and authorised by the Council of Elders in regards to further action. The decision — as many of you already know — is to go to Rukongai. We are here this morning to decide, therefore, who will go and when.”

There was a brief pause, then,

“I think it should be sooner, rather than later. If Keitarou is behind the Endou Clan’s tragedy, then we cannot waste any time in tracking him down.”

“I will send Kai and others from the Onmitsukidou, if so required,” Midori spoke up, her own expression grim. “I think it would be as well, given the nature of the mission, that some of our operatives are dispatched. Also, it’s no secret, unfortunately, that a former member of our division has been implicated in this business in some way. Therefore the grudge is ours as well as the Endou Clan’s and we must investigate that to the best of our ability.”

“The man you have in custody is confirmed as one of the Onmitsukidou?” Guren asked quizzically, and Midori’s expression became even darker as she shrugged.

“He hasn’t confessed, but it seems very likely,” she said at length. “What is for certain, though, is that he has some knowledge of matters that Souja-dono also raised in his final testimony. My brother reported to me that he had mentioned Aizen Kohaku — who the Council believe to be Keitarou’s son and heir. The prisoner taunted Kai with threats about the power levels this ‘Kohaku’ person possessed, and intimated that it was a level and nature that could destroy Soul Society completely.”

“Are you serious?” Mareiko’s pale eyes widened in dismay, and

Midori grimaced.

“What is truth and what is fiction is hard to tell at present, but he meant us to know about it and I’m reporting it because we can’t take the chance it’s not true,” she said reluctantly. “What nature of power this is I don’t know... but if our prisoner spoke true, it’s something we want to tackle with extreme care. I imagine that it will be necessary to kill this Kohaku person if at all possible. Kai reported that the prisoner referred to him as a ‘creature’, and an ‘it’...I’m not sure what significance that has, but it has an ominous sound to it that we don’t really like. It’s possible that this Kohaku is a hollowfied experiment of Keitarou’s.”

“Perhaps in the line of what he did to my brother some five and twenty years ago,” Guren’s eyes darkened.

“There is that possibility,” Midori agreed gravely. “I didn’t encounter Seiren-dono in his altered state, but from what I’ve heard of it...”

“Seiren-dono’s native spirit power was unfortunately allowed to overload his natural reserves and defences,” Retsu agreed sombrely. “He is a man of fierce resolve, else I am sure he would not have retained enough rationality to be brought back from the brink. I understood Seiren-dono’s condition to have been the result of unsealing his native spirit power in which there were already imperfections — but Keitarou was indeed involved in the breaking of the seal. It is possible that he did more than just unleash Seiren-dono’s *reiryoku*— and that he is capable of doing the same to other individuals.”

Atsushi’s eyes narrowed, and Shunsui took in the sudden tension that flickered through the man’s lean frame.

“Rukon individuals with higher than average spiritual power,” he murmured, more than half to himself, but Retsu nodded.

“It is possible,” she agreed sadly. “Discussion at the Council has indicated that he has carried out such experiments on Seireitei District individuals. There is no reason to suppose that he would not spread his interests to souls in the Rukon... whether they possessed natural spirit power or they did not.”

“Exactly,” Midori nodded. “Therefore we think it best to deploy forces trained in the darker arts of combat just in case.”

“I will also go to the Rukon,” Nagesu said heavily. “I feel that I should — or Mareiko — because of the need to analyse scientific

evidence at the scene.”

“I would sooner stay out of such a mission, Nagesu-sama,” Mareiko tugged absently at her wild blond hair, looking distressed. “If Midori-sama is right... sending my people to the Rukon... and they might not come back...”

She faltered, chewing on her lip, and Atsushi snorted.

“We are a military organisation, Sekime-taichou. Your subordinates are trained fighters, or they should be.” he said, his tones unusually sharp. “Unless, of course, you have other reasons not to want to send Twelfth Division to the Rukon.”

Mareiko raised her gaze, shooting him a reproachful look, and Shunsui saw her left hand inch unconsciously towards her right shoulder, before dropping back down at her side.

“I am an expert in Kidou, Atsushi-dono, and my team put all our effort into supporting Nagesu-sama’s scientific research,” she said quietly, “but not all of us are combat fighters of the same calibre as yourself. If Nagesu-sama requires Twelfth to deploy to Rukongai, then we will, of course, do as we are bidden — but there are surely squads better suited to that kind of deployment than our own.”

To Shunsui’s surprise, Atsushi flinched, opening his mouth as if to speak, but then pausing, as though he thought better of it, and Nagesu held up his hand to prevent the conversation from continuing.

Funny. I thought the Eleventh and the Twelfth had a good working relationship... but there was something in Mareiko-chan’s eyes then that I haven’t seen there before. More, Minaichi felt it — whatever it was she said, he felt it right to his core. I’ve never seen him pull that face before. He looked haunted... as though he was carrying a heavy burden and someone had come far too close to unravelling it.

Shunsui met Juushirou’s gaze across the chamber, and his friend gave an imperceptible shrug of his shoulders, clearly just as flummoxed by the exchange.

“It is my duty, given the nature of my relationship with Keitarou and my position as Chair of the Council to go myself, and I am willing to do so,” Nagesu was speaking now, so Shunsui turned his attention back to the matter at hand. “Mareiko, your concerns are noted and accepted. Twelfth need not send representation to Rukongai, but instead I will ask you to put your people to analysing some of the data that comes back. There will likely be too much for Third to manage on their own, given the wide space I believe we will have to cover.”

“With pleasure,” Mareiko looked relieved. “That we can do, and will do, to the utmost of our ability.”

“Is it a good idea for the Head of the Urahara Clan to take such a risk?” Kyouki looked doubtful. “Nagesu-kun, what if Keitarou takes a pot shot at you whilst you’re there? The Endou have already suffered grievously — it wouldn’t do for your family to take a similar blow. The Rukon is an unknown quantity — and more losses there at officer level would be unfortunate, not to mention catastrophic.”

“I have sons,” Nagesu said matter-of-factly, and Shunsui was surprised at the glittery of steely resolve that glinted briefly behind the spectacles. “My Clan’s succession is not in doubt, and my sons will not accompany me on this mission. Shiketsu already knows that I feel a certain amount of personal responsibility in this case, as it is Keitarou we are dealing with. I will go, Kyouki-dono, and if I find him, I will try and take him in Seireitei’s name. I am decided on this — it is my duty, just as it always has been, so I will go.”

“Then it’s a matter of deciding who should accompany you,” Retsu looked thoughtful. “Nagesu-sama, with your permission, I should like to send healers with you to the Rukon. You do not know what trouble you may encounter there.”

“If you can spare them, I would be grateful for their inclusion,” Nagesu looked somewhat relieved, and Retsu smiled.

“I will send my Vice Captain and one of my young members whose skills are extremely reliable,” she decided. “I do not think I can spare more than two at present. Mitsuki-san is still not healed, and nor is Seri-san, whilst I would rather not send Madeki-kun back to Rukongai so soon after his recent experiences there. My numbers remain depleted, but I believe that Eriko-san and Shikiki ought to be enough.”

“Shikiki?” Juushirou looked startled, and Retsu nodded her head.

“Shikiki’s spiritual aura is gentle and will not cause any further contamination within Rukongai,” she agreed gravely. “Her skills may also be in demand. I am already aware, Ukitake-taichou, that had she been on hand in Inner Seireitei the night of Souja-dono’s assault, she may have been the only one capable of saving his life. She was not here and I regret that fact. It seems certain now that Souja-dono was attacked in Rukongai. Therefore it seems wise for me to learn from that previous insufficiency and to send such a healer over the divide in the hope of averting a similar tragedy.”

“That does make sense,” Hakubei admitted. “Ukitake, she might be your sister, but in the circumstances...”

“I wasn’t going to say otherwise,” Juushirou shook his head, though Shunsui picked up on the flicker of his friend’s aura and knew that the other Captain was not entirely happy with the decision. “It’s as Unohana-taichou says... her skills are unique and best suited to this kind of expedition.”

“I think it’s a pretty for sure thing that you won’t be going with her, however,” Kyouki reflected, and Juushirou stared at her in surprise.

“Kyouki-sama?”

“Kyouki-sama is right,” Midori said briskly. “You have a history with Keitarou, and besides, your reiatsu is far too potent for the Rukon. Your control over it is a lot better than it was the first time I met you, but I think we all know that sending you over the divide when the enemy is someone you have personal knowledge of is a bad idea. Sougyo no Kotowari is a fine blade, and also one that should not be inflicted on the people of the Rukon valley.”

“I thought this mission was into abandoned Rukongai space?” Yuuichi protested, but Juushirou sighed, rubbing his temples.

“If Keitarou is there, it’s not abandoned,” he said wearily. “Kyouki-sama is probably right about my sword... and that he might try to goad me or worse, if he and I were to meet face to face. Besides... we don’t know how many people he has around him. It’s clearly not just him any more — not even just him and Eiraki-hime. There are the two children to account for, and who knows how many other allies. It’s all right. I don’t intend to ask to go along.”

“I, on the other hand, want to,” Shunsui said lazily, and everyone turned to stare at him, surprise and disbelief mirrored in their gazes. At their expressions he laughed, holding up his hands in mock surrender.

“What? Is it so strange that I’d volunteer for work?”

“Pretty strange,” Hakubei recovered himself, offering the man a wry smile. “Well? Is there a reason for this sudden bolt of lightning? Rukongai’s not much of a holiday destination, and I’m sure that it won’t be a sake-filled trip.”

“I think I should, there are things I want to look into,” Shunsui replied simply. “I don’t think that Nagesu-sama should be left to deal with it all himself, either — given that he’s a Clan head and has personal involvement. Well, I’m no Clan head, and though Aizen is an old Kyouraku name, the bloodlines between Keitarou and my family are so tenuous they’re practically invisible. I’m probably dispensable,

in the worst case scenario. Sora's a good Vice Captain, the squad would listen to her and all would be well even if something befell me. Most of you have Clans to look after, and so I figure it's time I stood up and did my bit."

"And the real reason?" Kyouki arched an eyebrow.

Shunsui attempted a hurt look, but as the Shiba Clan leader's gaze bored into his he sighed, shrugging his shoulders.

"I received something from Hirata yesterday," he admitted. "It's a bit messy, and I don't know entirely what it's about yet, but it's a note that Kikyue found in Souja's uniform. I don't have the note any more — Hirata wanted it returned and so I didn't bring it here — but I think it's something the lad picked up in Rukongai and that it's a sort of a clue."

"A clue? From the Rukon?" Juushirou stared. "That's your important evidence — what kind of a note?"

"One that doesn't make much sense if read cold," Shunsui admitted. "It's very poetic and cryptic and talks about shrouds and hunters and trees growing in the wrong forest. I admit I don't have a lot to base my conclusions on at the moment, but when Sora and I were going over it yesterday, it struck me that it didn't sound like a normal coded message. There were things in it — themes — that were eerily familiar to recent events. A hunter being struck down — Souja being an Endou, with a hunting bird as his spirit. A holy tree with blooded branches — Souja said the girl who killed him was called Sakaki. And then the last part — about the wrong tree being cut down by a bitter blade. I think that refers to Kikyue's sword slicing up the poor waif Ukitake's taking care of. In short, I think it's a potted summary of Souja's murder and its aftermath."

"But you said Souja-dono brought it back from the Rukon with him," Mareiko murmured. Shunsui nodded.

"Which is why I said I have nothing to base my hunches on," he replied. "It sounds crazy... really far-fetched, but that element of it makes me certain I'm right. And if I am, it's a terrifying prospect. It means that someone knew what was going to happen to Souja before it happened, and Souja found and pocketed a description of his own death — probably without even realising what he'd found. I don't know where he found it, but I want to go poke around and see if I can't locate any more similar scraps of paper. It might be a long shot, but I feel like with Keitarou you can't take risks of ignoring long shots. If I'm wrong, well, it's just one of my crazy ideas and it didn't pan out

— so much to the good. But if I'm right..."

"If you're right, Keitarou has a way of predicting the future?" Juushirou asked, horror clear in his hazel gaze, and Shunsui pulled a graphic face.

"It's what it looks like. I can't work out for the life of me how, but the note is too sinister to be a coincidence."

"Hirata-dono has this note now?" Guren asked, and Shunsui nodded.

"Yes. He said he wanted it after the meeting, but I didn't think it was my place to pass notes in a Captain's meeting, especially ones that might prove precious. I sent Sora to take it back to him this morning, when I was getting ready to come here."

"Then I think we should ask him to bring it before Council in the very near future," The Kuchiki said quietly. "In normal circumstances I would dismiss such a wild idea, but this is Aizen Keitarou and I agree with Shunsui-dono. There is nothing to be gained by underestimating this man — and much to lose, as Hirata-dono and myself have both learned in the most costly of ways."

"I agree," Juushirou said solemnly. "It sounds mad, but Sh... Kyouraku's right. That isn't a reason to doubt where Keitarou is concerned."

"Then Kyouraku-taichou will also accompany Nagesu-sama and my agents to the Rukon," Retsu said softly. "May I suggest that both of you take a few of your trusted subordinates to assist in the search? We have no specific bearings to follow, so the more numerous the force, the better."

"Too many people might constitute a target," Nagesu said thoughtfully, "but I think taking one or two individuals might be a good idea. Shunsui-dono, you should probably leave Sora-dono behind, but I'm sure you have other higher ranked officers you might take with you — ones with good spirit power control?"

"Probably," Shunsui agreed reluctantly. "I'll talk it over with Sora later, and we'll work out who'd be best to go. I had only factored in my own inclusion, and I don't really want to put my squad members at risk, but Unohana-taichou is right. We don't know what we're going into, and back up might be needed."

"Are no other squads sending representation?" Kyouki asked softly. "In the circumstances..."

“We have so far members from Third, Fourth, Eighth and the Onmitsukidou. I think that will suffice,” Nagesu shook his head. “There is no need to evacuate Seireitei to pursue this threat — on the contrary, if all our best fighters left this area, it would be an invitation to Keitarou to take advantage.”

“But with such a wide area to cover...” Guren mused. “Perhaps Kyouki-dono is right. Maybe we ought to be dispatching officers from our squads, too, for you and Shunsui-dono to command as you see fit.”

“That might not be necessary, Guren-sama,” Juushirou spoke up at that moment, and Shunsui cast him a questioning look.

“If you’re going to suggest deploying Thirteenth en masse, Juu, I’m not taking them,” he said pointedly, and Juushirou snorted, shaking his head impatiently.

“Don’t be stupid. I wasn’t going to say anything so reckless,” he said bluntly, “and don’t use that name here — we’re at a Captain’s meeting, not playing *shougi* in Ugendou. Whilst I would like to offer the services of my officers, I wanted to raise something of my own that came to my attention by coincidence following Souja-dono’s funeral.”

“Thirteenth doesn’t need to be a part of this, Ukitake,” Atsushi said disparagingly, clearly having regained his earlier lost composure, and Ukitake’s lips thinned.

“On the contrary, I think we should have representation on this mission, bearing in mind that Thirteenth Division has so far been involved in investigating the abductions and were responsible for the apprehension of the prisoner currently in Midori-sama’s custody,” he said coolly. “I will not go myself, because I accept Kyouki-sama’s reasoning — but with Nagesu-sama’s permission, I’d like to send my Third Seat with a couple of officers, just in case its of use.”

“Naoko-chan?” Shunsui let out a heavy sigh, but nodded. “Nagesu-sama, what do you think?”

“Thirteenth have had involvement in the other issues up till this point,” Nagesu acknowledged. “Very well. We will take three officers from Thirteenth, and they may report back to you on their return... Shunsui-dono, since you are acquainted with the officers in question better than I am, I will entrust them to your command.”

“That’s what I was afraid you might say,” Shunsui rubbed his temples, shooting Juushirou a rueful smile. “All right. Just promise me, J... Ukitake, that the ones you send with Naoko can act as a

cushion between me and her sharp tongue?”

“You can have Atsudane and Kira,” Juushirou nodded. “Though I’m quite sure Naoko will cause you no trouble. She’s a good officer and listens well to commands.”

“Yours, perhaps,” Shunsui muttered, but he held up his hands in resigned acceptance, and Nagesu’s gaze flitted back to Juushirou.

“You had something else you wanted to raise, Ukitake?”

“I did,” Juushirou nodded. “Something I think might be of use.”

He fumbled at his *obi*, pulling out a rough sheet of paper. At least, it doesn’t make very clear sense to me, because I’m not scientific, but...”

“Scientific?” Mareiko’s pale eyes widened, and she held out a slender, soot-smudged hand. “May I see?”

“With pleasure,” Juushirou nodded, passing the document to his neighbour, who scanned over it thoughtfully, her brow creasing as she digested the data it contained.

“This is very detailed,” she murmured. “Where did you get it from, Ukitake-taichou? This style of theorem is extremely outdated, but perfectly legible and coherent.”

“I can’t answer that,” Juushirou admitted. “It came to me via a contact of Hirata’s, and I’ve taken responsibility for it in his absence. I wasn’t sure whether I would bring it before you today, but in light of the other discussions, I thought it might be important.”

“Not from the Rukon, then?” Atsushi snorted. “What value has it to us if it doesn’t connect to this meeting’s main theme?”

“Why would it be from the Rukon?” Juushirou looked taken aback at the vehemence in his companion’s voice. “If Keitarou is there, Minaichi-taichou, I assure you he isn’t sending me secret notes through his illicit Spirit Gates in order to help me crack his intentions.”

“What are you trying to imply?” Riled, Atsushi’s fingers twitched close to the hilt of his sword, before dropping down at his side, as though he had remembered where he was and in whose company. “I asked a reasonable question about the importance of random scientific data on top of everything else we have to look at. I simply wanted to know if it had come from the Rukon. Is it such a foolish question?”

“I’m not sure,” Juushirou was bewildered now. “I don’t see why whether it came from there or not matters, if it has relevant data to

our investigation.”

“And you’ve yet to prove that it has any such value!” Atsushi exclaimed. “If it has such value to you, then I thought Souja-dono must have brought that back too, along with the data that Kyouraku-dono talked about. Your saying that’s not the case makes me wonder why you bothered to bring it here at all, and how it could have any bearing whatsoever on the work we’re embroiled in?”

“I’m sure Souja had no time to bring back a whole library of incriminating evidence with him,” Shunsui said lazily, “As it was, the scraps I had to look at were blooded and not in very good shape. Ukitake’s sheet is clean and crisp, if not exactly fresh. Logic suggests it came from a different source — so how about we save discussions about its worth until after we’re done hearing what it is, Minaichi-taichou?”

Atsushi bit his lip, his cheeks red with frustrated anger, but he made no further demur, and Juushirou sighed.

“Sekime-taichou, what do you make of it?” he asked softly.

“It’s certainly very thorough,” Mareiko admitted, passing it across to her Clan leader with a shrug. “I’m not sure whether it is relevant or not, though — Atsushi-dono might have a point in what he said. It looks as though it relates to the Seventh Division boy who was abducted — and we have no proof that that was connected to Souja-dono’s murder.”

“On the contrary, I think it likely there’s a strong connection between the two events,” Midori interjected, even as Nagesu’s brows twitched together in consternation at the neat lines of scientific data. “Kai reported to me that Tenichi became quite distressed when we called him to see our prisoner. He claimed not to have seen him before, but Kai wasn’t entirely convinced by his denials. And I’ve heard from Hirata that Souja was probably investigating Tenichi’s abduction when he was killed. There’s a link there — we just don’t have the proof to take action over it, that’s all.”

“The proof is probably here, if we find that this correlates with the part of Rukongai Souja-dono visited.” Nagesu glanced up, waving the sheet of paper and eying Juushirou quizzically. “You won’t tell us who gave you this?”

“I can’t say anything else about it. I gave my word,” Juushirou shook his head, meeting Shunsui’s eyes briefly, and the Eighth Division Captain’s eyes widened slightly as he realised where the mysterious sheet of notes must have come from.

Juu? Have you been playing with wild foxes in the time I've been wrestling with that note of Kikyue's? No wonder you look so harried — if you're juggling that and trying to hide that kid's Rukon roots... not to mention taking on new recruits... I'm glad you're not going to Rukongai as well. I think it might just be the last straw if you did... I need to remind Enishi to make sure you get some rest before I take Naoko-chan into the abyss.

"I also think that Souja's death has something to do with Tenichi's abduction," Juushirou was continuing, "but the information I received indicated that those tests were carried out when Tenichi was unconscious... after he was dumped back in Seireitei by whatever powers took him hostage. I didn't bring this here to imply he was complicit in anything — especially not Souja's murder."

"Nobody's saying that he was," Midori shook his head. "Right now we don't have evidence to make those kinds of assertions against an officer who has no record of insubordination, let alone anything more sinister. We believe that the memories he'd lost — or suppressed — as a result of his experiences may have started to come back. Kai said that Tenichi became particularly agitated when the name Aizen Kohaku was mentioned. So far that name has been kept to the highest level of security... but Tenichi acted as though he was fearful of it. I wonder whether he saw our prisoner and recognised him, but was frightened by the recollection. Which begs the question..."

"What happened to him to make him so afraid?" Retsu murmured. "I have read the assessments of Kotetsu-kun's condition following his return, and at that time he was disorientated and suffering from a degree of amnesia. However, suppressed memory in a case of severe trauma is not uncommon. It is medically possible that Kotetsu-kun is beginning to remember those things his brain wanted him to forget."

"Well, this data suggests he was taken to Rukongai. And if these mineral readings are correct, I might be able to work out a rough location for us to begin our search," Nagesu tapped the paper absently with his index finger. "Whoever wrote this knew their scientific principles. Mareiko is correct — the mode of approach is severely outdated, but the work itself doesn't seem to be inaccurate. Whilst I'm extremely curious to know what source could have produced it, Ukitake, following up the lead is more important at present."

"Thank you," Juushirou inclined his head. "I gave my word not to reveal where it came from, and I must keep that promise, no matter what, so I appreciate you not enquiring any further."

"Does Tenichi know you have all this data on him, by the way?"

Kyouki asked, and Juushirou shook his head.

“Like I said, he was unconscious at the time the samples were taken,” he replied. “I really don’t think that he’s anything more than a victim in this, Kyouki-sama. Even if he did see something that frightened him, and Midori-sama’s theorising is correct... I know him and can’t imagine him doing anything subversive.”

“Well, he certainly didn’t abduct himself, and he didn’t kill his Vice Captain, so I agree that it looks more like a case of wrong place, wrong time for the lad,” Hakubei rubbed his chin. “Midori-sama, were you wanting to interrogate Kotetsu about this?”

“Let’s see what the Rukon raid turns up first,” Midori shook her head. “If I’m right — and Tenichi did see this Kohaku — the fear might have been enough to make him forget about it. Alternatively, and given the nature of Keitarou’s sword, it’s not impossible that Kohaku has spirit power that relates to manipulation of memory. If that were the case, it might explain why Tenichi — and the minnows taken before him — remembered nothing of the experience.”

“But why take them?” Anabomi of the Ninth asked plaintively. “There seems little to be gained by that. Perhaps Kotetsu Tenichi was taken to Rukongai, but I still feel his kidnapping was not the same as the ones Minaichi and I experienced with our members. There was no demand made to the Endou that I recall...”

“There was,” Shunsui said grimly, and Juushirou nodded.

“A demand relating to secure Clan-related data he could not give,” he agreed blackly. “I agree with Anabomi-taichou, though. I think the kidnaps are different. I think Tenichi was taken for another purpose, and that purpose had the unexpected effect of taking Souja’s life. I don’t think Souja was the original target, though... he just found more than he bargained for and then had to be silenced. I think that Tenichi was used as bait in another trap.”

“A trap for what, Ukitake?” Yuuichi asked, and Juushirou shook his head.

“Only Keitarou knows for sure,” he replied with a shrug. “I’m not going to try and estimate how that man’s mind works. I’ve not yet managed to outthink him, and assumptions are dangerous things when he’s involved.”

Shunsui’s eyes narrowed slightly as he absorbed the evasiveness of this answer, and he knew his earlier assumption had been correct.

So it is the Kitsune you’re protecting. I wonder if it was Hirata who

put the two of you together... or if it's something you've begun on your own. I hope it's not a dangerous gamble, courting foxes and protecting Rukon strays at the same time. Something bugs me about your stray and what you said earlier on — until I work out what it is, Juu, please be careful.

“Then the next step is to go to Rukongai,” Nagesu folded the sheet of scientific calculations, casting Juushirou a glance. “May I take this? I'd like to look over it in more detail.”

“Please, do,” Juushirou agreed. “The time for concealing evidence is past. One life too many has been lost, and we need to pool whatever resources we have to prevent any more tragedies.”

“In which case, we should leave as soon as possible,” Shunsui observed, and Nagesu nodded, sliding the parchment into the folds of his *shihakushou*.

“Tonight, at Third,” he said frankly. “I'll prime the gates... we'll leave at midnight. Meeting dismissed.”

The moon was cloaked by a heavy layer of cloud that evening, and an owl hooted mournfully as it flitted above the trees that grew to the south of the Kyouraku's Eighth Division compound. Shunsui locked the door of his office with a heavy heart, making his way along the short walkway towards the main entrance of the barracks and the path that would lead to Third Division's domain. Whilst he was eager to go and investigate on his own account, he was not looking forward to being in command of Juushirou's feisty, opinionated Third Seat, and he let out a rueful sigh as he stepped out into the cool night air, glancing up and hoping inwardly that it wasn't going to rain.

Although I don't know whether Rukongai will have the same kind of weather we have here. I've never been on that side of the divide, even if I did meet one or two women who'd escaped from there in my time as a reckless teen.

“Taichou?”

Kaoru was already waiting for him at the Eighth gateway, hopping excitedly from foot to foot as she contemplated the adventure ahead, and at the sight of her, Shunsui felt his heavy heart lift slightly.

“Well, you're ready right on time,” he greeted her warmly. “You're sure you don't mind coming into this with me? It might be dangerous, and whilst I've faith in your skills, I don't know what we might be going into.”

"I'm fine, sir, really," Kaoru's cheeks flushed and she nodded her head. "If I can be of help, I want to come. Fukutaichou has to stay here, and she said she wanted Shindou-san to help her with the final supplies paperwork, so he can't go, but I'm the next highest rank and I don't have any assigned duty this evening so I'd like to be useful. I'm not on early morning patrol, either, so it really fits in quite fine."

"I see," Shunsui eyed her fondly. "Well, then I suppose that's all right. I thought I asked Sora to find me two officers, though — right now it looks like it's just you and me."

"Mm, no it's not," Kaoru shook her head. "Nakamura-san is coming, too. She just went to get her cloak from her chamber, because she said the wind was cold."

"Nakamura... Hanako?" Shunsui's eyes widened in consternation, and Kaoru's gaze became big as she interpreted the man's expression.

"Taichou? Is something wrong?"

"No, not at all," Shunsui gathered himself, inwardly wincing at the combination of Naoko's sharp tongue and Hanako's legendary obstinacy on such a delicate mission. They had sparred often as students at the Academy, and although it was widely known that Hanako held him in high respect, Shunsui felt certain that her opinion of the former Unohana *hime* had not tempered any with time. Reuniting them had not been his intention, and inwardly he berated himself for not telling Sora that Naoko was also coming along.

I thought if I told her that she'd want to go, or she'd fuss at me for complaining about Naoko-chan's attitude, but it was a bad oversight on my part. Hanako I can handle. Naoko I cannot. I'm not Juu — I can't weave miracles over her and expect her to treat me with respect. This might be a disaster waiting to happen, and there's nothing I can do about it.

"Are you sure?" Kaoru was still eying him curiously. "You seem like something's bothered you — are you worried about Nakamura-san's duties? Because I checked the scheduling myself and she's on my shift tomorrow. It shouldn't be a problem. And she's Ninth Seat, but it was Sora-dono's idea, so I assumed you would agree."

She frowned, pursing her lips.

"Shizuka-chan wanted to come, too, but Sora-dono didn't think you'd let her," she added thoughtfully. "She's on night patrol tonight, anyway, so I figured you'd not want to upset the timetable. Nakamura-san and I were the obvious choices, so that's fine, isn't it?"

"You're right," Shunsui sighed, running his fingers through his long

hair as he saw Hanako running across the courtyard towards them, thick woollen cloak wrapped around her shoulders and the silver-threaded hilt of her sword glittering in the dim haze of the moonlight. “Shizuka’s not experienced enough for this kind of mission, but I find it hard to argue with her, so it’s convenient that the schedule intervened. I think if I take you and Hanako, everything should go smoothly. And speaking of which, here’s our third now. Ready to go, Hanako?”

“Ready, sir,” Hanako bobbed her head forward in a decisive nod. “I’m sorry if you thought I was lagging. I did tell Nagasata-san...”

“It’s all right,” Shunsui assured her. “Kaoru told me, and in any case, we’re a little early still. It is nippy out, and no harm’s done. We should be at Third in good time.”

He pulled his own cloak around his body, gesturing for his two companions to follow along behind him as they stepped out onto the late night cobbles.

“How much did Sora tell you both about what tonight’s mission entails?” he asked softly, and Kaoru frowned.

“We’re crossing into Rukongai to investigate and bring back evidence, if we can find it,” she said slowly. “Evidence relating to the exiled criminal who’s top of the Council’s wanted list — Sora-dono said I shouldn’t say his name outside of barracks, just in case people are listening in.”

“Good advice,” Shunsui muttered grimly. “Though I don’t think in this case it matters overly if we talk. I think he already knows everything he needs to know about us and our movements, and I think it’s unlikely we’ll run into him on the other side unless he’s in a position to attack — but bringing back evidence may be key in tracking him down. Hanako, you’re all right with going through to the Rukon? I realise it’s something we don’t do generally, and I think the area we’re going to isn’t going to be pretty and polished like the Spiritless Zone.”

“You should know already that I’m not some sissy Clan *himewho* needs fuss or protection in grim situations,” Hanako said matter-of-factly. “I’m quite prepared for whatever we’re going to face. That’s why Sora-dono asked me to go with you. She said that I was thick-skinned when it came to grisly things, and since we might find the place Endou-fukutaichou was murdered, there could be blood. She didn’t want to send someone who’d faint at the sight of the red stuff.”

“Whilst that’s reassuring, I think your greatest strength with us

tonight is your navigation skill,” Shunsui said honestly. “Nagesu-sama is trying to find some kind of coordinates to work out where we should begin our search best. It’s going to be sketchy — so I think your abilities are going to be vital if we stand a chance of finding anything important. Kaoru-chan, I want you to keep on your alert, too. I’m told that the Rukon’s atmosphere is a little different from here, but your senses are sharper than your sight so I’m sure you won’t be easily fooled. Between the two of you I want us to cover all bases, so don’t think it will be an easy ride.”

“Not a chance,” Hanako assured her Captain with a firm smile, and Kaoru dimpled, nodding her head.

“Nakamura-san’s map-reading and navigation is the best in the Division,” she agreed. “I’m glad you’re coming with us, Nakamura-san, if it’s the way Taichou says it is.”

“Will it just be us and some of Third?” Hanako asked, and Shunsui sighed, shaking his head.

“Thirteenth, Fourth and the Onmitsukidou are also sending representatives,” he admitted. “Nagesu-sama and I are the only Captains being spared, so I imagine we’ll split into two teams. I don’t relish trying to give orders to Onmitsukidou, so I imagine Nagesu-sama will take on that task. He has higher Clan authority and Council authority to back him up if he needs it. I’ve already been assigned the members of Thirteenth thanks to the meeting earlier — and I think we’ll have a healer with us, too. That makes a team of approximately seven members in total.”

“It’s not many,” Kaoru chewed on her lip. “Not if we’re going to be covering a wide area and not even if there are two teams. Fourteen shinigami in the whole of the abandoned Rukon zone? We’re going to be there a lot longer than I thought.”

“No, we’re not,” Shunsui said firmly. “We’re going in, and we’re coming out. If there’s nothing to see then there’s nothing to see. We’re an investigation team, Kaoru, we’re not spies and we’re not scientists. If it looks like it’s going to take a long time, we’ll bow out and pass it over to the Third’s experts to examine with fine tooth combs. We have other duties and we’re not going to set them aside — don’t look so worried, I’m going to insist on that being the case.”

“Then seven really isn’t very many,” Hanako sighed. “I hope that means the ones from Thirteenth are going to be on their mettle. Do we know who they are, Taichou? Or does it depend on who Ukitake-taichou sends?”

Shunsui hesitated for a moment, then he grimaced, holding up his hands.

“Don’t shoot the messenger,” he begged, “but Juu... I mean, Ukitake said he was going to dispatch Naoko, Atsudane and Kira to our little mission.”

“Shikibu Naoko, huh?” Hanako’s brow creased momentarily in displeasure, then she shrugged. “Oh well. I suppose there’ll be a reason why he did that, and if you’re in charge, she’ll have to defer to you, so I don’t suppose she’ll be able to do as she likes and boss us around, even if she is a Third Seat now.”

“I would like it very much if the two of you didn’t choose to reignite your old school disagreements,” Shunsui agreed lightly. “I don’t want to be refereeing this business. I asked J... Ukitake after the meeting, and he said that Naoko’s been heavily involved in some of the investigation into the abductions and other suspicious elements relating to Hollows, so it’s important she goes, just in case there’s a connection and she can find it. I’d like you to show her — and the other two, of course — how efficient and professional Eighth Division’s shinigami are... all right?”

“Of course,” Kaoru looked startled. “We wouldn’t do otherwise. Besides, Thirteenth Division are nice. I like them.”

“That’s because — Shikibu-san aside — they’re pretty much as District as we are and so don’t have false airs and graces about themselves,” Hanako said matter-of-factly. “Even Houjou-fukutaichou acts with District sense, despite his Clan background. They treat people as people, not as bloodlines, and that’s the difference.”

“But most of Eighth are Clan, and they’re not like that,” Kaoru objected. Hanako pursed her lips, nodding reluctantly.

“True, but that’s because of Taichou and Sora-dono not allowing it, and you being Fourth Seat,” she acknowledged. “Eighth is pro-District, so there’s none of that discrimination nonsense lurking in the shadows. It wouldn’t be tolerated. Even if there are only you, me and Shizuka-chan who are District born, it doesn’t feel like we’re a cornered minority.”

“I can’t imagine you ever being a cornered anything, Hanako-chan,” Shunsui observed ruefully. “But you’re not wrong. Eighth will always be pro-District whether the Kyouraku Clan like it or not, because it happens to be the way I like to run things.”

“Taichou fought the system to let me be accepted to Eighth when I

graduated the Academy,” Hanako cast Kaoru a triumphant grin. “It wasn’t supposed to happen, but he said that if I wanted to go to Eighth, I should be allowed to go to Eighth. And the Council backed him, so I did.”

“I didn’t know that,” Kaoru absorbed this, then grinned. “Taichou is nice, that’s why.”

“Much as I’m enjoying this ego massaging, it’s an old story from a long time ago, and all I did was point out that if I didn’t object and Hanako wanted to come here, it was our business and nobody else’s,” Shunsui interjected dryly. “Meantime, the important point is that Eighth and Thirteenth have a good working relationship, and so I expect no trouble on the other side of the divide.”

“So long as the *him* doesn’t get any pretensions of grandeur, I’m sure we’ll be fine.” Hanako said frankly, folding her arms across her chest emphatically as if to underscore her point. “Nagasata-san and I are more than capable of holding our own, and we’ll not do anything to let the Eighth Division name slip.”

“Let’s hope that’s true, because we’re here,” Shunsui paused to gaze up at the imposing marigold that hung resplendant above the three slashes of the Third Division, and he sighed. “I’m understanding right now why that flower belongs to this Division, make no mistake — but the sooner we begin, the sooner we can finish. Come on, you two. Let’s go find our Rukongai playmates.”

Author’s Note

Because I thought some people might be curious to see Hanako again... she got assigned to the Rukon. Naoko was not best pleased with me, but sometimes these things have to be done.

This is also a very Shunsui chapter, following on from the end of the last, because I felt he was being unfairly neglected. Whilst I’m sure he’d rather be napping with sake in his chamber, I decided he was going to Rukongai with Naoko and Hanako. Lucky him...

36. Into the Rukon

Chapter Thirty Five: Into the Rukon

Well, so here they were.

Shunsui stepped out of the black chasm, setting his sandalled feet down on the parched earth of the outer Rukon and gazing around him with a mixture of anticipation and apprehension. Behind him, he was aware of the spiritual presences of his companions following his example, each one of them primed and ready to launch into attack if they came under immediate threat. In the midst of the group stood Nagesu, his eyes unreadable behind the lenses of his glasses, and Shunsui glanced at him, inwardly relieved that he was not the only nor the most senior member of the Gotei present on this mission.

Upon arrival at Third Division's barracks, the Eighth Division shinigami had found that all but the Onmitsukidou officers had already gathered and, as the Second Division's secret operatives had emerged silently from the shadows around their neighbouring Division, Nagesu had begun calculating the calibrations to open the door to the Rukon beyond, checking every spiritual emission with his usual meticulous care. Whilst Naoko and Hanako had greeted one another with wary glances, both had seemed to understand the gravity of their current mission, and so, to Shunsui's relief, neither one had made any snide remarks. Instead, Naoko had come right up to him, bowing her head curtly and then raising resigned green eyes to meet his wary brown ones.

"Taichou's dispatched us to be of use to you in whatever way we can," she had said quietly. "We'll do our best, over the divide."

"I've no doubt," Shunsui had acknowledged. "I know Juushirou has had you investigating several things of late — I'm hoping your knowledge will prove useful when we arrive at our destination."

"Mm," Naoko had turned her gaze towards Nagesu and the gate, her entire body tense, and Shunsui's eyes had narrowed, interpreting the things that the Third Seat had not bothered to say.

You want to go find Keitarou and use that poison sword of yours to rip holes in him, the way he ripped holes in you. Your aura is tightly controlled, Naoko-chan — but I can feel it. I know the hatred you have for this man and his sword — but that knowledge and that experience might be

enough to flush him out. I know why Juu really sent you, and it has nothing to do with your Hollow investigations. It's because, him aside, you know Keitarou's reiatsu best. Even Nagesu-dono and I, who've met him, haven't experienced Chudokuga's power at such close quarters as you two. If Juu can't go himself, sending you was the next best thing — but his sending you with me means he's asking me to look out for you and make sure you come back in one piece, no matter what the provocation.

I didn't expect to be going back to Rukongai so soon, "Kai's voice at his right shoulder had brought him back to himself, and he offered the Onmitsukidou leader a grimace." It wasn't that appealing the last time, but I'm told the wasteland Rukon is several times worse. I hope you're prepared for whatever we're going into, Kyouraku — at the very least, I think it's likely we'll find the site of Souja-dono's last stand."

"I'm counting on us doing exactly that," Shunsui had admitted. "It's not a nice mission, but I volunteered for it. I want to see where Souja went, and what he did before he died. If I can pinpoint that, maybe I can find something of use to the Gotei in tracking down his killer."

"Neesama said you had some idea of him being able to predict the future," Kai had observed. "Is that true?"

"That's what I'd like to prove," Shunsui had responded grimly. "One way or another."

Nagesu had unleashed the seal on the *Senkaimon* at that point, preventing any further conversation as one by one the shinigami disappeared into the blank chasm. Nagesu's meticulous work on both coordinates and release meant a short, uneventful journey between regions, and as Shunsui inhaled, he was aware of something stale in the air, heavy and cloying yet intangible to his senses. He raised his gaze to the sky, taking in the hazy cloud cover that cloaked the weak sun from view, and he sighed.

"Picturesque, isn't it," he murmured, and Kai snorted, shrugging his shoulders.

"I warned you. It's no picnic here, not considering there's been no resources of any kind in these parts for a long while," he said frankly, then, "Nagesu-sama, how close to the Spiritless Zone have we emerged?"

"Not close at all, if my coordinates are correct," Nagesu looked up from a scroll of parchment that he had clutched between his fingers. "I followed the scientific data from Ukitake's mysterious source, and tried to pitch my Gate's opening as close to that area as possible. With

any luck, my sword releasing the *Senkaimon* won't have been easily detected — I took every precaution to make sure that was the case. Even though it's true that a Bankai sword releasing a *Senkaimon* should in theory be untraceable, Keitarou is more knowledgeable about this science than I am, so I didn't want to take any risks."

He cast Shunsui a glance.

"We should divide here," he decided. "Kai-dono, I should like you and your men, along with Eriko-dono to accompany my officers and I as we comb the scene for any evidence of Souja-dono's place of attack. I believe there should be a trace of a broken Gate in that area, and I should like to conduct tests on it while the Onmitsukidou investigate the crime scene more thoroughly."

"I shall accompany you," Eriko agreed soberly, nodding her head. "If I can be of help, I will."

"Which leaves us to take the other direction?" Shunsui turned, putting his hand up to shield his eyes as he squinted across the barren landscape. "I can see something hidden in the dip of the land — something that looks suspiciously like shacks of some kind, yet I don't sense any kind of living presence. That being the case, it seems a good place to start looking."

"It could be an abandoned settlement from when the Rukon was evacuated," Nagesu warned, and Shunsui nodded.

"It could, but if so, we should tick it off our list," he said firmly.

"All right," Nagesu acquiesced. "Then we'll meet back here. Send a message if you need help — or flare your reiatsu, and we'll come."

"Understood," Shunsui agreed, and as the seven other officers disappeared into shunpo, he turned back to the group that remained. "Hanako-chan? We don't have a map, so I'm going to rely on you to be at the top of your game navigating us through this place when there's a good chance a lot of the scenery will look very similar. That's your key task on this mission — understand? Most importantly, tracking a route back to this gate as quickly as we can in the case of trouble. I have no intention of leaving anyone behind, nor any limbs or other extraneous parts, and it might not always be possible to rely on shunpo in such an unstable atmosphere. In fact, I'd rather we used that as little as possible, since flurries of spirit power in this environment will make us easier to locate for any enemy lurking in the shadows. We don't know who or what is waiting for us, so discretion seems the better part of valour."

“Yes, sir,” Hanako nodded her head curtly, and Shunsui grinned.

“Naoko-chan, you’re the highest ranking Thirteenth member here, so I’m going to entrust Kira and Atsudane’s safety to you,” he said blithely.

“Kyouraku-taichou, we can think and act for ourselves!” Makoto protested, and Shunsui offered him a smile.

“That was a Captain’s order, not a request from a former classmate,” he said lightly. “Naoko-chan, is that all right with you?”

“I’m used to it,” Naoko said dismissively. “Are you planning on splitting our group further, then? Because we only have one healer, and we’re already few in number. If Nakamura-san is going to be occupied with navigation, that’s one less fighter, and...”

“I can navigate and draw my sword if I have to, Shikibu-san. Don’t you worry about me,” Hanako interjected sharply, and Shunsui sighed.

“We’re not splitting up,” he said with a little shake of his head. “I’m delegating simply because you’re more familiar with the styles and skills of your members and it might be that we don’t have much time to make a decision. Well, you know what enemy we’re facing... so I’m sure you’ll understand without me spelling it out.”

“I do,” Naoko’s greenish eyes darkened. “I accept the order, Kyouraku-taichou. If we meet trouble, I’ll know how to act.”

“I’m sure,” Shunsui pressed his lips together for a moment, then, “Shikiki-chan? Are you all right with this? I realise it’s not long since you were last dispatched on a mission like this, but...”

“I wanted to come, when Retsu-sama spoke to me,” Shikiki shook her head, a pained look in her aqua gaze. “More than anyone, I should be here, Kyouraku-taichou. I wasn’t able to save more of my squad-mates. I was on manouevre in Sixth when Souja-dono needed me to heal him. And we’re here... looking for...”

She faltered, chewing on her lip, and Shunsui nodded gravely.

“No individual heroics,” he said firmly, gesturing for his companions to follow him. “There’ll be no unexpected corpses on my watch... you can all consider that the firmest order of any I’m going to give on this little jaunt.”

“Do we think he’s really hiding out here?” As the group made their way cautiously through the undergrowth, it was Kira who voiced the question, glancing around nervously as if expecting a rag-clad plus

soul to materialise from each nook and cranny, wielding a sword. “The exile, I mean. Do we think that he’s really here?”

“If he’s sensible, he won’t be anywhere near here,” Shunsui said frankly. “He’s not a foolish man and he always knows more than you think he does. It’s impossible to me that he wouldn’t know of Souja-dono’s death and that the shinigami are interested in his actions. If I were him — which thankfully, I’m not, but if I were, I’d go underground. Deep, deep underground, to a place that was impossible to find.”

“Underground?” Makoto’s eyes automatically strayed to the barren turf beneath their feet, and Naoko snorted.

“Kyouraku-taichou means figuratively, not literally,” she said derisively.

“Though I suppose we can’t rule out the literal possibility,” Shunsui sighed. “It’s all right, Makoto-kun — I think Naoko-chan’s probably right. Wherever he is, it will be in the last place we’d ever think of. And that being the case...”

“We should start thinking of places,” Kaoru murmured, “so we can get to the end of the list quickly and find him before anyone else has to die.”

“Something like that,” Shunsui nodded, pausing at the crest of the rise to gaze down on the ramshackle cluster of shelters that he could now see made up a rough, haphazard kind of a village. “Beginning with here. I don’t sense any life signs from this place, even though we’re as close as this now, but I want to go over it with a fine tooth comb anyway. There might be lingering Plus souls without a reiatsu signature. Also, I want each and every one of you to be on your guard against attack. The girl who killed Souja-dono had no discernable reiatsu, either. She could be here, or she could be miles away — but it’s better to be safe than sorry.”

“There are seven of us, and one of her. She’ll find herself at bad odds if she tries to cause us trouble,” Makoto said decidedly, but Shikiki shook her head.

“It’s not as simple as that, Atsudane-san,” she said grimly. “If Retsu-sama is right, and this is the same girl who slaughtered my comrades in the Spiritless Zone, then she singlehandedly took out almost a whole patrol without the need for any backup.”

“But Fourth aren’t trained in the same skills that we are,” Hanako said bluntly. “No offence to the Fourth, Shikiki-san, but I’m not sure

how healers would defend themselves against that kind of assault.”

“But it doesn’t hurt to be prepared,” Shunsui interjected quickly, before Shikiki could find a response. “So we’ll be prepared. Stay in range of one another and don’t disappear into any buildings or shelters on your own... enter in pairs or not at all. This isn’t a drill exercise, and nor is it like an average patrol into District territory. The enemy we’re dealing with is very, very dangerous, and any who associate with him must be considered similarly unpleasant. I am absolutely serious about taking everyone back in one piece.”

“I don’t think there’s anyone here,” Naoko pulled Dokusou Houshi from its sheath, using the tip of the blade to nudge aside a tattered piece of cloth and wrinkling up her nose at the squalid conditions beyond. “Not now, anyway — but I don’t think this was abandoned when the Spiritless Zone was formed. I think people were here till quite recently — it’s not dusty enough for anything else.”

“Suggesting a quick evacuation?” Makoto rubbed his chin, and Naoko nodded.

“Take Kira and go check those squats over there,” she instructed. “Be careful — remember what Kyouraku-taichou said.”

“We’re on it,” Makoto agreed, grabbing the more reluctant Kira by the arm and disappearing in the direction of the cluster of huts Naoko had indicated. Shunsui cast her a quizzical look, and Naoko sighed, shaking her head.

“He isn’t here,” she said curtly, and Shunsui could sense the disappointment in her aura. “I think... he might have been, at one point. Dokusou Houshi would be able to tell, if I released him, but you said you didn’t want to draw attention to ourselves...” She trailed off, eying the Eighth Division Captain doubtfully.

“Nakamura-san and I could check the houses over there,” Kaoru suggested, glancing at Shunsui. “It’s not far, we’d not be out of sight, and if there were the two of us, we’d be fine. I don’t think there’s anyone hiding there, but there might be clues, and if Atsudane-san and Kira-san are exploring that patch, we ought to do some investigation too. That way if Shikibu-san wanted to release her sword, she could, since we’d be splitting the work between us and we’ll be done twice as fast.”

“All right, but be careful,” Shunsui nodded. “Kaoru, you’re in charge. Hanako, if you find any Pluses quivering in corners, please don’t slice holes in them until you’ve ascertained why they’re there... it’s possible that Keitarou came here and forced people to obey him.

Those people might be able to tell us things, so try not to kill anyone you don't have to. All right?"

"Promise," Hanako's eyes twinkled with wry amusement and she nodded her head, hurrying off after the Fourth Seated officer in the direction of the shelters.

"I didn't realise Nagasata-san was so perceptive," Shikiki murmured, her gaze following the two officers across the patchy, yellowed grass, and Naoko pulled a face, leaning up against the trunk of a dead tree.

"I'm not sure if it's perception or just an eagerness not to be standing around waiting for something to happen," she remarked. "I know how she feels, too. Kyouraku-kun, did you have to bring Nakamura-san with you? I realise her navigation is good, but..."

"We are still on official business, Naoko-chan, and much as I like being called affectionate names by a pretty girl in uniform, I'm still your superior officer on this mission," Shunsui said lightly, reaching out to tap her on the head. She flinched back with a scowl, and he grinned, holding up his hands.

"Sora selected Hanako. Not me," he admitted. "I had other things to prepare so left that job to her discretion. I may have failed to mention to her that you were coming with us, though, so probably it is my fault. I wouldn't have put you two together by choice, but it's done now and you're both old enough and experienced enough to manage. Besides, Kaoru's smart, and Hanako likes her. They work well together, and we can trust them to do their part of the job. If you trust Kira and Atsudane to do theirs, that leaves us to do ours. And we both know why you're here, so while there's just us, there's no sense in pretending otherwise."

"Taichou sent me here because I was possessed by Keitarou's sword," Naoko acknowledged bluntly. "He thought I'd have the best chance of tracking it and he told me so before I left. I should have known you'd realise that, too — though it's not a memory I'd like dragged up too many times before the Gotei as a whole. And especially not before Nakamura-san. You're right — we're adults, and as adults, we can both do our jobs. But I'd rather not remember what happened between Keitarou and I, or between Keitarou and Suzuno — and having Nakamura-san know about it would be worse still."

"I have no intention of doing anything of the kind," Shunsui assured her. "Nor should you worry about Shikiki's discretion — she's met Keitarou too, albeit in a different way from you, and I don't

believe she's one to gossip about the shadows lurking in people's pasts."

"That's true?" Naoko's gaze flitted to Shikiki, who nodded reluctantly.

"He took me in when I was small, and raised me till I met J... Ukitake-taichou," she admitted at length. "I was with him for about four years, and lived with him in hiding. He protected me from the Endou purge, because he thought my skills were worth nurturing. Retsu-sama didn't say as much to me, but I think she chose me to come here because she knew that. Like you, she probably thinks I can sense him more easily than others — or maybe work out his movements. But I was just a kid, and I'm not sure... whether I ever really understood Kei-nii at all. I thought I did, but then... some of the things he's done since don't match up with how kind he was to me, and so maybe I didn't know as much as I thought I did."

She shrugged.

"I agree with you, though," she added. "I don't think he's here now."

"Likewise," Shunsui admitted. "But I didn't think he would be. I want you to release Dokusou Houshi, Naoko-chan. I know that I said it was a risk, but I think it's an important one in this case. Your sword's spores are intimately acquainted with Keitarou, and even if it can't pick up his trail, it might pick up other important things."

"All right," Naoko pursed her lips, but nodded, gripping the hilt of her weapon more tightly in her right hand as a faint greenish glow began to shimmer up the weapon's silvery surface. She raised the sword, holding it so that the tip pointed out across the abandoned village, and Shunsui watched as the faint flickers of light became more and more concentrated, giving the air around it an eerie, ghoulish appearance. Slowly Naoko spread her left hand out over the blade, her brow flickering slightly in concentration.

"*Inotte*," she murmured, "*Dokusou Houshi*."

Almost as soon as the words had left her lips, the weapon glimmered strongly with emerald light, then, bit by bit, the tiny particles of reiatsu that had clustered around it began to spread out into the ether, creating a cloud of spiritual vapour that lingered for a moment around the group of three shinigami before dispersing over a wider area. Shikiki's brows knitted together in consternation, and Shunsui saw her take an instinctive step back, as though wary of what the weapon could do.

“It’s all right,” Naoko had clearly seen her unease, too, for she cast the healer a faint smile. “Dokusou Houshi likes to understand its surroundings, that’s all. It won’t hurt you. Not like this.”

“I’m sorry,” Shikiki reddened, looking embarrassed. “I didn’t mean... I just... I thought...”

She faltered, then,

“Someone told me you were from the Unohana Clan,” she said awkwardly. “I didn’t know what kind of a sword you had, even though I knew you weren’t a healer, but I didn’t realise...”

“It’s not the kind of weapon an Unohana should be holding, huh?” Naoko acknowledged, a faint note of bitterness in her tones. “It’s the opposite of everything the Clan stands for. I can’t bring life with this sword, Shikiki-san. I can poison, intoxicate, or steal spirit power like a parasite. Maybe, if I was to push myself, I could do far more horrible things — but they’re things that leave a bad taste in my mouth, and I won’t even try to do them. Dokusou Houshi hasn’t a single cell of healing reiatsu anywhere in its spiritual make-up. It’s designed to kill, and to do so in unpleasant, perhaps cowardly ways. But they say a sword is the reflection of the one who wields it, so I suppose that tells you why it is I don’t make my home with the Clan any more.”

She lifted the weapon, sweeping it sharply through the cloying atmosphere.

“As a tool for spiritual detection, however, it’s a useful ally,” she acknowledged. “Kyouraku-taichou, Keitarou’s reiatsu is definitely here. It’s faint and I can’t get a clear lock on it — so he’s not here now, and I don’t know where he’s gone. But he was here. I’m quite sure and so is my sword. This is where he was lurking — Nagesu-sama’s coordinates were right.”

“Thanks to Juu’s secret source,” Shunsui, who had been trying to work out how to respond to his former classmate’s self-critical little speech decided that it was safer not to attempt to cross into Juushirou’s territory, instead focusing his attention on Naoko’s last sentence with a measure of relief. “Can you tell how long ago he was here, or is that too difficult for Dokusou Houshi to make out?”

“Mm. A day or two. Maybe longer, but not much,” Naoko’s eyes narrowed. “It’s very fleeting, but stronger in some places than others. There are other reiatsu signatures here too... but they’re meshed together and I can’t single them out. I don’t think they’re presences I recognise — and most of them are very weak.”

“Perhaps the villagers?” Shikiki suggested, and Naoko nodded her head, a sudden grim expression crossing her proud features.

“Perhaps,” she said cautiously.

“Naoko-chan?” Shunsui eyed her keenly, and Naoko pressed her lips together, driving her sword once more through the air and closing her eyes as the haze of green energy flickered and danced around the silver surface.

“Maybe I’ve imagined it,” she said slowly, her words almost too soft to make out, “or maybe it’s because Houshi-sama didn’t get a proper lock on it before, so it’s only at the edge of our awareness... but I could’ve sworn...”

She opened her eyes, shaking her head in exasperation.

“I can’t pin it down,” she said frustratedly. “Just like before, it’s there but not there.”

“What is?” Shikiki looked confused, and Naoko cast her a hopeful glance.

“Shikiki-san, you were in the Spiritless Zone. You were there when Mitsuki was found, weren’t you?” she asked eagerly, and Shikiki nodded.

“Yes, I was, but...”

“Was there any foreign reiatsu around? Anything you noticed out of the ordinary? Anything at all?”

“I wasn’t really looking,” Shikiki looked chastened. “I’m sorry, Shikibu-san. Maybe I should’ve been, but with trying to get Aomori-san and Edogawa-san to safety, and making sure Madeki-dono was stable... my senses aren’t as perceptive as most of the healers in my squad, either. I was focused on what I was doing, and I didn’t think to scan the area for any reiatsu.”

“But the killer of Souja-dono and the killer of the healers had no reiatsu.” Shunsui pointed out. “That being the case, Naoko-chan, what’s got you so agitated?”

“Hrm,” Naoko gave her weapon a little flick, sealing it and returning it to its sheath with a sigh. “It’s hard to explain, especially when I don’t really have solid evidence. I picked up the faintest hint of reiatsu investigating the Hollows. It was really no more than a ghost of a presence, and I didn’t recognise it, but it was... odd. Meshed in with the remains of the Hollow, as though...”

“It was manipulating them?” Shunsui asked sharply, and Naoko nodded.

“You remember that conversation?”

“I do,” Shunsui agreed. “And you think you sense that spirit power here again now?”

“Maybe,” Naoko agreed hesitantly. “I also picked it up at Thirteenth Division, though. The night Mitsuki was stalked... the night Kuchiki-kun took her back to Sixth, before Souja-dono was killed.”

“Wait a minute,” Shunsui’s brows twitched together in consternation, and he held up his hands. “Are you telling me that someone who is manipulating Hollows also followed Mitsuki right into the heart of Juushirou’s division without being detected — except by you, after the fact — and that person was also here in Rukongai, where nobody is meant to be?”

“I think so. Yes,” Naoko looked troubled. “I know it doesn’t make sense, but Dokusou Houshi thinks it and my sword is usually right when it comes to things like this. We’ve picked up that sensation before. It was fleeting and I can’t get a lock on it... but it was there all the same. Someone’s reiatsu. Not a sword... but something else.”

“The Onmitsukidou, perhaps? The one Juu took into custody?”

“No...” Naoko faltered, then shook her head. “No, I don’t think so. An Onmitsukidou would train with a sword. No, it’s more than that. An Onmitsukidou would train, period. There was nothing really... trained about this spirit power. It’s raw and rough and that’s what’s wrong with it. It’s as though someone’s using it on instinct — and there’s no way one of Shihouin-kun’s people would ever be in that position, no matter how dead he was meant to be.”

“Dead?” Shikiki blinked, but Shunsui ignored her.

“So someone in association with Keitarou — someone from here?” he asked urgently. Naoko shrugged helplessly.

“It’s all I can think of,” She admitted. “How else could he get through to Seireitei to follow Mitsuki? I can’t explain all of the details, but I’m sure it’s the same person. Here and Seireitei. Which implies that we have a serious people leak, and Keitarou is exploiting it.”

“No kidding,” Shunsui grimaced. “All right. We don’t know who’s manipulating the Hollows, but now we can make a good guess at it being Keitarou, by proxy. And if I’m right that he’s able to predict the

future, maybe he can operate in particular areas in readiness for a certain patrol's arrival. Perhaps in the Spiritless Zone, too. Maybe he knew in advance when they would be divided into two groups — and sent two agents to do the killing. The Hollow attack was probably murder just as much as the slaughter at base camp. Shikiki wouldn't have noticed anything even if she did go to the camp site, because the Hollow attack happened somewhere a long way away from there, so just because she wasn't aware of it doesn't mean it didn't happen. I'm hypothesising wildly of late and it's not good, but if this person was manipulating Hollows in Seireitei, it stands to reason he or she did it in the Spiritless Zone, too. Mitsuki said the Hollow behaved strangely. Juu's been flapping about it since she first mentioned it and it looks like he's right to pinpoint the Hollows in all of this."

"Maybe whoever it was came looking for her because someone intervened in the Spiritless Zone and killed the Hollow," Naoko agreed bleakly. "Perhaps he was trying to finish the job, only it was too close to the heart of Taichou's division to try, so he pulled back. But he could try again. Mitsuki thinks there's no danger, but if it wasn't the Onmitsukidou — and I don't think it was — then the person in question is still out there. Somewhere."

"Mm," Shunsui rubbed his chin. "Though if he's not willing to make a move so close to the heart of Inner Seireitei, she's probably safe enough so long as she's at Juu's place with all of you. Using the Hollows is the kind of tactic I'd pin on Keitarou, though. It's sneaky and indirect, and his sword has controlling properties. But you're sure it's not Chudokuga, which means..."

"His son?" Naoko asked quietly, and Shunsui eyed her keenly.

"You know about that, then?"

"Taichou told me everything before we left. He thought I should know," Naoko said simply. "It occurred to me that the reiatsu I sensed might have been the mysterious Aizen Kohaku that Souja-dono mentioned. Manipulation could've been inherited, and there's no reason to suppose he'd use a sword — Keitarou isn't a traditional *zanpakutou* wielder, and he'd have other priorities."

"But then there's the sword Souja saw," Shunsui remembered. "Unless it's as Guren-sama said, and that's a decoy to make people think Kohaku is in a place that he isn't. It could be a prop or an experiment of his. It doesn't have to have anything to do with Kohaku — in fact, because it says his name on it, I'm tempted to assume it doesn't."

“Well, it’s certainly not being used to manipulate Hollows,” Naoko said acidly, “because Dokusou Houshi would’ve identified a fellow *zanpakutou*’s presence, and he’s adamant that whatever controlled those creatures, it wasn’t a sword.”

“Hollows scare people,” Shikiki said darkly. “They can’t fight them, so they run, scared. If you’re right, Shikibu-san, then this is the ultimate way to intimidate the populace. If shinigami don’t protect them, then they turn against the shinigami and fear them, too. I know... I was like that. My village was destroyed by shinigami, so I hated and I feared them. They took Dai-nii away from me and forced Kei-nii and I into hiding. If I hadn’t met Juu-nii, probably I’d have always been afraid. I certainly wouldn’t have become a shinigami myself. It’s easy to understand how they think and feel, and Kei-nii would know better than anyone how to play on that emotion. He understands the Districts far better than a lot of the Clan shinigami do.”

“He’s creating an army, isn’t he?” Naoko murmured, and Shunsui sighed, shrugging his shoulders.

“We’ll need more tangible evidence of that before we can create mass panic,” he said wearily. “Enough on this subject, now. We’ve already discussed enough in front of a lower seated officer without her Captain’s clearance for her to hear it — I’m sorry, Shiki-chan.”

“No... it’s all right,” Shikiki sighed heavily. “I won’t discuss it with anyone else — and like you said before, I know Kei-nii. It’s a little different, where I’m concerned. I was there... in the snows in District Seven that day, so I know... the worst of what Chudokuga can do to a soul.”

“If you don’t mind, let’s let that memory stay buried,” Shunsui asked plaintively. “I can hear Kaoru’s voice, and it looks like Kira and Atsudane are heading this way too. We’ll move on — Naoko, did your sword spot out any likely places for us to investigate whilst it was doing its sweep?”

“Mm. That way,” Naoko pointed. “I don’t know how to read what Dokusou Houshi is telling me, because whatever it is, it’s dark, broken and decayed. It’s... I feel as though I should know it, but it’s all in the wrong order and Houshi-sama says he can’t decipher it properly because of that. Still, if we go that way, we might find out more. Houshi-sama thinks whatever caused it is no longer there — the reiatsu is old and beginning to break down. It’s significantly twisted and strange, though... and Houshi-sama definitely sensed Keitarou’s reiatsu meshed in with it somehow. I think we ought to check it out.”

“It’s possible Keitarou was using it for experiments,” Shunsui agreed. “Whether you can or can’t pinpoint the other reiatsu clearly, Naoko-chan, your sword has told us unequivocally what poor Souja was trying to tell his father the night he came back. Keitarou *is* here — or more importantly, *was*.”

“There’s nobody in the huts we searched, Taichou,” at that moment, Hanako and her companion returned to the group, Hanako dusting down her *shihakushou* with a grimace. “How anyone can live like that is beyond me, but there were signs that the houses had been lived in at some point. Nagasata-san found footprints in the dirt outside the back of one — but there was definitely nobody hiding there now.”

“We came up blank too,” Makoto agreed, casting Kira a rueful glance. “Kira tripped over a cooking pot and almost got it stuck on his foot, so I guess that told us there had been people here... but not now. Not a soul. It’s a ghost village.”

“A ghost village which Keitarou was lurking around up till a day or two ago,” Shunsui mused darkly. “He clearly did know we were coming and so cleared out.”

“Maybe he didn’t expect Souja-dono to survive and escape,” Kira suggested, his cheeks still a vibrant scarlet from his comrade’s blunt account of his exploits. “Perhaps he wasn’t meant to go back at all.”

“Or he didn’t mean to kill him in the first place,” Shunsui reflected, pressing his lips together as he gazed in the direction Naoko had indicated. “Perhaps Souja showed up here, saw something he shouldn’t have done and then had to be silenced. Or someone decided to silence him, just in case.”

“But they botched the job, and he escaped,” Hanako interjected. Shunsui nodded.

“Well, if it’s any comfort, it means that Keitarou’s schemes aren’t foolproof,” he said heavily. “The Spiritless Zone and Souja... in both instances people escaped and were able to leak information back to Seireitei. Keitarou’s agents are not as thorough as Keitarou himself probably would be, and his trusting them to carry out those tasks implies his own attentions are focused somewhere else. Whilst I still have concerns, I think we should press on. Naoko’s sword indicated a likely place of investigation up ahead — we should begin there, and this time I want everyone staying together. It might be dangerous.”

It did not take long for the group of seven shinigami to reach the stretch of land set aside from the makeshift village, and it was clear as

they approached it that even without Dokusou Houshi's sensitive analysis, the area reeked of decay. Where they had seen patches of yellowed grass bravely trying to struggle through the dry ground around the settlement, here the ground was brown and dead, littered with the chalkish remains of bird skull fragments and other unidentifiable objects that to Shunsui's troubled gaze seemed to have once been other living things that had simply fallen out of the sky, never to move again. The curled branches of gnarled trees twisted like sentries warning them to keep out, and a coarse wall of thorns and briars acted as a barrier between them and what was clearly a world of death. To one side, water bubbled in a freshly broken spring, and Shunsui bent to run his fingers through the cool water. Though the liquid seemed clear and pure, he was reluctant to put it to his lips, instead getting to his feet and wiping his hands dry on the fabric of his *hakama*.

"There's a hut through the briars, Taichou!" It was Hanako's voice which broke the uneasy silence, and Shunsui turned to look in the direction his Ninth Seat had indicated, seeing that there was indeed a roofed building set deep into this world of decay, almost hidden from view by what now appeared like a deliberately designed divide. His eyes narrowed as he remembered the testimony Souja had brought back with him that night, the fleeting, gasped words he had heard through the door of the chamber as he had marshalled the members of Seventh Division here and there, ensuring they were kept too busy to either intrude or panic. It had been faint, and difficult to make out, but Shunsui had keen hearing, and what he had heard had lingered in his mind.

"...A hut... in the hut... the sword... said Aizen."

"A hut," he said out loud now. "Souja-dono mentioned a hut when he came back to Inner Seireitei. I don't suppose that there's any doubt this is the same one he meant. There's something very nauseating in the atmosphere around here — like you said, Naoko-chan, it's broken and decayed, yet somehow familiar."

His eyes darkened, becoming almost black with suppressed emotion as he moved to the narrow gap between the briars.

"I can sense Keitarou's reiatsu too, now," he added grimly. "I couldn't, before, but now I can. He was here, and very recently, I'm sure of it. I'd never forget that taint of something twisted in his aura, even after so many years. Dokusou Houshi was right to point this out, Naoko-chan. That was good work."

"Do we have to go in there?" Kira looked apprehensive. "It doesn't

look very... friendly.”

“There’s nobody in it, though, so why should we care?” Makoto responded with a shrug. “So there’s some dead stuff — Kira, we’re shinigami. Our job is dealing with dead stuff. There’s no sense getting squeamish about it. Taichou told us that the Rukon might not be pretty... well, this is the not-pretty he was talking about. That’s all.”

“Don’t you feel the creepy vibes in the atmosphere, Atsudane-san?” Kaoru stifled a shiver, wrapping her arms around her body as though suddenly cold. “It’s not what the place looks like, but how it feels. It feels like death itself lives here... and if we go inside, we might never come out again.”

“So it feels a bit Hollowish,” Makoto conceded. “But we fight Hollows all the time, Nagasata-san. It’s no different from how it feels facing them, surely?”

“I’m not bothered if we go in,” Hanako said pragmatically. “I can feel the nasty atmosphere but it doesn’t bother me. Like Atsudane said, we’re shinigami. More, we’re here because someone’s dead who shouldn’t be. This is where he came, and because he came here he died — therefore we need to go where he went and see what he saw.”

“So long as we don’t get to the dying part, I tend to agree,” Shunsui sighed, resting a reassuring hand on Kaoru’s shoulder, and she turned to send him a doubtful glance. “I know, it’s not nice, I feel it too. It’s something deeper than a Hollow’s essence, something darker and more unwelcoming, but we can’t just walk away. I’m certain Souja came here. He told his Captain and Ukitake both about a hut, and a sword within that hut with the name Aizen on it. If that sword is here now, we need to find it and take it as evidence. And if it isn’t... we need to explore the scene and see what we can learn. I don’t want us splitting up again, not here. We’re all going in there together — I’m afraid you’ll just have to grin and bear it, Kaoru-chan, Kira-kun.”

“Keitarou was here, which means we need to investigate,” Naoko agreed solemnly. “Shikiki-san, are you all right about going into this place?”

“I’m sure that I’m more prepared than you think to face something ugly,” Shikiki said softly. “Besides, the place might feel like death, but it isn’t death. I spent the first eight years of my life in District Seven when people were being hunted and killed and I saw death on a regular basis, but this isn’t it.”

“I could release Dokusou Houshi again, and see if Souja-dono came here?” Naoko suggested, but Shunsui shook his head.

“I don’t want you or your sword picking up anything from here,” he said firmly. “Juu... I mean, Ukitake wouldn’t thank me if I sent you back with some kind of spiritual poisoning because I’d let you dabble in dark matter. We’ll use old fashioned investigative skills and see what we can find. Nobody is to release their *zanpakutou* here unless we come under direct attack and it’s unavoidable. It’s bad enough as it is — I imagine it’d be even worse to handle with swords released.”

He pushed the briars aside, making his way purposefully across the barren land towards the hut, gesturing for his companions to follow him. They did, though he was aware that some were more reluctant than others, and he pressed his lips together, hoping they could not detect the misgivings in his aura.

Because I agree with Kaoru and Kira. Whatever I say about it, this place gives me the heebie-jeebies and if I had a choice in the matter, I’d be turning in the opposite direction. Shikiki’s right — this isn’t death, but something else, and if Naoko was right, that this is reiryoku, it must belong to someone. Someone... or something.

He frowned.

Maybe we’re thinking about this all wrong. Naoko would’ve said if this was the same reiatsu as she sensed before, but she didn’t. So this person isn’t the one controlling the Hollows. Yet this feels like the kind of power Kai mentioned at the Captain’s meeting... the one with the potential to destroy Soul Society. Perhaps the Onmitsukidou’s threats aren’t idle ones — and this is Aizen Kohaku. Maybe it’s not the Hollows that Kohaku is connected to, but this place. But if that’s the case... who other than Keitarou has the power to manipulate in a wasteland like this? Maybe the hut and the sword are something else completely. Oh, I wish I understood how Keitarou’s twisted brain worked!

His brows furrowed together in consternation.

Have we overlooked something? Assumed something we shouldn’t have assumed? If this is just residual spirit power and it’s giving good officers the shivers, what would it be like if someone unleashed it at you full tilt? And yet it doesn’t feel... as though it was released in any kind of confrontation. It feels as though it’s just... here. I don’t think someone released it intentionally... it just... leaked.

He reached the door of the small wooden shack, registering the scorched, melted lock on the door and brushing his finger against it with surprise. Someone had been here, then, and had forced their way through to get the door open.

Souja, perhaps. I imagine Keitarou has a key, and this looks like kidou.

Still, it saves me vandalising it to get it open. The less reiatsu I deploy in this atmosphere the better.

He pushed back the door gingerly, glancing back at his companions before tugging the divide firmly open and gazing for the first time into the dim interior. The decay in the ether was yet more potent here, and he put his sleeve over his mouth, stepping hesitantly within the small, squalid shack.

It was empty, and as Shunsui's eyes became more used to the dim light, he realised that it too had been evacuated at short notice. Though the back of the room was partitioned with a ragged curtain, anything else the chamber had ever contained had been carefully removed and, as he crossed the faded mat floor to inspect the fabric, he noticed the chains and ties hanging loose against the wall. He paused, frowning.

A place just big enough for a sword. So it's more than just a decoy. Keitarou thought it important he took it with him, so it matters somehow.

His sleeve still pressed to his face, he used his free hand to rip back the curtain, the rotting fabric coming away in his hands as he surveyed with some dismay the bamboo cage that lay beyond, the scraps of food matter still littering the floor, and evidence of ropes or some other kind of restraint clear from a crude hook that had been drilled into the wall. The cage door was no longer locked shut, the fastening having been sheared through by some kind of sharp-bladed implement, and at his action it creaked slightly, swinging eerily on rusted hinges.

A... prison? Something was kept here? Someone...? Good grief, what have we walked into?

"Something was here. Something horrible." Kaoru's trembling voice made him turn, seeing his Fourth Seated officer standing in the middle of the room, her features chalk pale and her arms wrapped protectively around her body. "I don't know what it was, Taichou, but even though it isn't here any more, the air is full of something bad."

"Mm," Shunsui glanced at the ripped fabric in his hand, folding it in half and half again with a sigh before tucking it into his obi. "I don't understand it any more than you, Kaoru-chan. The place obviously had some significance, just as Souja said — but it looks as though the one piece of evidence we came looking for has been taken away too."

"The sword," Naoko murmured, moving to touch the loosened ties with a grimace. "Whatever Souja-dono saw here, it's not here now."

"But the fact it's gone indicates it mattered," Hanako said astutely, putting Shunsui's own thoughts into words. "Otherwise they'd have left it for us to find. This Keitarou person is good at leaving false trails, isn't that what the brief said? If the sword Souja-dono saw wasn't important, it'd still be here, so we could get excited about it and not focus on what really matters."

"Such as the fact someone was kept confined here?" Shunsui indicated the cage, and Kaoru let out an exclamation of dismay.

"As a prisoner? In a tiny place like that, with all this horrible stuff in the air? Who would do something like that?"

"A man who spent a good portion of his exile experimenting on turning village people in District Seven with *reiryoku* into various levels of Hollow," Shunsui said blackly, and Shikiki nodded her head.

"I think that's possible," she said sadly. "It's the kind of thing... he did... when he was working on *reidoku*. I never knew that, when I was small... but since... I guess it became clear."

"So he's making *reidoku* again?" Naoko demanded. "Is that what this is?"

"It would explain the atmosphere," Shunsui said slowly. "The aura is very Hollowish, and that would make sense... but... I don't know."

"I don't know a damn thing about *reidoku*, except the stuff Kamitani told us when we were students," Makoto reflected, "but if someone was kept prisoner here, wouldn't Souja-dono have mentioned it? If he came here, and he saw the sword that isn't here now, and he talked about the hut... wouldn't he have mentioned a prisoner? If the place was vacated after he was here, it'd make sense for there not to be anyone here now. But nobody was anticipating his coming, right?"

"We don't really know if they were or weren't, but it's a point of thought," Shunsui rubbed his chin. "You're right, Makoto-kun. So either Keitarou wasn't using it for experiments always, and so there wasn't always someone here... or..."

"Maybe it was set up to look like someone was here, when actually it was somewhere else," Kira suggested.

"That sounds like Keitarou," Naoko agreed darkly. "It'd be just like him, to play the game that way. In which case, nothing Souja-dono told us matters at all. The sword might've been moved to make us think it was important. It could be a double bluff. We just don't know."

“Perhaps Tenichi-dono was held here?” Kaoru wondered, but Naoko shook her head.

“Tenichi-kun was one of my recruits. I’d know his reiatsu if it had been in here, and it hasn’t.” she said firmly. “Keitarou’s is all over the place, but Tenichi’s isn’t. He wasn’t held captive here... and we don’t even know that he was taken prisoner by Keitarou or brought to the Rukon. There’s no proof to suggest anything like that.”

“But Souja-dono was attacked because he came looking for clues about that abduction, I thought?” Kaoru frowned. “Sora-dono said as much — was that wrong?”

“No... not wrong,” Naoko shook her head, “just that it’s dangerous to jump to conclusions that things are connected when there’s nothing to suggest they are. Tenichi-kun wasn’t inside this hut. Whoever was being held captive here, I think it would make more sense for Keitarou to experiment on people he found wandering in the Rukon. There’s nobody to notice if they go missing... whereas shinigami disappearances are noticed.”

“Tenichi might’ve been brought to Rukongai though, Naoko-chan,” Shunsui pointed out. “Did Dokusou Houshi detect any sign that he was?”

“Maybe,” Naoko admitted reluctantly. “He thought he detected the faintest of presences — but he wasn’t totally certain of it. Tenichi was cuffed and probably drugged, so if he *was* brought here...”

“So there *is* evidence, you’re just trying to conceal it because this Kotetsu Tenichi person was a former division member of yours?” Hanako’s eyebrow arched, and Naoko bristled.

“I’m not concealing anything!” she objected indignantly. “I said he wasn’t held in this hut. He wasn’t. That’s all I can be absolutely sure of. Detecting reiatsu that was here a long time ago is more difficult than you think, Nakamura-san... and I’d like to see you do better!”

“Well, so we’ve established that someone might’ve been held here at some point in the past, but we don’t know who or why, or what happened to them,” Kira said despondently. “We don’t have much to take back to Urahara-taichou, do we?”

“I wonder.”

Shunsui eyed the cage again, a sudden chill touching his spine as the rest of the phrase he had overheard Souja’s faint voice mumble flickered suddenly to mind.

“Called her... Saka... ki. And a hut... in the hut... the sword... said Aizen...”

Called her Sakaki? Who called her Sakaki? Maybe someone who was in this cell... someone you set free? Someone who then helped you... when you were hurt?

He bit his lip.

Someone... now in Thirteenth Division custody? If Keitarou was using this place for experiments, and was kidnapping people in the wasteland Rukon to experiment on, maybe Juushirou's waif and stray was his latest captive. Maybe Souja rescued him before he was poisoned with the reidoku, but if that's even remotely close to what happened, it's possible that Juu's witness knows a heck of a lot more about Keitarou and his operations here than any of us imagined he did

And more, if he was chosen as an experimental subject, like Juu was all those years ago, it's not impossible that Keitarou will decide he wants him back.

Juushirou padded along the narrow corridors of the Thirteenth barracks, his expression preoccupied as he made his way to the small sickroom currently inhabited by the Thirteenth Division's unexpected guest. A silver-winged Hell Butterfly early that morning had told him that Joumei's preparations had been completed, and that Izumi would arrive at her new location the next day. That being the case, he had decided that he could not postpone his meeting with Souja's samaritan any longer, and so, after consulting Kirio on the boy's coherence, he had sent word to Mitsuki that he intended to hold that discussion that morning, if at all possible.

Shunsui's progress in Rukongai was also playing on his mind, and inwardly he wondered what kind of danger his friend might have stumbled into. Sitting in his office dwelling on the progress of people so far out of his reach was a pointless endeavour, however, so he had buried himself in his work, glad that, at times such as this, he had the reassuring responsibility of Thirteenth Division to turn to.

“He's awake,” As he reached the end of the hall, Mitsuki slipped her slender body around the thin frame of the door, pulling the sliding divide shut behind her and casting the Captain a grin. “He knows you're coming, and he says he'll speak to you. I don't know how much he will be able to tell you, but he seemed to be resigned to the fact you were going to talk to him sooner or later, so I don't think he'll freak out when you go in there.”

She patted his white *haori* contemplatively, then,

“Unlike me, he probably doesn’t know what this is, so he’s not going to get a shock if he sees you wearing it.”

“Mitsuki...” Juushirou snorted, pushing her hand away from the pale fabric, looping his fingers briefly through hers before releasing his hold. “You’re not offended by it now, though, I trust?”

“I’m not,” Mitsuki agreed contemplatively. “I’m starting to get used to it, and the idea of so many people hanging on your every word.”

“They do not!” Juushirou protested, and Mitsuki grinned.

“They do,” she said lightly, cocking her head on one side to look at him. “If you don’t realise it, you’re being dense. You always said you’d make your division a family, but I didn’t realise you’d go wholesale into succeeding. I’m almost jealous of it sometimes — I’m here, but I don’t belong here, and you have all of them to fuss around after you.”

“Mitsuki...” Juushirou’s brows knitted together, and the healer laughed, shaking her head.

“I’m teasing you,” she assured him, “or at least, mostly I am. I like your division — I just know I don’t belong in it. And this isn’t getting your work or mine done, so I’m going to have to beg leave to return to Fourth for more supplies. I’ll take Hikifune-san with me, if I may — she’s helpful, and she’s taking this duty very seriously. Who knows? It might not be a bad thing if one of your division members picks up some more practical first aid than the theory lectures new recruits are apparently expected to sit through on joining a squad. I’ve been meaning to talk to Retsu-sama about that, but I haven’t had a chance... maybe I will do so, if Hikifune-san finds it helpful.”

“You’re sounding a lot more like yourself,” Juushirou remarked, putting his hand on the door and turning to glance at her. “I’m glad. You worried me for a while.”

“Koku needs me, and it helps to be needed,” Mitsuki replied pragmatically. “I’m serious, though. We don’t have time for this kind of discussion. I know we’ve hardly had a chance to talk lately, but considering the situation...”

“I know,” Juushirou’s expression became grave. “Thinking about anything else is impossible when Souja’s killer is still at large, especially when Shunsui, Naoko and two of my other officers are deployed into unknown, potentially dangerous territory. You’re right, and I won’t keep you any longer. I’m just glad to see you fit and well — and if Kirio’s going with you to Fourth, I needn’t worry any about

your safety.”

“I don’t expect to be jumped en route,” Mitsuki scolded, shaking her head in amusement. ‘It’s not far to Fourth, and it’s broad daylight. The Second have a prime suspect in Tenichi-kun’s abduction in custody, so I understand, and nobody has threatened me since I’ve been here. I’m being useful, and that’s what matters most — and worrying about Naoko-chan and Kyouraku-kun helps nobody, as I’m sure you realise. Now you be useful and go put that young boy at ease. He is very young, Juushirou,’ she added, her tones becoming serious as she glanced back towards the chamber. “He hasn’t said much to me — I don’t know why. He looks at me... as though he’s not quite sure whether I’m there to help or hurt him, and he hasn’t let his guard down around me once. The more I consider it, the more I think Ryu and I must have been mistaken when we thought he said my name, because he’s given me no indication that he’s even interested in me, let alone that he knows me from somewhere before. It sounded like it, but perhaps it really was just a case of randomly assigning a name he’d heard to the first female face he saw. He’ll let me treat him, but it’s fairly clear that he doesn’t want me around. I think he spoke more to Hikifune-san, from what she said, but even then he was very wary and uncertain of his ground. It’s more than just wariness, though. There’s something else in his aura.”

“Fear?” Juushirou asked softly, and Mitsuki shrugged.

“That, maybe,” she agreed pensively. “Sadness. Resignation. Pain from his wound. All of those things, too. But no, perhaps it’s something else altogether that I pick up from him most of all. I think it’s loneliness. Hikifune-san said he was on his own — she thought maybe he’d been abandoned like she was, and perhaps she’s right. I’m not sure... it’s hard to know what kind of a background he came from, but I get this impression from him that although he’s holding back as much as he is, he’s really very lonely underneath the wariness. You’re possibly the one person who can reach through to him... so give it your best, all right? Be kind to him. It strikes me he’s not used to people treating him with kindness.”

“I was going to be, anyway,” Juushirou assured her. “I want to know what he knows about Souja, of course, but I also want to make sure I keep my promise to that poor boy and protect his rescuer from unwelcome attention. Hirata would like to interrogate him, but I’ve held out and I’ll handle this myself. You needn’t worry. I’ll be gentle.”

“I know you will,” Mitsuki hesitated, then reached up on tiptoes to kiss him on the cheek. “I’ll see you later. Maybe then there’ll be time

to talk, but right now, we both have important things to attend to.”

With that she was gone, shooting him a playful grin, and Juushirou’s fingers strayed to his cheek, a smile twitching at the corners of his own mouth.

In this climate, such shows of affection are inappropriate... and even if we wanted to talk about how things are between us, there are too many other things pressing. Yet even despite that, I feel that the girl staying at my division now is the Mitsuki I went to school with. Whatever she went through in Rukongai, the emotions are still there. She’s strong and she’ll overcome it. Perhaps when all this is over, we can look at where to go from here. Right now, there’s no chance of her going back to the Rukon, since the Spiritless Zone is suspended... and if she were to stay here... maybe...

He frowned, lowering his hand and turning his attention back to the door of the small sick room that had been Koku’s makeshift home since his arrival at Thirteenth’s barracks.

Right now, though, I have to talk to the only person who might know what really happened to Souja in Rukongai. Get a grip on yourself, Juushirou! You’re a Captain, not an adolescent schoolboy! No matter how pretty she looks, Mitsuki can wait. This is more important, so put it out of your head and get to work!

To think was to act, and he gathered his composure, pushing open the divide and stepping purposefully into the chamber beyond. A figure was huddled up in the far corner against the wall, curled up on the bed with a blanket wrapped around his shoulders like a shield against outside intrusion and, at Juushirou’s entrance, he raised his head, brown eyes meeting the Captain’s hazel ones. For a moment the two just looked at one another, and Juushirou thought he caught a glimpse of sadness in the youngster’s gaze, but then the next minute it was gone, and Koku glanced away. His body language was tense and unwelcoming, but he made no objection as Juushirou closed the door behind him, crossing the tatami mat floor until he stood a foot or so from the edge of the bed.

“How are you feeling?” he asked the question softly, and the young man gave a little sigh, stretching pale fingers out against the fabric of his bed covers.

“A shinigami tried to take my guts out,” his voice was low and flat, lacking in any particular emotion, but he made no attempt to meet Juushirou’s gaze a second time. “I can’t exactly say I’m fine.”

“No, I know,” Juushirou sighed, perching himself on the stool beside the bed and folding his hands in his lap. “It was a rash action

and I'm sorry for it. So is the shinigami responsible. Souja-dono was her brother, and in the panic she jumped to the wrong conclusion... but you won't come to any more harm here now, I promise."

"Mm," the response was non-committal, but Juushirou was determined to persevere.

"You're name is Koku, I've been told," he observed, and the young man's head jerked into a faint nod. "Just Koku?"

"People like me don't tend to have all the fancy names and titles that people like you do," again, there was no resentment in the boy's tones, just a flat, emotionless edge, and Juushirou was reminded of Mitsuki's words about the youngster's wary attitude and lonely aura. He sighed, sitting back to regard his companion carefully. Despite the hunched figure that Koku presented, it was clear that the boy was underweight, the slight hollowness of his cheeks giving away the fact that it was unlikely he had had a stable diet for some time. His long hair had been carefully brushed and tied in a neat tail by one of his attentive carers, but the ends were uneven and ragged, splayed out against the rough surface of the blanket wound tightly around his shoulders. Whether his posture was out of defensiveness or pain from his injury Juushirou wasn't sure, but although he did not have Mitsuki's sensitivity for other people's auras, he was suddenly struck by how right her judgement appeared to have been. Frightened and wary he might be, but overriding all of these things was a sense of lonely melancholy.

If I was in any doubt about his motives for crossing the divide, his behaviour now would seal my convictions. This boy doesn't want to be in Seireitei. He didn't want to come here, and now he is, he's unhappy. I don't know what kind of a world it is on the other side of the Sekkiseki wall, but in comparison, this one must seem alien and dangerous. He came here because of Souja. That being the case, it's doubly important for me to find a way to keep his real origins a secret until I can work out better how to handle them.

Out loud he said,

"You'd be surprised, you know. Not all of us come from fancy, titled backgrounds."

"You're shinigami, aren't you?"

"Yes, but not all shinigami belong to Clans." Juushirou said frankly.

"Kirio-san said she was abandoned." Koku seemed to respond to this, although he still made no attempt to meet the Captain's gaze, and Juushirou nodded.

“That’s true,” he agreed. “People come into the Gotei from all walks of life. There are good and bad in all strata of society — and shinigami from almost all of them. When I say you won’t be hurt here, I mean it. This is Thirteenth Division, and I’m its Captain. My name is Ukitake — Ukitake Juushirou. Thirteenth is also known as the District division, since most of its members are District born. The people here aren’t so very different from you, Koku.”

A little snort, but no verbal response, and Juushirou pursed his lips, rallying himself to try again.

“I wanted to talk to you about Souja,” he murmured. Koku’s head twitched into another jerky nod.

“I know,” he said flatly. “Edogawa-san told me you were coming. I’m not going to be able to help you, though. I found him after he was attacked. I don’t know how he brought us here. I don’t understand shinigami techniques and I don’t have anything else I can tell you.”

Juushirou eyed Koku long and hard for a moment, then he let out a heavy sigh.

“You know, Souja was a fine young man,” he said gravely. “Not just as a shinigami, but in other respects too. I knew him from when he was a small boy, and his father and I are old friends. I understand that to you, Souja is a shinigami, and because you helped that shinigami, you were hurt. I know you must be angry about that, and wary of what we might do to you. But we haven’t brought you here in order to plug you for information then discard you. Souja wouldn’t have wanted that, and it’s not what I intend to do.”

“Souja-dono wouldn’t have done anything about it,” now Koku raised his gaze, and Juushirou was taken aback by the sudden cold gleam of bitterness that surfaced in the young man’s eyes. “He was a shinigami. He couldn’t possibly understand anything about me. And even if he did, he’s dead, so that door’s closed.”

“The first thing Souja said to his father when he returned to Seireitei was to ask about you,” Juushirou said evenly, taking in the look of surprise and consternation that flickered across the boy’s expression. “He was adamant that we made sure you were all right. Out in the field, too — it was Souja who stopped his sister from attacking you. Not me. Maybe I held her back, but it was Souja speaking through the pain to tell her that you helped him. He was that kind of man. His loyalty ran deep. He saw you as his ally, and he used precious last breaths to convey to us how important he felt that was.”

Koku bit his lip, letting out a shaky breath of air.

“I think he understood more than you think,” Juushirou continued, resting a hand gently on Koku’s arm, but the young man pulled it back, rubbing it absently and lowering his gaze once more. “I think he was as frantic as he was because he knew that if people discovered you came from the Rukon, not District Seireitei, you’d be hurt. I think he wanted to make sure this didn’t happen, and so he entrusted your safety to us.”

This got a reaction, for there was no hiding the dismay in Koku’s expression now, and Juushirou offered him a smile.

“I haven’t reported it,” he said lightly. “I don’t intend to, and nothing you say about it will go outside this room. I promise — you have my word. But I know you met with Souja in Rukongai. I know that’s where he was hurt. And right now, he can’t do anything to help you. But I gave him my word that I would, and I keep my promises. This is the last thing I can do for a lad I was very fond of, and so I intend on doing it properly.”

“What do you want from me?” Koku’s words came out in a hoarse whisper, and Juushirou pressed his lips together pensively.

“I want you to tell me what you can, for his sake,” he said at length.

“I already told you. I don’t know the things you want to know,” Koku shook his head impatiently, though there was a note of agitation also in his tones. “I can’t fabricate something I don’t know, Ukitake-dono. He was a stranger to me. I didn’t know him before that day and I’ll never know him now. That’s the truth. We met for the first and last time that day.”

“I don’t want you to fabricate anything,” Juushirou shook his head. “I want you to tell me as clearly as you can what you remember. Even if it seems unimportant, it may carry some resonance.”

“And if I don’t remember?” Koku demanded. “Are you going to use what you think you know about me as a threat?”

“I already told you that I wasn’t going to mention the Rukon outside of this room,” Juushirou reminded him. “I said it was a promise, and I keep promises.”

There was a long silence, then Koku frowned.

“What happens to you, then, if it’s found out you’re sheltering someone who you think is from Rukongai?” he asked softly, and Juushirou shrugged.

“I’ll deal with that if and when it happens. It won’t change my intentions. I’m not afraid of the Council’s censure, and I’ve made up my mind what to do about you, so I’ll see it through. Thirteenth Division is a safe place and you have nothing to fear here. Whether you can or can’t help us investigate Souja-dono’s death, I intend on seeing his last wishes properly carried out. That means making sure you’re safe, regardless of your role as last witness.”

Koku buried his head in his hands.

“I should’ve not got involved. It’s better not to get involved,” he murmured, his words muffled and more than half to himself, but Juushirou heard them.

“Then why did you help Souja? If you knew it would put you at risk, why do it?”

“What else can you do, when you find someone helpless and bleeding on the ground?” Koku raised his gaze, looking hopeless. “I know it’s wrong... I never meant to leave that place and come here. I never would’ve! I don’t belong here, and I didn’t want to come. Only... he wasn’t able to get up on his own. At first, I thought he was dead. But then he groaned, and I knew he was alive. I couldn’t just leave him there. I didn’t know any way of helping him, though. I can’t... I don’t know any shinigami magic, and I can’t fix people. I can’t do anything useful at all.”

“But you decided you should try?” Juushirou pressed, and Koku nodded.

“He had dropped his sword,” he murmured. “He asked me to give it to him. His fingers were all broken, his wrist too, and he couldn’t hold it right, but he... he did it anyhow. He couldn’t stand up, so I helped him. He was bleeding a lot. He did something with the sword, and the black hole opened. We had to go into it. Then... then we were here. I don’t remember... it’s blurry.”

He rubbed his temples.

“He fell down, and I was trying to help him up, and then the girl came with her sword,” he concluded bitterly. “That’s as much as I know. I told you. It’s useless.”

“But this was in Rukongai?”

“You already seem convinced that it was.”

“I know, but I’d like to know for sure,” Juushirou pursed his lips. “Friends of mine are in Rukongai as we speak, and if there’s a crime

scene there, they will find it whether you tell me it's there or not. I wanted to know whether you'd trust me enough to tell me that it was."

"I don't know, yet, whether I can trust shinigami," Koku pointed out. "If you think you know where it happened, you don't need me to tell you. Maybe it's all right, and you won't get me into trouble — but maybe it's a trap, and you will. I don't know who you are, Ukitake Juushirou. We haven't met before, so I don't know if you're a good person or a bad one. I'm not going to admit to anything until I know the answer to that question. I might not have shinigami skills, but I'm not foolish."

"No," Juushirou acknowledged, folding his arms loosely across his chest. "You're right, and I won't expect you to trust me or any of my people until you've decided for yourself what our motives are."

His gaze softened.

"But I am grateful to you, all the same," he added, causing the young man to gaze at him in surprise once more. "You helped bring a much loved son home to his family. Without you, they would never have been able to say goodbye. You took a big risk, and because of it, his family could at least cremate him with honour and find some kind of closure."

"I couldn't save him, though," Koku's words were numb. "I wanted to, but I couldn't. I don't like... death. I didn't want to see someone die. I didn't want to, but I couldn't save him. Because I couldn't..."

He trailed off, clamping his mouth shut as though afraid to allow his true feelings to come out, and Juushirou sighed, patting him lightly on the shoulder.

"Nobody likes seeing death, even those of us who wear its robes and do its bidding," he murmured. "We purify Hollows to free them from the taint of negative emotions and despair, and I believe a sword should only be used for that purpose. To see someone killed in the way Souja was is hard to stomach. He was young and he had promise for a future that was taken from him. Even finding justice for him doesn't make that easier to bear."

"The future, huh?" Koku's expression became wistful, and Juushirou was sure he saw regret in the other's brown eyes. He nodded.

"It would be twice as unforgivable, don't you think, if another young man had his future stolen from him too?" he asked gently.

“Right now you’re stuck here with us and I’m sorry, since you clearly don’t like being around shinigami such a lot, but bear with it and let Mitsuki... I mean, Edogawa-san treat your wounds. You will heal, even if it takes time, and then, after that, we’ll talk about what you want to do.”

“I can’t go back,” Koku’s eyes were sad. “There’s no way to... I can’t go back.”

“But you want to, all the same?” Juushirou asked, and Koku sighed, shrugging his shoulders. The tension slipped from his body as he sank back in resignation against the wall.

“It’s not a matter of going back to a place. It’s going back to a time, and it can’t be done,” he murmured. “I can’t undo this. I can’t not have come here. And I can’t go back. There’s no place for me now... maybe there never was one, but now it’s so complicated and I don’t know what to expect. All I know is that I can’t go back... not ever. I knew it when I helped Souja-dono, and whether I’m here with you or out there on my own, the same is true. I can’t take back the past... and as for the future...”

He closed his eyes.

“Sometimes it’s better not to know what that holds.”

Juushirou eyed him keenly for a moment, then,

“Have you told me everything you think I should know about Souja’s death?” he asked quietly. “Bringing justice for that boy is all any of us can do now. If you’re from the Rukon, I understand how scared you must be, and I also know that there are probably things you saw there that you don’t want to talk to me about. Maybe there are people there who you’re afraid of, too. I won’t ask you to talk about those things right now, but if they are there, Koku, and they relate to Souja’s death, I hope you’ll come to trust me enough to tell me about them later.”

“I’ve told you all I can.”

“The Endou have a tradition, that the cremated soul of the dead wanders looking for its killer,” Juushirou added. “They can’t rest until that person has been brought to account. I don’t know if I believe in superstitions, but I would like to be able to put this business to rest, if for no other reason than to alleviate his family’s pain. Souja’s mother is quite unwell as a result of his murder — I’ve understood from Hirata that she’s more or less collapsed since his funeral and doesn’t leave her room. His youngest sister is confused and bewildered about

why anyone would hurt her brother. His other sister is beside herself, trying to cope with the grief of his loss and the guilt of hurting you, and his father is struggling to hold it all together for all of them. Maybe you feel that Seireitei has abandoned you and people like you, and I can't deny that there's probably been an oversight somewhere. But Souja had family and that family loved him. You helped him come home to them, so I think you understand that impulse, at the very least."

"Meaning what?" Koku's eyes were expressionless, his demeanour somehow more defensive than before, and Juushirou sighed.

"I thought you perhaps understood being part of a family," he admitted. "Even though they're not here now."

"Rukon souls don't have 'family'."

"I'm sure that's not true," Juushirou shook his head. "Thirteenth Division is a family. There's no blood between us, but we are one all the same. For some of my officers, this division is their only family. Their comrades are their brothers and sisters. I'm sure that, even in the Rukon, that system operates. Mitsuki's told me that in the Spiritless Zone, souls gathered together for company and formed friendships. I know... I believe you're not from the Spiritless Zone, which concerns me, because I didn't know any souls lived outside of it — but even so, I can't imagine you've always been alone. If there's someone worrying about you back home..."

"There's nobody."

"You seemed miserable... I wondered if you were homesick."

"For a world with no sunlight? No life? Nothing?" Koku's words were cold. "I might not want to be here, but I told you, I can't go back. There's nothing to go back to. Nobody to go back to. And even if Souja-dono had family and you think you can elicit more information from me by talking about it, it doesn't change anything. I told you what I know. I don't know anything else. I can't invent something I didn't see."

"Fine," Juushirou got to his feet, smoothing the white fabric of his *haori*, before turning to glance once more at the boy. "But in your own words you just confirmed for me that you came from Rukongai. So who knows what other things you might decide to tell me as time goes on."

The stricken look that entered the young man's eyes was unmistakably genuine this time, and Juushirou offered him a faint

smile.

“You’ll have to trust me, now,” he said evenly. “I hope that when you realise you can, we’ll talk again... but for now you should rest. You’re still very pale, and I don’t want to be nagged by the people looking after you for pushing you too hard so soon after such a bad injury.”

With that he took his leave, striding from the chamber without looking back and closing the door behind him. Tsunemori waited in the passageway, clearly assigned sentry duty in Kirio’s absence, and he cast his Captain a questioning look.

“Is he... all right? I mean... I know he’s awake... but...”

“He won’t hurt you. I don’t think he’s that way inclined, and if he was, I’m sure your training would soon put him right,” Juushirou assured him. “Keep an eye on him till Kirio comes back, Tsunemori. Since he’s prone to go wandering if he’s unsupervised, and since Mitsuki will be cross with me if he’s allowed to do that again so early into his recovery, I want you to be extra vigilant this time.”

“Yes, sir,” Tsunemori said fervently, saluting his superior officer before scuttling to take his place inside the sick room, and Juushirou sighed, leaning up against the panel wall of the hallway as he replayed the conversation in his head.

There’s a lot you told me, Koku, and a lot you did not. I’m not as talented as Shunsui at reading between the lines and putting together nuances, but you tensed when I talked about family.

Mitsuki is right, too — you’re lonely. Maybe you have been abandoned. Perhaps it’s a sore point. I wish I knew more about Rukon souls and what they remember from their past lives — but I can’t very well ask Mitsuki about it when it’s a secret and I promised to keep it that way. If I want you to open up to me any further, Koku, I have to prove that I can be trusted both to keep my word and be discreet. That being the case, I’ll just have to muddle it out on my own.

He pursed his lips pensively.

Still, Souja was definitely attacked in Rukongai, and Koku came back with him through the Senkaimon to the place Kikyue found them. So long as Shunsui and the rest bring back evidence that tallies with his story, the chances are I won’t need to interrogate Koku again. If he didn’t see the assailant — and how he’d have escaped unscathed from a Vice Captain’s killer with no weapon of his own and no knowledge of shunpo or kidou, I don’t know — then maybe there’s no more he can tell me. At least, not about that. Maybe not about anything.

His gaze flitted back in the direction of the chamber door.

So why do I feel as though I want to speak to him again? Is it what Mitsuki said about him being lonely? Was it because he was so prickly and withdrawn? Getting involved personally in investigations is never a good thing, and I took this on for Souja's sake... but... having met the lad, maybe I feel differently about it. Perhaps I want to do it for his sake, too... so that, at the end of all of this, he has a chance to live a proper life, without needing to be so wary and afraid. He's the proof that people are living unnoticed in the wasteland Rukon, and that means something needs to be done about it... but right now, my job is to protect him specifically and that's what I'll do.

He ran his fingers through his lank white hair.

And prepare myself for Izumi's imminent arrival. I only hope the Thirteenth Division will prove to be the safe haven Joumei imagines it to be.

There was a bitter edge to the atmosphere of the wasteland Rukon as Nagesu and his companions made their silent progress through the clumps of wilted plants and greyed out hollow trunks of dead trees that flanked their path on either side. It wasn't a breeze exactly, Nagesu mused, rather a sense of antagonism towards their presence, as though the whole of the world beyond the Sekkiseki divide was screaming its defiance to the shinigami regime that claimed sovereignty over all of Soul Society.

It was a naive perspective, he realised, to assume that, by inaugurating the Spiritless Zone, the problems of impurity and pollution in the Rukon would be overcome. On the contrary, if Keitarou had really been making a base of this place, it suggested the opposite — by opening a judicial black hole, the Gotei had allowed a poison known as hatred to seep into the area left behind. Nagesu did not know whether the sad state of the environment through which they now walked was Keitarou's doing, or simply the result of constant pollution in the ether left over by the many fierce battles between shinigami and mutated soul in the years leading up to the Spiritless Zone's first blueprints, but whichever it was, the result was the same. Rukongai was empty and unwelcoming — and the perfect place for a man like Keitarou to conceal himself from prying eyes.

“Taichou!”

As they reached a stretch of more open land, Yunosuke, the division's Third seat let out an exclamation, raising his hand to indicate the dark, seeping stain of something colouring the dying blades of grass. Before Nagesu could even react, Kai had darted forward, crouching at the edge of the patch and eying it with a

grimace, putting black gloved hands against the substance and bringing them to his nose, sniffing them disdainfully.

“Blood,” he confirmed grimly, “and what’s left of Souja-dono’s reiatsu. I think we’ve reached our murder scene, Nagesu-sama.”

“Nobody’s made an attempt to clean up, if that’s true,” Nagesu himself approached the patch of land reluctantly, eying the extent of the bloodspill with dismayed eyes. “My goodness. I knew the reports said he’d lost a lot of blood — but can this all belong to the one individual?”

“It’s smeared around a bit, but you’re right. Nobody’s tried to clean up,” Kai wiped his hands clean on his uniform. “As for whether it’s just Souja-dono’s blood, I guess that’s where scientific tests come in — the reiatsu is too degraded for me to try and speculate whether one or two people bled out here.”

“If I might interrupt, Kai-dono, Nagesu-sama,” the slender form of the Fourth Division Vice Captain joined them at that moment, eying the land with grave eyes. “I believe perhaps I might be of use in this matter.”

“Eriko-dono?” Nagesu cast her a glance, and Eriko nodded, kneeling carefully on the ground beside the worst of the blood and hovering her hands over it, closing her eyes. For a moment she was silent, then she sighed, opening them and raising her gaze to the Third Division Captain.

“I only detect blood belonging to Souja-dono,” she admitted. “I think proper tests would be needed to absolutely confirm I’m right, but even degraded, I sense only his aura here.”

“So all of this,” Kai indicated the blood, “is Souja-dono’s? How in hell did he get back alive, if that’s the case?”

“I can’t guarantee that,” Eriko said cautiously. “The person who attacked him is not in possession of reiatsu. Therefore her blood would not be significant to me at the scene. However, Retsu-sama was of the opinion that Souja-dono lost a potentially fatal amount of blood before he returned to Seireitei. This scene would support that hypothesis.”

“Meaning that Souja-dono ought to have died here, but for some reason, managed to live long enough to get his message back home?” Nagesu asked. Eriko nodded.

“The strength of will and resolve of some shinigami when faced with death is an incredible thing,” she admitted. “Medically, if all of

this does belong to Souja-dono, I would not expect him to have been able to move, let alone open a *Senkaimon* and return to Seireitei. Yet I know that that is what happened. He must have been possessed of incredible determination, to stave off death long enough to do his duty.”

She sighed.

“Retsu-sama did all she could to revive him, but looking at this, I think anything even she could have offered him would’ve failed,” she said regretfully. “I’m not certain that even had Shikiki returned in time to tend to him with her exceptional and unique barrier magic, she would’ve been able to save him. Even now, Shikiki takes longest reconstituting blood. It cannot be done instantaneously, and sometimes requires multiple sessions to succeed. Souja-dono was already living on borrowed time following this attack. His organs had undoubtedly begun to shut down before he left Rukongai, and forcing his sword to release the *Senkaimon* would’ve only put them under greater stress. I do not believe Shikiki could have healed him quickly enough — he lost too much blood for her to be able to repair quickly enough to prevent an irreversable level of organ failure.”

“You’re essentially saying he was dying... no, he forced his body beyond the limits of life and death and his doing so also cemented his fate.” Nagesu murmured softly. “Such courage in such a young officer is both awe inspiring and, in these circumstances, terribly tragic for all concerned. Hirata-dono had a son to be proud of... perhaps there is truth in the old adage that those who shine brightest burn out the most quickly. I did not know Souja-dono well, but my son has spoken very positively of him and his general attitude to his duties. Perhaps in time that knowledge will be of some comfort to the family, though I confess at present the whole thing appears so very bleak.”

“I agree. He would’ve made a good Onmitsukidou,” Kai commented. “Seeing this makes me realise how true it is, when they say the quiet ones are the ones that surprise you the most.”

He turned to his companions.

“There may be further clues around here,” he told them briskly. “Karaki, you go left. Doihara, you go right. Scour the horizon for anything of use. If you find anyone, take them for interrogation but don’t kill them. I will speak to them myself. Understood?”

“Yes, sir,” the two officers saluted in sync, disappearing into subdued shunpo steps as they hurried to carry out his bidding, and Nagesu sighed, rubbing his fingers against his brow as if trying to

offset a brewing headache.

“Yunosuke, I would be grateful if you and Kamitani would take some samples from the scene here,” he said wearily. “I realise it is an unpleasant sight, but we must be certain, as Eriko-dono said, that we have found the site of Souja-dono’s last stand. It’s clear to me that events were as he said they were — he fought his enemy here in the Rukon, and then returned home. That being the case, there is almost certainly a *Senkaimonin* these parts, and I would like to find what traces of it exist on this side.”

“I understood that the Gate had been destroyed, Nagesu-sama?” Eriko asked quizzically, as the two Third Division members hurried to do their Captain’s bidding. Nagesu nodded.

“Certainly to the point where nobody else could enter it,” he agreed. “Souja-dono appears to have forced it open using his *zanpakutou*, but his doing so activated some kind of self-destruction impulse within the Gate and it imploded on itself. If I’m correct, however, there should be spiritual remains of that doorway on this side that match the one on the other. I’m afraid it might become a little tedious for you, waiting for us to collect fragments of data — but in the absence of so much information, every little piece we can gather is progress.”

“On the contrary, it is preferable to me to be somewhat superfluous to requirement,” Eriko offered a faint smile. “I am a healer, Nagesu-sama. My being deployed into active service means someone has been hurt. As a healer, one hopes for that eventuality to be prevented. If I can be of material use to you in obtaining your spiritual samples, please, don’t hesitate to ask. Retsu-sama requested me to be of as much use as I could be.”

“That is reassuring,” Nagesu offered the woman a smile, curling his hand around the hilt of his sword and pulling the weapon from its place of rest at his side.

“Well, Sekizanha,” he murmured, more than half to himself, but at the sound of his words the katana glittered slightly, as if anticipating his next command. “I wonder if you can sense the Gate, even in your sealed form.”

“You don’t intend to release, Nagesu-sama?” Eriko was startled, and Nagesu shook his head.

“Sekizanha was always quite a powerful sword,” he said frankly, “and releasing it into this atmosphere would corrupt the spiritual samples my men are taking. Besides, now that it has attained Bankai,

it no longer needs to be fully released to detect or open a *Senkaimon* of this nature. I think, therefore, that the less I disrupt the spiritual balance the better — Sekizanha's techniques are a little violent, and I should rather save them for a time when they are truly needed."

He turned his back on the crime scene, extending the weapon slightly and closing his eyes as he centred his concentration on his sword's spiritual aura.

Well, Sekizanha? Do you detect anything of use?

You really shouldn't use me as a spirit detector, Nagesu. The woman is right — I'm not just a tool for your scientific endeavours. Besides, this place is thick with unpleasant auras. Just because there are no enemies in plain sight, I wouldn't assume there's nothing for us to fight against.

I understand, but this isn't that kind of a mission. Keitarou isn't here, and I'd sooner save our strengths for him, if possible. The more he learns about us, the more of a disadvantage we find ourselves at. He already knows our shikai. I would sooner he didn't have a chance to scientifically examine our potential for Bankai, so for now, let's just find the Gate.

Hrm.

The sword was silent for a moment, but Nagesu could feel its presence humming against his own thoughts. Then,

There are two gates here. One matches the spiritual aura you had examined at the scene in Seireitei. The second... is different.

"Two?"

Nagesu's eyes snapped open and he glanced around him in surprise.

"Nagesu-sama?" Eriko looked quizzical, and the Third Division Captain reddened slightly, shaking his head.

"Sekizanha detected two *Senkaimon*. Not just one," he explained hastily.

"Two gates?" Eriko looked thoughtful. "One that Souja-dono escaped through, and a second that Keitarou perhaps used for his own escape?"

"Perhaps," Nagesu agreed. "Sekizanha's indicating that it's somewhere in the close vicinity. It believes this one is different from the other, though how I'm not quite clear."

Between the dead trees, Nagesu. About ten paces to your right. Though I cannot open it. It is barred with a level of Kidou that would require a higher level of release to slice through — even in Shikai I do not think I could manage it, and if we were to use Bankai, it might

well be the kind of trap you are afraid of. More, I think that the Senkaimon might implode on itself if too much pressure was applied — it seems very precarious to me.

Hrm.

Nagesu moved carefully around the splashes of blood in the direction his sword had indicated, putting his hand against the trunk of one of the trees and running the tip of his sword briefly through the atmosphere inbetween. As he did so, something glittered, then pushed his weapon back, and he let out an exclamation, only just managing to keep himself from falling headlong.

“Taichou? Are you all right?” Yunosuke’s concerned exclamation made him turn, nodding his head.

“Yes. It didn’t attack me, it simply repelled. It seems the second *Senkaimon* is indeed sealed with some kind of Kidou barrier. Keitarou does not intend us to follow wherever he’s chosen to go.”

The spiritual emissions leaking from the gate suggest the Real World. I don’t know if that matters, but I think this gate goes there, rather than back to Seireitei.

“The Real World, huh?” Nagesu sheathed his weapon, running both hands lightly through the air that separated the two trees. “A gate barred and locked against us, leading, as we feared, out of shinigami jurisdiction and into the great unknown.”

“Can you open the Gate, Nagesu-sama?” Eriko asked softly, and Nagesu shook his head.

“It’s a powerful seal,” he replied. “Sekizanha believes trying to neutralise it would almost certainly destroy the Gate completely, and I think I agree, judging by how quickly it reacted just to the presence of my sword sealed. No, I think Keitarou’s done his best to keep us out this time. If of course, that is what this gate signifies, and this really is Keitarou’s doing.”

“If I can suggest, maybe we should summon the other group here and let them examine the scene too,” Kai stood up, casting Nagesu a pensive look. “Much as I hate to admit it, I think we need Shikibu’s sword to find out for sure.”

“Shikibu Naoko?” Eriko stared, and Kai nodded.

“Shikibu’s *zanpakutou* has been controlled by Keitarou before, but more importantly, it picks up reiatsu on a terrifyingly in-depth scale,” he said frankly. “It’s not a nice sword by any stretch of the imagination — in fact, it wouldn’t look out of place in my secret ops

unit, but in a case like this, I'm sure it could tell whether or not it was Keitarou who set the seal on that Gate. Even given that he has a Bankai level sword, and his power levels being as they are, I'm sure that Shikibu out of everyone has the best chance of confirming or negating his presence at this scene."

Nagesu frowned, his brows knitting together thoughtfully.

"Very well," he agreed, after a few minutes of deliberation. "If it will settle the matter one way or another, Kai-dono, then I would like you to go find Kyouraku's party and explain to him what you just did to me. With his consent, I should like to deploy Shikibu's sword in the manner you suggested, and see whether or not we can't make a firm link to my prodigal cousin, Keitarou."

Author's Note

The return of Nagesu's sword, Sekizanha in this chapter. It's a little nostalgic — I haven't written about it in a while, but it actually got to speak a bit in this chapter. There's a good chance Sekizanha will see a full scale release before the end of this story, too!

Also, no sake for Shunsui — the entirety of his scene in this chapter he made me write in an entirely different way to how I first intended it. Silly boy...

37. Izumi

Chapter Thirty Six: Izumi

“Ketsui-kun, when you’ve done eating, the Taichou’s looking for you.”

Ketsui gulped down his mouthful of green tea, turning to stare at the speaker with a look of apprehensive confusion. It was early morning in the Thirteenth Division barracks and all members, bar those on patrol duty were at breakfast — all, that is, except for Naoko, Atsudane and Kira, who had not yet returned from their top secret mission to the Rukon. It was a top secret mission, at least officially, but unofficially everyone in Thirteenth knew about it and Ketsui was no exception, so it was with any amount of consternation that he met Tsunemori’s gaze.

“Me? Right now? Are you sure?”

“As soon as possible, that’s what he said,” Tsunemori nodded his head, offering the boy a grin as he seemed to understand his companion’s concern. “I know, being summoned these days has all kinds of undertones, doesn’t it? But I don’t think it’s anything bad. In fact, I think it’s the opposite. Taichou said he had a training assignment for you and I was to send you to his office right away.”

“A training assignment?” Ketsui set down his chopsticks, placing his mug on his tray and getting to his feet. “I’m about done now, so I’ll go right there. Did he say anything about what kind of assignment? I mean, I’ll do it, if he wants me to, but...”

“You need to have more faith in yourself,” Tsunemori told him firmly, resting a hand lightly on his subordinate’s shoulder. “You’re Tenth seat — there’s no reason why you can’t take on training with a lower ranked member. Besides, Kira-san said yesterday before he left that he’d heard Naoko-san and Fukutaichou talking about us taking in a new recruit out of the normal timetable. Probably it’s about that. With everything else going on, Taichou probably doesn’t have time to see to them himself. It’s a good chance for you, if I’m right... you haven’t trained a recruit before, have you?”

“No,” Ketsui agreed slowly, stacking his tray with the others to be cleared and following the skinny Ninth Seated officer out of the mess hall and along the corridor that led towards the Captain’s Ugendou.

“A recruit out of season? I remember. Kira-san said he didn’t know the circumstances, but that it sounded like a special case — someone who would benefit more from squad placement now than waiting the year through. That kind of thing doesn’t happen very often, does it? And if they came here, it must be a District student — so even less so.”

“True, but I suppose it can happen,” Tsunemori reflected. “What a time to join a division, though. Being a recruit is intimidating enough, but to come at such an unusual time, and in the midst of all this chaos...”

“Hopefully nobody’s told the kid that one of the Gotei’s higher officers just got murdered,” Ketsui said darkly. “If I was recruiting, and someone told me that, I’d run a mile. Seriously. It’d be the first thing to put me off.”

Tsunemori grinned, shaking his head.

“I don’t think so,” he reflected. “I think I know you quite well now, Ketsui-kun. We share quarters, so it’s easier to get someone’s measure when you spend so much time together. I don’t think you’d have run away from the Thirteenth — not then and not now.”

“Not now, certainly,” Ketsui ran his fingers through his messy blond hair, eying his companion anxiously. “Do I look all right? I haven’t really time to go upstairs and smarten up, not if Taichou sent a direct message... but I want to make a good impression. There was a time, though, when I really didn’t think I’d make it as a shinigami.”

“Likewise,” Tsunemori mused, and Ketsui’s eyes widened in surprise.

“You?” he demanded. “Ever since I’ve know you, you’ve been one of the most level-headed, settled people in the division! All right, maybe you don’t shout at everyone...”

He paused, reddening as he realised how cheeky his words might sound, and Tsunemori laughed, nodding his head.

“Thirteenth is my family,” he said frankly. “Ukitake-taichou and Houjou-fukutaichou were the first two people in that family that I knew and trusted, back when they were my senpai at school. When I began at the Academy, though, I couldn’t even read, and could barely manage to speak two words together, even when people were being kind to me. My mother had died, and I was all by myself in the world for the first time, with no place to go but the school. I tried once to run away. Between the two of them, Taichou and Fukutaichou helped me out a whole lot. I don’t know if I decided then that I could be a

shinigami, but I definitely decided somehow I was going to repay them for being so kind to me. So I worked hard, and as I did, I realised that I was starting to really like what I was doing. I'd never go anywhere other than Thirteenth Division, now... not even if it was dangerous to be here. Being on your own is more frightening to me... and I think you feel that too, don't you?"

"Mm," Ketsui reddened, nodding his head. "It's silly, really. Tenichi-nii is the one in the family with the courage, the drive, the determination. He's the one with the plaudits, the former Anideshi, the one people talk about maybe being a division adjutant at some point in the future. My name might be Ketsui — resolve — but I don't think I have all that much of it. I like being a shinigami, but I don't always think I'm very good at it. And when something like this comes up... do you really think it will be all right, if Taichou really does hand me a recruit?"

"I don't see why he wouldn't," Tsunemori reflected. "I've trained you in Kidou and I've done some training work with Kuyashima and a couple of the others, and I only rank up on you by one place."

"I guess I'm still not confident of Tenth seat," Ketsui admitted, "but I don't want to let anyone down, so I'm doing my best. I know Ten-nii left Thirteenth so I could do that, and he's dealing with a whole lot more than I am right now, with Seventh in the state it is — so I don't want to create any trouble for him, either. Maybe... I suppose if it's a recruit, maybe I will be able to teach them something. My sword skills are quite good, and you said my Kidou was getting better."

"There," Tsunemori grinned at him. "And here's where I have to leave you. I promised to relieve Hikifune-san so she could get her breakfast and she's been with our mystery patient since before dawn."

"All right," Ketsui returned the grin. "Thank you for bringing the message and for walking this far with me, Tsunemori-san. I'm sure you're right — I'm sure it'll be fine, else Taichou wouldn't have asked for me, would he?"

"Right," Tsunemori agreed. "I'll see you later. Try and make a good impression!"

With that the Ninth Seat was gone, disappearing along the twisting, turning passageways towards the side room which had become Koku's sickroom since his arrival at Thirteenth Division, and, left alone, Ketsui once more attempted to smooth his hair, pulling his *hakamashita* as straight as he could manage and checking the knot on his *obito* make sure it was not squint. Once reassured that he had

spilled none of his morning meal across the crisp black fabric, he pushed open the sliding door that led out onto the planked walkway over the koi pond to the Ugendou, striding more purposefully than he felt across the slatted wood and raising a clenched fist to rap three times sharply on the bamboo divide.

Juushirou's voice called him in, and he obediently pushed the door back, stepping into the office-cum-living quarters and bowing his head properly towards his senior officer.

"You sent for me, sir?" he said evenly.

"I did," Juushirou's voice sounded part relieved, part harried, and as Ketsui raised his head, he realised that his Captain was not alone, but in the company of a tall, gangly man of about his own age, with a shock of red hair, robed in the plain browns and beiges of a District settlement. For a moment the two men gazed at one another, Ketsui curious and the man clearly wary, then the stranger spoke, bowing his head curtly towards Juushirou and taking a step back.

"I'll leave Izumi-hime in your hands, then, Ukitake-sama," he said softly.

Izumi... hime?

For the first time, Ketsui caught a glimpse of a third person, standing silent and almost completely hidden behind her taller companion. This one, he realised with a jolt, was neatly robed in black, albeit not the normal regulation *shihakushou* of the Gotei. Her *obi* was also a strip of ebony cloth, neatly knotted, and the whole apparel made a stark contrast with the girl's silverish fair hair, which fell mostly loose down her back, aside from a few beaded strands that strayed carelessly over her shoulders. She was tiny in stature, her full height not even reaching to Juushirou's shoulder, but as the redhead turned to glance at her, she merely nodded her head, as if she was unaffected by his clear unease of the entire situation. Her lashes were lowered demurely, the picture of a porcelain doll, but as she raised her head to meet his quizzical stare, Ketsui was struck by the vivid light that lurked in the depths of equally argent eyes. She was robed in common clothing, but as they locked gazes, Ketsui had the sudden impression that he really was looking at a '*hime*', and that the redhead's term of address had not been exaggerated.

A District hime? That doesn't make sense, but even so, it's the only way I know how to describe her.

The redhead bowed his head in Ketsui's direction, a sombre, troubled look on his features, and then, with a backward glance at the young girl, he left the room, leaving a confused Tenth Seated officer

alone with Juushirou and the silver-haired sprite. He eyed her critically, unable to take his gaze off the ghostlike delicacy of her countenance and the shrewd, intelligent contradiction that lurked deep within that deceptively innocent gaze. She could not be more than eighteen or nineteen at the very most, yet despite her elfin frame, Ketsui did not think that she was weak. In fact, unlike the troubled redhead and the harried Juushirou, the young woman seemed perfectly calm and composed, as if being there, in the middle of the Thirteenth Division's Captain's office at a time of year when new recruits were rare, was the most normal and natural thing in the world.

She met his gaze again, a faint smile touching her lips at his attention, and he reddened, suddenly discomfited about how much he had been staring. She lowered her lashes once more, tilting her head forward in perfect imitation of a Clan *hime*, and Ketsui had that strange sense of the surreal once more — the princess in rags, surveying her new dominion.

"Hiko-kun will return safely, I'm sure," Juushirou cast the young woman a fleeting glance. 'In the meantime, this is Kotetsu Ketsui, our Tenth seated officer. He will take care of you and show you around the division. He's been with us a long time, and will know all the things you'll need, so you can trust him to help you settle in. Ketsui,' he turned to his subordinate, "this is Ichimaru Izumi. She is a recruit with the Thirteenth Division starting today. It's an unusual time of year for her to join us, and as you're aware, we've been very busy, so I'm going to be relying on you to mentor her and show her the ropes. When Naoko comes back, you must ask her for a proper uniform for the girl and of course, for her to be shown the female quarters and her sleeping arrangements — but for the time being, I would like to put her under your mentorship."

"Yes, sir," Ketsui forcibly tore his gaze from Izumi, nodding his head. "I can try, sir. I mean, I'm not a girl, but..."

"No, you are not," despite his weariness, a faint smile glimmered at the corners of Juushirou's mouth, and Ketsui was mortified to see it mirrored on Izumi's delicate features. "However, with Kirio engaged with looking after our patient, and Naoko in the field, there are no female officers I can entrust Izumi's induction to. You don't mind going with Ketsui, do you, Izumi?"

The girl shook her head, offering Juushirou a reassuring smile. Juushirou returned it with a relieved one, patting her companionably on the shoulder, and nodding.

“Then I’ll ask you to step outside for a moment, while I speak to Ketsui alone,” he said lightly. “Don’t go far — just on the walkway. The ponds are quite pretty in this light, and there are quite a lot of fish in them at this time of the year.”

Izumi bowed her head respectfully, then, without making a sound, she picked her way daintily across the tatami mat floor, slipping the door open and disappearing outside. Juushirou waited until the divide closed, then turned his gaze on his Tenth seat with a rueful grin.

“You don’t mind, do you, that I’ve asked you to do this?” he asked softly, and Ketsui faltered, then shook his head.

“It’s a big responsibility. I’ve never had a recruit before, and, well, with her being a girl... but Tsunemori-san said that with everyone so busy... I want to be helpful too. And well, it won’t be... hard, will it? I mean, just showing her where to go, what to do, and things like that...? I can manage basic drill training and stuff, too... I think. And, well, I want you to think I’ve earned being Tenth Seat, so I... I will try.”

“Mm,” Juushirou hesitated for a moment, then crossed the floor, resting his hands on the younger man’s shoulders.

“I know you’re worried about Tenichi. I am too, but there’s nothing for us to do there,” he said solemnly. “Your brother’s division is in a bad state and he has to work out for himself how to deal with that. I want to give you this responsibility for that reason, too. That, and I know you’re kind. You won’t be impatient or judgemental with the girl — which I think is important. She’s not like any recruit we’ve had before, so...”

“In what way, sir?” Ketsui’s curiosity was piqued, but Juushirou shook his head.

“It’s complicated,” he said vaguely, and Ketsui had the impression his Captain was keeping something back. “Izumi is not yet formally in adult years, but it isn’t possible for her to remain with her family, nor with the Academy. Her... gifts... are not compatible with her being in either place, and it’s hoped she’ll find a better niche here. I want to give her that chance.”

“I see,” Ketsui absorbed this thoughtfully. “The man who was here... he called her ‘hime’...?”

“I would rather you didn’t ask me too many questions,” Juushirou admitted. “As I said, it’s complicated. Izumi might be... in danger if I were to try and tell you any more, and so might you. Remember, we

are in a high-tension situation, and a dangerous killer is on the loose. I want you to give your attention to Izumi's well-being as a mentor and a senpai within the division. I'd rather you just absorbed that and took it forward, even if it's not a satisfactory answer."

"Are you asking me to train Ichimaru-san, or are you asking me to protect her?" Ketsui's eyes widened, and Juushirou sighed, rubbing his temples.

"Training is a form of self-protection," he answered at length. "I want you to be of help to her in whatever way you're able. I trust you, Ketsui-kun. I know you won't repeat anything I've said to you here outside this room, as some things are sacred to individual people and their privacy. I just wanted to give you some background, even a very little, so that if things she does seem at odds with you, you'll understand it's because her situation is different, and will, I hope, make allowances to compensate for them. I believe, for example, that she has excellent kidou and shunpo, but her sword skills are poor at best. You'll understand too if I say that she has some connections that she would rather didn't become public knowledge, because you do too — and for that reason, I think you will realise best how you can help her fit in."

"Well, I'll try," Ketsui's eyes burned with curiosity, but he nodded his head. "I won't ask any more, Taichou, and I won't ask her, either, I promise. If it's an order, then I'll carry it out as best I can. And if it turns out that it's sword training she wants or needs from me, well, I could do that, I think. I'm quite confident of my skills in that discipline at least."

"Good lad," Juushirou grinned. "That's what I knew you'd say. Although... there is one other thing I ought to tell you, before you take her off to show her the division. Something quite important, that I didn't know till she and her escort arrived here."

"Taichou?" Ketsui looked quizzical, and Juushirou's pursed his lips together.

"Izumi doesn't appear to have the power of speech," he admitted at length. 'I know,' as Ketsui looked startled, "it makes communication interesting, if not highly difficult. I understand she communicates using a sophisticated form of sign language, but outside of her family circle, that is difficult to comprehend. You may have to be considerably patient. I am assured — no, I know for a fact that she is an extremely intelligent young woman, and will be a great asset to us here at Thirteenth. But we will have to make... adjustments to fit her needs. I want you to protect her in that regard, at the very least — try

and make her feel welcome in a place that is, almost certainly, very foreign to her at present.”

“It’s the same for all of us, when we recruit, even if we recruit in numbers,” Ketsui said wisely. “When Shizu-chan and I first came here, sir, I remember wishing we were both in the same Division, because I was terrified of coming into Thirteenth without her. I relied on Ten-nii too much, and forced him to feel he should move elsewhere, but everyone was kind to me, so now it’s my turn. I’ll do my best to make Ichimaru-san feel like this can be a second family to her — I promise.”

“Then you’re dismissed,” Juushirou indicated the door. “Take her and show her the... what now?” as there was a hurried pounding at the divide, followed by the rough sound of the wood being forced back to reveal the broad frame of the Thirteenth’s hefty Vice Captain, his face red as if he had been running.

“Taichou! I’m sorry to burst in like this, so early in the morning, but Shikibu and the others have returned from the Rukon, just!” he exclaimed breathlessly. “Shikibu’s wanted by the Third — something to do with her sword and reiatsu detection — but Kira and Atsudane are back at base and I’ve taken a brief...”

He paused, glancing at Ketsui as if seeing him for the first time, and Juushirou grinned.

“Go on, Ketsui. Enishi, it’s fine. If they’re back, I’ll see them myself.”

“Well, that’s the other thing,” As Ketsui bowed, moving to excuse himself from the office, Enishi continued earnestly. “Kyouraku... Kyouraku-taichou’s here, too. I mean, he wants to see you. Here. In Ugendou, now. That’s what I came to tell you — he said that even if you were undressed, he was coming, so make sure you had the sake ready.”

Ketsui did not hear his Captain’s response to this startling demand, closing the door hastily and turning to search for the division’s mysterious new recruit. She stood a few feet away, resting her hands against the bamboo railing as she gazed down into the clear blue waters below, apparently unconcerned by the fact her new Vice Captain had just thundered past her across the wooden walkway. At his approach, she glanced up, meeting his gaze briefly, before bowing very properly towards him.

Ketsui swallowed hard, gathering his courage, then offering her what he hoped was a professional grin.

I dunno how we’ll talk, though, if she doesn’t speak. I don’t like awkward

silences, and I don't know the first thing about hand signals. Oh well. I guess we have to begin somewhere.

"I'm Kotetsu Ketsui, like Taichou said," he said firmly. "It sounds like our Third Seat is back from her mission, so later I'll introduce you and she can help you find where you sleep and change into proper *shihakushou* and things like that — but for now, shall I show you around the Thirteenth Division? I can introduce you to people — some of the other recruits are bound to be around, and, well, even though they're all guys at the moment, they're nice enough."

Izumi tilted her head on one side, considering his words, then greeting them with a smile and a nod of approval, and Ketsui let out an inward sigh of relief.

Here goes. My first recruit to mentor... and I hope to God with everything else going on I don't screw it up. Taichou made it sound like this girl was someone important, but not in a necessarily good way — and a way I don't need or want to know about. I only hope I'm not taking on more than I can handle, agreeing to take her on.

"You know, I didn't expect the first place for you to call would be Ugendou, following your return from the Rukon."

Juushirou poured the last of the green tea into the second cream ceramic mug, pushing it across the low slung table towards his companion before taking his own and putting it contemplatively to his lips. "I would've thought Eighth were eager to speak to you, not to mention your official debrief."

"I've left Sora to debrief Hanako and Kaoru on the important things, and no doubt Naoko will speak to you herself later, when she's finished talking to Nagesu-sama about the things her sword picked up on the other side," Shunsui sat back against the wall of the small hut, taking a gulp of his own tea and letting out a heavy sigh. "No sake, not even for a weary traveller? You're a hard taskmaster, Juushirou — I've been seeing and sensing horrors unimaginable and all you can manage is tea?"

"We have no sake. You drank the last of it, and there's been no time to order fresh," Juushirou said unsympathetically. "Besides, you might want to drink it away, but I'd rather have you clear headed. You obviously came here for a reason. Enishi spoke to Kira and Atsudane and they apparently gave him a brisk appraisal of the searches they carried out and so on — but your appearance makes me think there's more to it than what they encountered. You only drop in on me like

this when something's on your mind — so spill."

"If I did that, your nice clean table would get ruined and Naoko-chan would scold me," Shunsui said lightly, offering his friend a benign smile, and Juushirou sighed, shaking his head in defeat.

"What's on your mind, not what's in your mug," he said wearily. "Now I know something's wrong. You're only this infuriating when you're dancing around a subject and the more irritating you become, the more serious it obviously is. What happened in the Rukon, Shunsui? What did you see there that's brought you to my door so soon?"

"Mm," Shunsui took another slurp of tea, setting the mug down on the table with a grimace. "You always did read right through me, and you are again. Though I think it's extremely hurtful of you to suggest I only come here when something's on my mind. I assure you that quite often nothing is on my mind, and I still come by to say hi, see how you are and play *shougi*."

"You come here to hide from Sora when your paperwork is due, or to coerce me into drinking the latest sake you've received from your brother, you mean," Juushirou corrected, and Shunsui beamed.

"Yes! I'm such a good friend that I bring and share my gifts! You shouldn't doubt my generosity, and..."

"Sora doesn't like you drinking sake in the office when she's trying to work, and you stop changing the subject. It isn't going to work so you might as well save your breath," Juushirou cut across him, holding up his hands. "I have a lot of things of my own to do, so I don't have time to play games with you. Much as I welcome your company — at times like this I'd rather you got to the point."

"Fine," Shunsui let out a gusty sigh, but nodded his head, folding his arms across his chest pensively. "I wanted to talk to you about a couple of things, but first of all, about the Kitsune."

"Kitsune?" Juushirou's eyes narrowed, and Shunsui nodded.

"I'm not asking detailed questions," he assured his friend, "but I know that you got the data you produced at the meeting from them. Did Hirata put them in touch with you, or was it all on your side?"

"Neither. It was theirs," Juushirou shook his head. "I can't really tell even you that much. Honestly, I'm not sure what I even know. But yes, the data did come from them."

He lowered his voice, glancing around him as if expecting someone

to be eavesdropping from the shadows, then,

“Enishi and I met with one of them. He came to us, and offered us his help,” he said quietly. “If I tell you any more, then it could put them at risk, since I can’t guarantee what techniques Keitarou has at his disposal. If he’s corrupted a former Onmitsukidou, anything is possible, so I’ll play safe. They’re willing to continue cooperating with us, though — so if that’s what you want to know, you can consider them an ally in the shadows.”

“Good. That’s what I hoped,” Shunsui admitted. “The coordinates Nagesu-sama pulled from the data you gave was very accurate. Strikes me we’d never have landed in such close proximity to Keitarou’s former base if not for their work, so if there’s any more where that came from, make sure you bring it forth. Does Hirata know you’re in touch with them?”

“No, but when he returns to the Council and meetings proper, I’ll tell him,” Juushirou responded. “They’re his people, so it’s only right.”

“Understood. As far as I’m concerned, this conversation didn’t happen,” Shunsui grinned, but Juushirou could see the clouding in his dark eyes and frowned.

“And?” he pressed. “You said Keitarou’s former base. He’d upped and left?”

“Are you surprised?” Shunsui snorted. “A wounded victim escaped back to Seireitei. His location was bound to be discovered. Nagesu-sama found a locked and barred *Senkaimon* that seems to lead to the Real World. Naoko-chan’s sword confirmed that Keitarou’s reiatsu was all over it. Third and Twelfth are taking apart the science of it now, trying to pinpoint a new set of coordinates to open a door there and extend their search — but the Real World is huge, so doing so might take some time. I’m leaving that to him, although it bothers me a little.”

“Too obvious for Keitarou? You think it’s a red herring and he’s still in Rukongai?” Juushirou questioned. Shunsui shrugged.

“All I know is that he’s not in the bit we searched, but was till recently. And he definitely opened a gate to the Real World, but a shinigami with a Bankai sword doesn’t leave traces of himself on a gate unless he wants to be followed. He might be there, but I’m not sure if he’ll stay. The thing is, I don’t know where else he might have gone. The camp in the Rukon is cleared out. There’s evidence of people living there, Juu — not much, but enough to theorise that there was a settlement and Keitarou was at the heart of it. Wherever

he's gone, he's taken them with him. Naoko-chan called it an army... maybe she's right."

"Including children we know very little about," Juushirou murmured. Shunsui nodded.

"I have some problems on that score, too," he admitted. "Naoko-chan detected the same reiatsu over there as she picked up here at Thirteenth and controlling the Hollows in District Seireitei. She thinks the person who did that is one of Keitarou's agents, which fits in with your own suspicions, doesn't it?"

"Yes, sadly," Juushirou agreed, "but it's not the Onmitsukidou?"

"No. Naoko-chan didn't think that the reiatsu felt right. It wasn't controlled enough, or something... very raw, very undermanaged. Onmitsukidou are the opposite — even ones like your corpse in the forest."

"Then we have someone else? Do you think Mitsuki is in danger?" Juushirou's eyes widened with horror, and Shunsui shook his head.

"I think where she is now is probably too close to the heart of things here to be a viable target. Since that person, whoever they are, came here once and then never again since, I imagine they were scouting out possibilities, decided it was too great a risk and left. That would suggest they wanted to finish the job begun in the Spiritless Zone, but didn't think it worth risking their own safety just to finalise their tally. Especially now Seireitei is on high alert."

"Mitsuki didn't see the killer of the healers, though. Madeki-dono did, but Mitsuki was across the other side of the area," Juushirou protested.

"Well, I'm thinking maybe that Hollow was also being controlled. Perhaps those deaths were murder too — no, in fact, I'm certain of it, though I can't prove it and nobody's really bothering to investigate with so many other things going on," Shunsui responded. "If the young lad hadn't stepped in and rescued your Mitsuki, who knows what might have happened?"

"You think I should stop being suspicious of him?"

"No, I think being suspicious of anyone is a good thing in this climate," Shunsui responded. "Whoever he was, and whyever he was there, I think we can rule out his intent to hurt Mitsuki if he helped her escape and then someone came after her here. What other reason he might have had for being there I don't know... yet. It might not be important, but I hate discarding detail. Still, for now, we'll let that rest

on your lovesick paranoia and move on to more tangible things. The long and the short of it is, Hollow manipulation bears a spooky resemblance to soul manipulation, which we know is one of Keitarou's party tricks. That suggests to me..."

"This is Aizen Kohaku?" Juushirou's brows furrowed. "But what about what the Onmitsukidou said? Should we discard that as nonsense, or designed to lead us off track?"

"Goodness knows, but I think whoever is controlling those creatures is probably a child of Keitarou's," Shunsui replied matter-of-factly. "It's not the girl, because she has no reiatsu presence. That leaves... either Kohaku, or..."

"Or?"

"Character X," Shunsui sketched out the characters for unknown on the table with his index finger. "If the Onmitsukidou is telling the truth, but if the person controlling the Hollows is Keitarou's child, and if we know the girl with the sword is not either one of those, then is it not possible Keitarou has more children than we've assumed? There's not much to do in the Rukon. It's more than possible he's been keeping Eiraki-hime busy by populating that world with his willing servants."

"Oh lord," Juushirou whitened, his throat tightening as he realised the truth of Shunsui's words. "We've assumed that what Souja said was complete, but you're right. We've jumped to that conclusion but have no basis for it. It's possible Keitarou has other children. The Kitsune who came to see me intimated that a child of Keitarou's could claim the Endou Clan legitimately by challenging Hirata in battle. He thought that Keitarou might be keeping his son's hands clean of blood so that he would be prepared for such an eventuality. Apparently he warned Souja of that fact, too — but Souja didn't heed it as carefully as he should've done, and we both know the end result. If you're right, and there's Kohaku controlling the Hollows and this Sakaki girl slicing up shinigami... maybe there's a third in the shadows, waiting for a time to strike."

"Ugly thought, but very possible," Shunsui agreed. "Let's not share that one with Hirata just yet, though. In his current mood, he'd vaporise anyone who dared challenge him before they'd even uttered their name, so I don't think we're in imminent danger of any such attack."

"The Onmitsukidou definitely referred to Aizen Kohaku, though," Juushirou rubbed his chin. "A smokescreen? Good grief, how many of

them are there?”

“Like I said, Rukongai’s a boring place to be stuck for the best part of thirty years,” Shunsui said darkly. “Eiraki-hime was pregnant when they crossed over there. Who knows how many they’ve spawned since?”

“Not good news for us,” Juushirou finished his tea with a sigh. “All right, I can see your line of thought more clearly now.”

“There is one other thing,” Shunsui eyed Juushirou hesitantly, and Juushirou furrowed his brow in consternation.

“Yet more? Isn’t this enough for one session? At this rate I’m going to be the one needing sake!”

“I told you that tea wasn’t a strong enough drink,” Shunsui reminded him, then sighed, shaking his head. “No, it’s no good. The jokes just don’t flow without the right spiritual lubrication. I shall have to give it up as a bad job and go back to my main subject — which is, I’m afraid, your waif and stray, Koku.”

“Koku?” Juushirou’s lips pursed thoughtfully. “What about him?”

“Well, I was hoping you’d tell me,” Shunsui admitted. “You must’ve spoken to him yourself by now — what are your impressions of him?”

“Scared, lonely, young and a little feral,” Juushirou looked pensive. “Wary of me, definitely holding things back... I don’t know. He was a little like I expected and a little different. You remember I told you Kirio had mentioned him identifying Kikyue as a kestrel, among other things?”

“Yes,” Shunsui confirmed. “What of it?”

“Well, we didn’t discuss that, particularly, and he didn’t say it to me, but he did... when he was caught off guard, he said things that gave away more than he meant to. He was very unwilling to talk about Rukongai, but ended up admitting that he came from there completely by accident. I’m doing nothing about it — that’s my decision and you won’t change my mind,” as Shunsui opened his lips, “so if you do, I’ll be very cross with you. I made him a promise not to report it and I need to win his trust.”

“Even if his coming from Rukongai is important?”

“I think it probably is important,” Juushirou admitted. “But if I want him to tell me the things he’s still keeping a secret...”

“You think he is definitely covering something up?”

“Mm,” Juushirou nodded. “I’m not quite sure of why, yet, but I’m pretty sure there’s something. I can’t read people in the same way you do, and my instinct is to help him, not manipulate him, but there’s something there all right.”

“I see,” Shunsui stretched his arms up over his head contemplatively. “Well, if you think like that, what I have to say might shock you or it might vindicate you. Either way, I have a theory. You know the hut that Souja mentioned?”

“Yes,” Juushirou agreed. “What about it?”

“Well, we found it. It was empty. Any sword, or anything else that was there was long gone,” Shunsui recounted with a grimace. “It had a horrible, Hollowish atmosphere over it — dark, cloying... Kaoru and Kira were very unwilling to go near it and I couldn’t blame them. Inside, it looked like someone had been held captive.”

“Captive?” Juushirou’s expression became one of dismay, and Shunsui nodded.

“I wondered if Keitarou might’ve been using people in the Rukon for his *reidoku* experiments,” he admitted, “just like he was in District Seven when you first got entangled with him. I wasn’t privy to that atmosphere, but I couldn’t shake the feeling once I saw the restraints and felt the aura. Then it occurred to me that when Souja talked about his killer, he said that someone had *called* her Sakaki. Not that she’d identified herself, but that someone else had identified her.”

“How did you know what Souja said? You weren’t even in the room!” Juushirou objected, and Shunsui offered him a benign smile.

“I was outside with Tenichi, making sure he understood his duty to stand guard and be at your beck and call,” he said blithely. “I happened to overhear bits.”

“Well, I don’t remember exact grammar constructions, so I’m amazed you did,” Juushirou retorted. Shunsui shrugged.

“I didn’t, not until I really thought about it. I was trying to remember what I’d heard him say about the hut, and it just popped in there. It sounded odd, and then I realised why. What if the person who called her Sakaki was your Koku?”

“You think he’s Keitarou’s spy?” Juushirou immediately tensed, and Shunsui sighed, shaking his head.

“I think he’s involved with Keitarou, certainly,” he said matter-of-factly, “at least to the point he knows the man and probably this

Sakaki girl too. The odds are that if someone else was at the scene other than Souja and his killer, it was your unexpected guest, which means he must know something. But hear me out before you savage me. I can see in your eyes that you're already thinking of Koku as your latest waif and stray to protect against all logic and reason, but just hear what I have to say. It occurred to me that if Koku was one of those Rukon people, and Keitarou took him prisoner to experiment on him, maybe Souja rescued him from the hut. And then, in return, Koku helped Souja to come back home. How he escaped Sakaki's blade is another question entirely, but if Sakaki knew he was one of Keitarou's specimens, perhaps she chose not to hurt him. Maybe Koku did also want to escape Keitarou, so took the gamble. Who knows?"

"No... I don't think he wanted to come here. If I didn't know better, I'd think he was homesick," Juushirou relaxed, tucking a wisp of pale hair behind his ear as he considered his friend's theory. "At the very least, completely out of his depth. I'm quite sure he's never been in Seireitei before, nor really knows a damn thing about it or about us. But the rest, I suppose makes sense. If Keitarou was experimenting, Koku's the kind of person he'd pick. He has reiatsu, and it's uneven, but substantial from what I can tell. It would also explain why Souja was so adamant about protecting him, if he was Keitarou's prisoner. Koku's not ready to talk to me fully yet, though. What he told me about Souja's death doesn't contradict anything you've suggested, but I had a feeling it wasn't the whole story. Even if you find an injured man and want to help him, I wonder if it's normal to plunge into the unknown and risk your own neck to save him when you don't know who he is or whether you'll be arrested the moment you step down on the other side. It was pretty clear Souja's chances of survival were low... do you normally do that? But if Koku had a debt to Souja as well..."

"Then it would make sense to try and repay it. Yes," Shunsui agreed. "But if I am right — and I have no evidence for any of it — we need his testimony."

"Which means my winning his trust?" Juushirou sighed. "I intended on doing that already, like I told you."

"To solve the murder case, Juu. Not to take him under your wing," Shunsui warned. "I know you, and it worries me how much you might end up risking if you decide to protect him from the Council and from full interrogation without knowing all of his thoughts and motivations. I don't want you in trouble for this... so be careful, all right?"

“If there’s a storm, like I said, I’ll ride it out,” Juushirou said comfortably. “It’s all right. But you mustn’t speak about his Rukon links. Even if it seems like a clue, and even if you think its important, right now if he knows something about Keitarou, we need him to tell us in his own words. If you’re right, I want him to want to tell us.”

“Rather than us pressing it on him, in case he decides to use it as an excuse or explanation,” Shunsui muttered. Juushirou frowned.

“Do you think Koku’s more involved with Keitarou than you just suggested?” he asked sharply, and Shunsui shrugged.

“The only thing Keitarou has taught me is not to trust anyone I know nothing about, and especially not to take them at their word,” he said frankly. “As for your stray, we’ll see how and where his position is. If he’s an innocent victim, I will do everything I can to help back you up in protecting him from the Rukon Execution law — but if he’s not...”

He shrugged.

“I’ll be protecting you, at his expense if need be.”

It was cold and damp in the depths of the Real World mountain, and the air was musty and heavy with the scent of mildew. Keitarou coughed, reaching down to pull a strip of fabric from his *obi* and wrapping it firmly over the lower half of his mouth in order to prevent him from inhaling any unsuspecting Real World spores. The atmosphere was weak and devoid of spiritual life, but that did not mean that it could not harm him, and his brows knitted together as he contemplated what he might find in this cavern deep within the bowels of the earth.

Kusakawa Daigo, huh. That name brings back memories.

His lips pressed together beneath the folds of fabric as he made his way over an uneven curve of land, negotiating with a little difficulty the sloping steps that had been hewn into the volcanic rock with more haste than careful accuracy. As he reached the bottom he paused, resting his hand against the wall of the cavern and bending to rub his aching leg with his other hand. Damp weather was never good for his rheumatic bones, he mused darkly to himself, and doubtless he would pay dearly for this trip when he returned to the Rukon.

Reidoku might have saved my life and bolstered my arsenal, but it couldn’t heal all of my physical ills. Much as I patched myself back together, there are still scars left from that Kuchiki’s cursed storm sword. And yet I can’t do anything about it. Not this time. Kuchiki Kinrya may still live or he

may have died — but courting his anger is not on my agenda. The targets I seek are all gathered conveniently in one place, now. Inner Seireitei is the only place I'm interested in — a place where geriatric relics of the Kuchiki past do not tend to tread.

His eyes became grim as he rolled down the leg of his clothing, setting off ahead once more. The Real World was a place he knew well, for he and Eiraki had hidden here several times during their initial flight from Seventh District, yet all the same he disliked it. Though the Rukon was wretched, he mused bleakly to himself, it was at least a world in which he existed and had purpose. Here, in a place where the native citizens paid him not the slightest bit of notice, he could not help but feel severed.

You should be glad of that anonymity. You don't want to be noticed here — or had you forgotten?

Chudokuga's voice cut acerbically through his thoughts, causing a wry smile to twitch at the scientist's lips.

True enough. I can't argue with that. I suppose that it's not a case of wanting to be acknowledged, or even to be noticed. It's the overwhelming emptiness of this world... the dullness of its life-forms, and the pointlessness of its entire construction. It depresses me to know that I'm nothing more than a ghost here. Superior knowledge could transform this savage land into a place worth calling a domain — and yet there is no way to break through their thick skulls and reach them. Why their dead fascinate the shinigami so much I'm loath to understand. True, the Plus Souls have their uses, but only once their auras become tainted do they have any real worth to a scientist.

You include your daughter in that assessment?

No.

Keitarou pursed his lips, shaking his head.

No, Sakaki has plenty of worth, if not much perception to political danger. She is reckless and often foolish, but she has proven herself useful. Besides, she is not a Plus soul. Perhaps she is similar to them — but she is my daughter, and so she is not the same.

Mm.

Chudokuga's grunt was somewhat derisive, but he did not push the point, and Keitarou felt the spider's essence scuttle back into the recesses of his brain. He sighed, reaching up to tighten the knot of his makeshift facemask before ducking down into a narrower tunnel with jagged, uneven walls and a ceiling that bowed and rose at random intervals.

I must focus on the matter at hand. Koku is in Inner Seireitei, so I must go

there... but it's not safe to go there yet. I have to be patient a little while longer, and hope that no harm befalls him in the meantime. I have to make sure all angles are carefully taken care of... which means coming here, even after I swore I never would.

At that point he reached a heavy stone door, thick with cobwebs, and he spread his hands, allowing them to light up with the gentle hum of a Kidou flame. Searing through the ancient remains of dessicated spider legs and severed fly wings that littered the greyish net-like web, he fumbled at his belt for the small, silver disk that he had brought so carefully through the *Senkaimon* and down into the depths of the earth.

Well, lets see if the rumours were true. Let's see if the things you brought me as surety when you promised to be my eyes and ears on the other side of the wall were as important as you said they were. A place you never saw, notes you couldn't read, information you couldn't validate or even really explain... yet on studying them, I knew what they were right away. Kusakawa Daigo's legacy to Soul Society — written in the shorthand taught him by my father, before he decided to go his own way. I thought your science had died when you did, Daigo-dono... until that point, I hadn't known that, like my father, you had a son and heir to continue your work on the other side of the divide. The only difference was, I had to work in exile, whilst you did not. I had to barter, beg and cheat for my study materials... whereas if those notes are truly accurate, you had something far, far more interesting at your disposal.

A derisive smile touched his lips.

You'd squirm in your grave if you knew I was treading your hallowed ground like this, wouldn't you, Daigo-dono? You, who escaped being tainted by the reidoku scandal. You, who erased all your history with Father after his downfall, in order to ingratiate yourself with powerful figures. You would hate to know that a son of Keitsune stood here, about to break into your world... but then, you should have expected it.

His eyes narrowed, the muddy orbs becoming suddenly cold.

Had you bothered to tell me about this place when we met in District Seven, I might have spared your life. Unfortunately, I didn't know you'd left anything so valuable in a place such as this one, and so I allowed my personal feelings to overstep my rationality. You were the first test of my Bankai's technique — proof that I had fully mastered its manipulative power — but had I known... oh well. They say you live and learn, and it might well be that the information falling into my hands when it did will prove opportune.

Who knows? Perhaps your son believed you were killed by the ruthless antics of the Endou Clan. Certainly he never thought to come after me. Not that it matters. Dead lips do not tell secrets... and nobody else will ever come here, save for me. I didn't intend to ever need to fall back on the work of someone I eliminated, but this is not the time to be squeamish. It is here, and I can use it. More, I must use it... to even the score.

He ran his fingers along the smooth surface of the stone door until he found the almost imperceptible circle shaped dent, and carefully he slid the disk into it, placing the palm of his right hand over it and closing his eyes as he summoned the words to the correct kidou spell. Muttering the incantation, he felt his *reiryoku* swell up inside of him, and then there was a creaking, splitting sound as the heavy door cracked across the middle, shattering as if made of no more than glass. As he stepped over the debris, Keitarou realised that it had not been stone at all, but a powerful kidou barrier set in place by someone who knew their magic, and he clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth in approval.

Nicely done. To all outside observers in this spiritually dead place, a heavy rock that refused to move would be an adequate deterrent. I understand now why it was buried here... though what I might find in the chamber beyond makes me wary. I feel I am stepping over the enemy divide.

He paused, remembering the hooded, cloaked figure who had first approached him, speaking Kusakawa's name, and bringing the silver seal and the wadge of documents written in the almost unintelligible shorthand scrawl. Keitarou had not known, then, whether to believe it. He had not known whether it was a trap, or whether he had found an alliance that he had not expected to encounter. But at the time, he had not been in a position to be choosy. They had found him, and they could betray him. He would have to trust them, and hope for the best.

And now, more than twenty years on, he had entered into that trust once again.

"Why bring it to me?" he had asked. "You must know that Kusakawa had no regard for me, nor I for him. You too — you must look at me with doubt and revulsion — why come here, and expect me to believe you seek my alliance?"

At this the figure had bowed its head, as if trying to hide the glitter of emotion that reflected in their gaze.

"The words you say are true," it had admitted in a low murmur, "but the things I have always trusted in have been shown to me to be

false. I cannot read these documents, but he always treated them as though precious. He always said they were the work of his father, and the prelude to genius. He always promised to teach me, but it turned out there wasn't time. Now there is only me... and when I heard that you'd escaped the Kuchiki lord, I came here."

"How did you find me?"

"I know this land better than you do," came the wry response, "and I have clearance to be here. Nobody would be suspicious, no matter how long it took me to find you. Here or the Real World — I would have tracked you down. You were the only one I thought might be able to do what I never will — take the vengeance I'm not able to take, and put things to rights."

"You realise I won't stop at just taking your vengeance?" Keitarou's question had been acerbic, and the hooded figure had nodded once more.

"The world I thought I believed in has been turned on its head for me," the voice had whispered, trembling slightly as those emotions threatened to seep through again. "I've lost my faith in it and all the things I was ever taught. If that's the case, maybe your way of seeing things is the right one. So I'll help you, and in the process, you'll help me find a world in which I can once more put my faith. The enemy of my enemy is my ally, and the ally of my enemy is my enemy. Need there be an explanation greater than that?"

And then, in short, uneven phrases, the truth had spilled out, and Keitarou had come to understand the full extent of his visitor's bitter emotions.

But to think I'd really come to Kusakawa's vault. I thought to use you only as a spy and a contact, but to think I'd be forced to use the work of someone like that to further my cause. Sakaki's careless blade and Koku's naive judgement have created a lot of extra work.

Keitarou sighed, glancing up at the smaller, wooden door that now blocked his path, a distinctive crest adorning the criss-crossed beams. Beneath it he could make out the two characters for 'grass' and 'river' that spelt out the name Kusakawa, and then, beneath it, the ones for 'great' and 'enlightenment' that inscribed the name Daigo. Placing his hands against the wood, Keitarou frowned, trying to draw an image of the man into his mind's eye, but despite the fact they had met face to face not so many decades ago, he found the recollection blurry, cloaked by his obsessive excitement over perfecting his *zanpakutou's* ultimate skill.

You were no friend of my Father's. You studied under him then sought to

overreach him, mocked his theories and argued with his science in public on more than one occasion. Mother would say so — that you were a hateful, arrogant man who smarmed his way to favour and who never had half of the talent Father did. She said that she hoped you'd come to a bad end, and so, for her sake, I made sure you did, just so that I could be sure her spirit was put to rest.

His eyes narrowed.

But at least I can say one thing for you. Your name was not included on the list of those who testified in my Father's hearing. Your name was not listed among those who spoke to condemn Father's work. Maybe now I understand exactly why.

He flexed his fingers, and a neat burst of kidou flame engulfed the wooden divide, turning it immediately to ash.

Because you knew about it, didn't you? The reidoku — just like everyone else. But you didn't betray Father... was it because Father could betray you, too? You wrote your notes in a shorthand Father developed — is that because he knew about this project in the Real World — your vault, your experiments? Maybe Mother was wrong about your talent, if that's the case. Perhaps Father knew you were trying to do what he was trying to do — to increase and stabilise spirit power. Maybe he even knew you were experimenting on the criminals that were sentenced to execution in the Urahara cells — the ones your family were put in charge of dispatching. Perhaps Father felt forced to bring reidoku to light because of you — but maybe also you kept quiet because he knew about your work. Father never betrayed you though, Daigo-dono. Perhaps I did, when I used you to test my sword, but father didn't. And now I intend on putting that work of yours to good use — building on all the things I learned from watching that fool Kuchiki Seiren break the divide between shinigami soul and Hollow monstrosity without needing to ingest reidoku at all.

He dusted the ash from his fingers, stepping forward into the gloom and absently activating the kidou lamps set deep into the carved wall alcoves as he walked. The discomfort in his rheumatic leg slipped his mind as for the first time he surveyed the underground chamber — more of a laboratory than a vault, he decided, though one that had not seen active use for some time.

Twenty or more years, if my information is correct. To think this was here when Eiraki and I hid in the Real World, and I was unaware. I'm losing my touch — it seems even a scientist of my calibre has things yet to be discovered.

He ran his fingers along the shelves of dusty books, recognising the titles of some and not of others. Alongside the shelves on one wall of

the squarely cut, stark chamber there were a series of wooden units small enough to hold animals or small children, but not great enough to hold an adult, and, after ascertaining that all were empty, Keitarou chose to ignore them, moving further into the lab. On the opposite side was a stone unit, cut into the wall of the mountain, its surface thick with volcanic dust, and Keitarou knew this had once been a work-surface, though it too was now devoid of any tools or equipment. The remains of a broken vessel lay scattered across the top, a deep, seeping stain colouring the charcoal surface in a sticky residue, but on closer examination Keitarou realised it was nothing more than a discarded drink vessel that had corroded from age and shattered, depositing its congealed contents across the unit. Above the unit was another shelf, this one containing a number of small boxes just big enough to house paper scrolls, and Keitarou manoeuvred himself into a position where he could reach them, bringing down a cloud of dust on himself as he finally managed to dislodge them from their resting place.

The first box was empty, but, as he prised up the lid on the second, he realised that his hunch had been correct. Neatly bound within were the unmistakeable traces of ancient scientific notes, and, as Keitarou unrolled the first one, he found that these too were written in the convoluted shorthand script that his father had devised. It was more of a code than a script, really, he reflected absently, running his finger down the side of the columns as he absorbed the contents. It relied on logic and understanding to break it, and Keitarou had spend his teenage years working hard to do so, buoyed by scraps of cipher and the incomplete memories of those who had managed to flee into exile with them. Eventually he had succeeded, and as he read through the second scroll, he felt a sense of smugness that although Daigo had imitated Keitsune's writing style, he had not employed in it as well thought out a manner.

Reidoku notes were far harder to crack than these. Perhaps you didn't learn everything from my father.

Most of the scrolls related to more mundane scientific premises, none of which were of particular interest to Keitarou, but as he dug down more deeply into the bottom of the box, he found a scroll tied with newer lengths of ribbon, suggesting it had been written or rebound within recent memory. Unknotting the ties, he carefully smoothed the document out on the work surface, being careful not to contaminate it with the sticky remains of the drink.

The hand was the same, but, as Keitarou's gaze roved over the document more carefully, he realised that at a point in the middle the writing changed, a younger, more elongated script writing in darker

ink. Though it too was written in the shorthand, Keitarou understood that this was the proof he had looked for — the evidence of Daigo's work being continued by his only son — and his heart skipped a beat with excitement.

Well well. Even without knowing what you were giving me, it seems you were right. Kusakawa's son was working on things his father began, and, judging by this, perhaps he finalised them, too.

"Kamen no Gunzei," he spoke the words aloud, re-tying the scroll and sliding it into the rough sash at his waist. "The Masked Militia. Such a grandiose name for such a small scale experiment. According to these notes, only three specimens remain. Perhaps originally there were more... but it looks like I'm missing some data. Militia for what purpose, I wonder? Was Daigo planning a hostile takeover of the Clan? Was his son? Either way, I suppose we'll never know, Chudokuga. All we can do is benefit from what they left behind."

All you have found so far is a single scroll, from which you draw such grandiose dreams. Besides, have you learned from your encounter with Kuchiki Seiren? Monsters lose all reason and simply kill. If you believe such things are in existence somewhere within this laboratory, do you not think you ought to be careful how you proceed? You are not their Master, nor their Creator... they will see you as prey and savage you the moment they meet your gaze. It sounds like you're worried about me.

Keitarou's lips twitched into a smile of amusement. *Surely you don't think that I'm going to be killed by a few experimental subjects? I'm not the person I was when I encountered Kuchiki Seiren in all his monstrous glory — and he would never have made a good subject, anyhow. His power was too unstable, and he wasn't designed to be useful. It was a simple biological flaw that made him that way — I capitalised on it, but this is not the same.*

He patted his waist.

Kusakawa's document indicates that there is a chamber beyond this one, and all I must do now is find the door. Within that place are sealed the experiments that I need to occupy the Gotei and throw them properly off my scent. There is really no need to worry... if they prove violent, then we shall have to use our particular talents of persuasion and convince them otherwise. I could not control Kuchiki Seiren — but things are different now. We... are different now.

As usual, you'll get your way.

Chudokuga sighed, but Keitarou could tell that the spider's senses too were tingling with anticipation.

If it's that way, you know I'll help. At least you're thinking

constructively, rather than worrying about the pointless satellites that serve you.

You should be more respectful towards my wife and children.

Keitarou chided lightly.

They are family to me, as you are.

No, I am not family.

Chudokuga's eyes bored briefly into Keitarou's mind.

I am you. I am part of you, all the more now than I ever was before. Find your monsters, Keitarou, and use them to kill the obstacles in your way. But never forget that your true weapon lies within you — within both of us, and it is that weapon and no other which will bring Seireitei to its knees!

Author's Note: Formatting

Okay, for some reason FFnet keeps taking out random sections of my italics and moving my bolded text around. I have no idea why... but please don't think I don't bother to proofread things like that. I do. Honest. I think this chapter is sound, but I've had to fiddle with others recently and I'm sure there are other bits I've missed...

38. Unwanted Memory

Chapter Thirty Seven: Unwanted Memory

“It seems wrong, somehow, holding a meeting in an atmosphere like this.”

Enishi pushed open the door of the Vice Captain meeting chamber with a sigh, sinking his broad frame down into his usual seat and resting his elbows on the polished surface of the desk. “Nothing’s been the right way around since Souja-dono’s funeral, and that’s a fact. Now we’re having a Vice Captain’s meeting? Seems messed up to me. All our divisions are on high alert as it is.”

“For that reason, I suppose,” Sora followed her former classmate into the small, brightly lit chamber. “I know what you mean, Houjou — it’s a strange feeling, isn’t it? Walking in here and knowing that even if everyone on roll shows up, we’re one short. All those things he said about security in Seireitei, and the next thing we know...”

“Too young,” Enishi said gruffly. “That’s all I can think about it, Sora. Too young. The youngest of all of us shouldn’t be the first to go. I’ve had to keep up face in front of the young’uns — Thirteenth have been sent a bit scatty, what with Kirio’s stray and now a new recruit turning up in the middle of it all — but I really don’t like it. Souja wasn’t more than a kid himself — and Hirata’s a friend. This kind of thing shouldn’t happen to anyone, but it’s roughest when it’s to someone barely out of training *hakama*.”

“That’s how this world is,” Shirogane’s voice came from the doorway, and both adjutants turned, taking in the grave features of the Sixth Division deputy. He crossed the mat floor towards them. “Unless you’d forgotten, Houjou, Souja-dono isn’t the first nor the youngest of Aizen Keitarou’s Clan victims.”

“Ribari-sama,” Sora’s features became shadowed, and Shirogane nodded.

“As you say,” he replied shortly. “I doubt there’s a single division right now who isn’t focused on bringing this particular felon to heel. That’s probably why we’ve a meeting right now. We’re not just individual divisions or Clans facing this threat. The more split up we are, the more he’ll harpoon our weaknesses. It’s how he works, playing with people’s minds and jumping in to take advantage while

we're scattered and confused. We should be sharing information, and working out what we can do. Even if Keitarou isn't the kind of enemy we can take down ourselves, the more we know as a collective, the stronger we are behind our Captains, and right now that has to count more than anything else."

"I suppose that's true," Enishi rested his chin on the back of his hands with a frown. "That was the vein in which Souja himself was talking, wasn't it, last meeting?"

"Mm," Shirogane nodded. "He said to me afterwards that he was determined to get to the bottom of it. I can't help thinking that he was killed on purpose because of that intention."

He shrugged helplessly.

"Guren-sama's talked to me a little about the Council and the Captain's meetings, but Sixth didn't send representation to the Rukon, so I don't know if we're any further on than we were in that regard. This is what I mean about pooling information. Surely there's something we can do?"

"Father is hard at work trying to decipher the coordinates of the Real World *Senkaimon* he found in the Rukon, in order that they can get a rough fix on where Keitarou might've fled to," Shiketsu pushed back the door of the chamber, slipping over the threshold and revealing Ryuusei and Hyakken in his slipstream. "We were just discussing it. Father hasn't asked me to keep anything from this meeting, but there's not much conclusive to talk about. I know Twelfth have been asked to look at the Rukongai evidence in the meantime... but it feels as though we're grasping at straws."

"Sora-chan, if your Captain's said anything to you, it might be a good time to share it," Ryuusei added, glancing at his sister, and Sora let out a heavy sigh, shaking her head.

"He's not told me anything much at all," she admitted. "The fact he hasn't makes me certain there's something he hasn't said. I mean, I debriefed Kaoru and Hanako, and they said they'd found an abandoned settlement and so on — signs that Keitarou was there, but wasn't there now. I've not had a chance to ask Naoko-chan, either. Shunsui's clearly got something on his mind regarding this, but whatever it is, he doesn't seem to want to share it with either of our other two, or with me. He might have told J... Ukitake-taichou, but other than that..."

She trailed off, shrugging her shoulders.

"I guess I don't have high enough clearance. Shunsui and I are close friends, Anieue, but there are times he can play the Captain and pull rank too. I think this is one of these times."

"Houjou? What about you?" Shirogane asked. "Has Shikibu said anything?"

"Mm," Enishi pressed his lips together. "To be completely honest, I haven't spoken to Shikibu since they came back. We've both been too busy. Kira pretty much reported the same as you've just said — an abandoned settlement, an empty hut, signs of having been cleared out... that's all. Nothing else."

"No Vice Captains went to the Rukon, either," Hyakken pointed out. "Maybe none of the Captains felt it a good idea, considering what happened to Souja-dono, but it means nobody here has a direct idea of what was seen there."

"That's not the case, Hyakken-dono," Shiketsu said matter-of-factly. "Two Vice Captains went to the Rukon. Eriko-dono and Kai-dono were there."

"Kai-dono never comes to these meetings, though, or hardly ever," Shirogane grimaced. "Onmitsukidou isn't quite like the other divisions. As for Eriko-dono, the Fourth are so busy at the moment after what happened in the Spiritless Zone. I don't expect either of them to show for this meeting."

"Well, today is an exception," Kai's own voice prevented any of the others in the chamber from commenting, and Enishi turned, seeing his friend wearily cross the room towards the often vacant Second Division seat. "I'm here, and I'm here because of the Rukon. Nagesu-sama told me that I should report to you what I felt was wise. That's why there's this meeting, now. Midori-neesama arranged it with the other Captains and sent through the memos... I'm hoping that most of us turn up."

"Eriko-dono said she was coming, too. She was just seeing to a couple of patients and would be late," Shiketsu offered Kai a faint smile. "She asked me to bring her apologies, but she felt that coming late was better than not at all."

"So now we just have to wait and see if the others appear?" Sora reflected. "It would be a tragic irony, wouldn't it, if the first Vice Captain's meeting where everyone else showed up did so because one of ours got killed."

"It's not the first time that's happened," Ryuusei reflected. "It's

been a while since a Vice Captain died in action, true, but I remember the last time. Shirogane-dono, Shiketsu-dono, I'm sure you do too."

"You mean Sakanoue, I suppose?" Shiketsu grimaced, nodding his head. "Yes, though it's not an incident I like to recall. We lost kinsfolk in that incident, too. It was a messy business."

"I haven't heard this story." Sora's ears pricked up, and Ryuusei sent her a pensive glance.

"Gossip you haven't picked up on? I'm surprised," he observed wryly, and Sora pulled a face.

"I don't know everything," she defended herself. "I don't know much about the Urahara — so sue me!"

"Sakanoue was a Yamamoto, actually," Enishi scratched his chin. "Not that I really know much about it, either. I know he died, and had a formal funeral. That's about it. Total different branch of the family and older t'boot. Well, I guess you can say I wasn't much for social Clan functions, and begged out of them as much as possible, so I don't see how I'd have met him anyway. To be truthful, the only reason I know even his name is because it came up briefly when I was originally invited to be Eleventh's Vice Captain after graduation. Since I chose against it, I never heard any more. I figured it was a Hollow or something — was it not?"

"Hollows of a sort, yes," Shiketsu confirmed. "In the Rukon. I don't know all the details — just that he was killed in action over the divide and he had a hero's funeral on account of it. There was a lot of spiritual pollution in the Rukon then — a lot of Hollow incidents there that the Eleventh and Twelfth saw to cleansing. It was one of those things which, on another occasion, could've ended differently."

"But the meeting after he died, everyone came together and talked like this," Ryuusei reflected. "Sakanoue was respected by pretty much everyone, just like Souja-dono."

"Some people say that his death was murder, too." Hyakken added, and Sora turned to eye the Ninth Division Vice Captain in dismay.

"What? I thought Shiketsu-dono said he died in action!"

"He did," Hyakken nodded. "It was just a rumour... that there was something off about the Hollows in the Rukon. They were more... humanoid than normal, and apparently, capable of independant thought to a limited degree. But the subject got shut off and they never investigated it. Minaichi-taichou and Sekime-taichou both wanted it that way, I think... well, they both lost people they were

close to, and there was no proof of anything. I know there was suspicion, though.”

“Of Keitarou?” Shirogane asked sharply, and Hyakken shrugged.

“There was that rumour,” he agreed pensively. “It was within memory of Ribari-sama’s death, and of course, the incident with Seiren-dono. People wondered... well, whether he’d escaped Kinnya-sama’s blade and taken up his old tricks again.”

“So maybe this is the same as then, then?” Sora wondered, but Shirogane shook his head.

“Sakanoue died before I was inaugurated as heir of the Kuchiki,” he said quietly. “It was too soon after Keitarou’s run-in with Kinnya-sama’s blade for him to have begun any kind of operation anywhere else. Even if we do now have proof he was in the Rukon, and he’s been there the whole time, he wouldn’t have been able to orchestrate the sheer quantity of Hollows that were being deployed in that region. He took a severe injury — both Kinnya-sama and Hirata-dono testified to that effect before the Council. Besides, the original Hollow incidents began before Keitarou stopped stalking my family. Much as I don’t like to give him an alibi in any of this, I think it unlikely there’s a connection since his focus was clearly on destroying us, not unleashing random unknown experiments in the Rukon valley. You’ve let your imagination run away with you, Hyakken-dono, because of the Kuchiki-ke’s feelings following that business — but in reality it seems more likely that Real World pollution slipping through the soul burial process caused the contamination.”

“Father’s enquiry into the matter came to the same conclusion,” Shiketsu agreed. “He could find no reason to open a full scale investigation. Sakanoue died as a result of his deployment in the field as an active member of Eleventh Division... and we should leave the past in the past and move to the present. Souja-dono’s death was definitely murder, and we have to focus on justice for him now.”

“Yes, let’s drop the Sakanoue subject before Ikata and the others get here,” Enishi suggested. “I agree with Shirogane-dono. It was a bad incident, but the kind of thing shinigami are geared up to face and it sounds like he acquitted himself in the way an officer should. Let’s not slur a good war record with intrigue we can’t prove when there’s already enough grim stuff to be going on with.”

“Ikata’s his cousin, isn’t he?” Ryuusei remarked thoughtfully. “I remember thinking how it was impossible two such different people could be so closely related. I was surprised when Atsushi-dono

selected him as Sakanoue's replacement... I guess it's probably still a sore point."

"As we see regularly, with Ikata's general attitude towards his Captain," Shiketsu sighed wearily. "I can't imagine Ikata has the sensitivity to care about such a distant event, though. We see proof of his attention grasping attitude and blatant arrogance on a regular basis. He was probably glad that the competition was removed. Though I remember Minaichi went through a few candidates before he was forced to fall back on the one he did... you included, of course, Houjou."

"We'll drop the subject." Ryuusei said firmly, before Enishi could respond. "I can sense Ikata and Michihashi at least heading this way, and Kai-dono said he had things to report."

"Kanshi's on his way, too," Sora added, settling herself more comfortably in her seat. "I guess you're chairing this meeting, Shihouin, since your Clan called it in the first instance."

"If nobody else has an objection, I think I should," Kai looked troubled, but nodded, moving to the front of the room. "It's not generally the Onmitsukidou's way to divulge information, but when it comes to Keitarou, all rules change. If it gets us even an inch closer to what we need to know, I'm prepared to tell what I can — beginning with the testimony of a Second Division prisoner currently in custody known to us under the name of Suzuki Naoto."

"This is everything that you got from the Rukongai visit?"

Mareiko rested her hands on the unit of Nagesu's laboratory, her quick, dreamy gaze flitting over the reams of scrawled notes her Clan leader had scribed hurriedly down in the hours since the mission's return from the Rukon. Nagesu himself had not yet rested, even though the investigation had taken place through night hours in Seireitei, and it was drawing on towards midday. On the contrary, he had sent messengers to Twelfth Division as soon as he had been able, summoning the Twelfth Captain to help him go over the results.

"There's a lot written here, Nagesu-sama. You must have been working non-stop."

"There isn't really time to think about resting, not when Keitarou is on the loose, and besides, my mind is too jumpy to step back from the investigation," Nagesu ran his fingers through his sandy blond hair with a sigh of acknowledgement. "I'm sorry for the abrupt summons too, Mareiko — but two heads are often better than one and I wanted

your opinion. I'm quite sure that we discovered the scene of Souja-dono's murder, and I had Kamitani and Yunosuke collect samples to prove it, but those will have to wait for the time being. More important are the readings from the *Senkaimon* — both the one that Souja-dono must have destroyed to make it back here, and the other, which was barred with Kidou."

He moved to stand behind her, leaning across to indicate a particular passage.

"Sekizanha warned me against trying to open that gate. He thought it was unstable, and that it might implode if I used any significant level of power on trying to break the Kidou spell. It wasn't childish magic, though. From the little evidence I was able to glean through Sekizanha's senses, it was a complex barrier designed from Bakudou but — I have to admit — a spell to which I could give no name. Perhaps it was a custom technique... which would marry with the evidence Shikibu Naoko's sword gave about Keitarou having been in the vicinity."

"Shikibu Naoko?" Mareiko looked startled. "From the Thirteenth Division? She was with you on this trip, too? I thought you went with Onmitsukidou?"

"I did, but Shunsui-dono's group had assigned members of Thirteenth, if you recall, and she was one of them," Nagesu responded wearily. "It turns out that she had a personal encounter with Keitarou some several years ago, and as a result, her *zanpakutou* is keenly sensitive to any trace of his lingering reiatsu. She detected his presence all around the area that Shunsui-dono patrolled, and when Kamitani told me about her *zanpakutou*'s ability, I sent for her to come do the same at the crime scene. Keitarou's reiatsu was not present in Souja-dono's blood, which supports the idea he didn't kill the boy himself, but the gate... that was different. I had thought that Keitarou's presence was there, but suppressed and not quite tangible to me. Shikibu's Dokusou Houshi was far more concise. She said that there was no doubt — Keitarou had gone through the gate, and, almost certainly, had set up the Kidou around it. That being the case, investigating it became priority number one."

"I see," Mareiko stood back, pursing her lips thoughtfully. "And you think he went to the Real World?"

"Sekizanha was convinced that that was where the gate led to, yes," Nagesu nodded. "I only have a vague sense of coordinates, and I've tried to note them down as best I can, but I don't know how accurate they are. The Real World is a big place, and although I have sent

Yunosuke and Kamitani with coordinates ahead of me to fix a gate and stabilise it for frequent transport between here and the Real World to one of our usual Urahara encampments, I may well miss our target by a wide range. I also don't want to leave them alone for long — I can't spare other officers, and I wanted to hear Shiketsu's report before I join them, but his meeting seems to be running on longer than I expected. For that reason, I want you to take command of the data and continue to work on it. Anything you can glean from it that might tell us about Keitarou's whereabouts or anything else you deem appropriate to our resolving this situation, I will welcome with gratitude."

"I can try," Mareiko eyed the notes doubtfully. "I would offer to come with you to the Real World, Nagesu-sama, but in the circumstances..."

"Your brain is my greatest ally and support in this," Nagesu rested a reassuring hand on her shoulder. "You often see things that I do not, and I trust in your ability to work this through. If my mission to the Real World proves fruitless, at least I know that there is a back-up plan being put into operation and there will be other options to investigate on my return."

"Well, creating other options is becoming a Twelfth Division speciality," Mareiko, whose pale eyes had become rather tragic brightened at this, nodding her head. "I'll do what I can, and that's a promise. Also, if you want me to analyse the readings from the Kidou, perhaps I can come up with a less volatile way to break the bond on the original gate than releasing Sekizanha would achieve. It's possible that, even if the spell has been custom designed for the purpose, my research might indicate the base spells it has been formed from, and so the best way to neutralise it."

"That's why I sent for you," Nagesu sent her a wry smile. "I knew you'd reassure me with suggestions like that, and at present I think there's nobody in Seireitei who knows as much about Kidou as you do. It might come to it, that we have to go back to Rukongai and try and breach the gate, so that would be helpful. Also, there's one more thing I need to leave with you."

"Yes, sir?" Mareiko's gaze burned with curiosity, and Nagesu nodded.

"The information Ukitake gave me at the meeting. The sheet you saw... the data that he produced out of nowhere," he said pensively. "It turns out that that research was not only thorough, but extremely accurate. We opened our gate very close to the area where Keitarou

had, indeed, been operating, and found the site of Souja-dono's murder, clues to follow Keitarou's path, and signs of a settlement, including — if Shunsui-dono is to be believed — a location Souja-dono himself mentioned before he died. That kind of accuracy does not come by fluke. I don't know how Ukitake came by it, but thanks to that work, I was able to hypothesise coordinates that took us right to where we needed to be. I don't know how much interaction you have with your neighbour, but if you should find the time..."

"You want me to talk to him about it?" Mareiko tilted her head on one side, then nodded, her grin widening. "That's no problem. As it happens, I'm quite fond of the Thirteenth — they've always been polite neighbours, and I find Ukitake-taichou is friendly enough. These days I don't have much reason to call by Eleventh, but I've been to Thirteenth once or twice to do scientific analyses of his sword's release and he's been very accommodating of my geekish curiosity. I'll go see him, and see what he says. He might not reveal his source, though — it sounded in the meeting like it was something top secret."

"Mm, which bothers me just a little bit," Nagesu admitted. Mareiko's eyes widened.

"Do you think Ukitake-taichou has links to Keitarou?" she demanded, and Nagesu laughed despite himself, shaking his head.

"No. Out of all the potential figures in Seireitei who might plot rebellion, he's bottom of my list," he said, amused. "I remember the sorry state Keitarou's blade left him in following an encounter in the snows of Seventh District — no, I think it's fair to say that Ukitake would choose to have nothing to do with my misguided cousin. It's more a concern that he got to that information and we didn't. I can't explain it, but it seems... strange."

"Midori-dono was saying similar things about Ukitake-taichou and Onmitsukidou business," Mareiko pondered. "I guess he has a more accurate information network than anyone thought, considering he's from the Districts."

She shrugged, offering a happy-go-lucky smile.

"Maybe it's because he's nice to people, and it makes him easy to trust," she suggested. "In any case, I will go there, I promise. If I can, I'll find out his source, but if not, shall I trust some of this information to him, in case there's a chance he can pass it to those contacts? With the Real World being such a big place, and with us not knowing so much... even if he isn't an Urahara, I think maybe... we should."

"In the current climate, unity is the only weapon we have against

chaotic genius,” Nagesu agreed grimly. “Do what you think is best, Mareiko. I trust you.”

“Then I’ll do what I can,” Mareiko dimpled. “Don’t look so worried, Nagesu-sama. It will be all right. Really.”

“Let’s hope so,” Nagesu responded darkly. “Now, I must go and see whether Shiketsu has returned yet from the Vice Captain’s meeting. It’s a long one, today, so hopefully that means some useful information has come to light. Michihashi will probably be looking for you, too, before long — so I’ll keep you here no longer.”

“All right,” Mareiko gathered the notes up in her arms. “You’re probably right — I don’t want him to think I’ve got locked in the supply basement again... last time he clean blew the door off its hinges and organising repairs at Twelfth is such a hassle.”

She sighed, rolling her eyes expressively.

“You’d think the craftsmen would be glad of the business, especially since we’re such frequent patrons, but they always seem so reluctant to come calling,” she added. “Good luck in the Real World, Nagesu-sama. I hope you find what you’re looking for.”

“So do I,” Nagesu nodded, “and more, that this time I can stop him before he causes any more harm.”

Well, so Nagesu and the Kyouraku idiot had made it back safely from their trip to the Rukon.

Deep furrows lined Atsushi’s brow as he considered this, disapproval touching his expression as he placed the last of the documents in the pile for distribution and let out a heavy sigh. It was mid-morning, and, thanks to the summons of the Shihouin, his adjutant was busily engaged in a Vice Captain’s meeting, leaving him free to go about his work in peace and quiet. Atsushi relished these brief scraps of sanity time, as he thought of it, for though Ikata’s skills were good and his drive genuine, it was no secret between them that he was not the kind of second Atsushi would’ve chosen given half a chance. In fact, Atsushi reflected, as he got to his feet, stretching his arms over his head to release the cramp setting up home in his long, bony fingers, he would have sooner worked without a Vice Captain, had the Clan been willing to allow it. Ikata was not the smartest man he had ever known, but he was sharp enough to know that he got on Atsushi’s nerves, and his strident voice and swaggering figure were often the causes of Atsushi’s late night headaches.

They were chalk and cheese, sun and moon... and had it not been for the firm pressure of the previous Clan leader, Hashihiko, he would never have even considered the man as a candidate.

Even Enishi would've been a better selection than this, had the fool remembered his responsibility to his kin.

Atsushi rested his hands on the windowsill, gazing disgruntledly out towards the direction he knew Juushirou's Thirteenth Division were based. The jagged shape of the Twelfth Division barracks, with its frequent reconstructions blocked his view, but Atsushi could just make out the sloped roofs and the briefest outline of the Captain's chamber stretching out over the koi lake. Thirteenth had been built so close to the edge of Inner Seireitei's land that they had been forced to build it partially over a puddle, he told himself derisively, and yet, instead of being put out or righteously embarrassed by that fact, Juushirou had declared the location beautiful and welcomed it with genuine delight. There was a reason Thirteenth Division came numerically last in the list of divisions, yet the infuriating white haired Captain, with his District airs and interfering habits seemed completely oblivious to the fact his squad ranked below all of the others. For him to have had the temerity to accept the position of Captain at all had grated on Minaichi's Clan-proud nerves, but then, to appropriate his own potential Vice Captain candidate... no, there were some insults that were not to be forgiven.

His gaze fell on the Twelfth Division once more, and the cross expression in his eyes softened slightly, a faintly sad look entering the normally harsh gaze.

He had hardly been there in years, either. There had been a time when the Eleventh and Twelfth Divisions had worked in such close partnership that he had known the names of most of the senior officers within the Urahara Division, but now he no longer knew nor cared who was working under its auspices. Only Mareiko remained of the people he had once worked with so closely — and even where she was concerned, things had moved beyond the point of no return.

"Well, Atsushi-kun, we're ready to go when you are!"

The image of her robed in the black uniform of a Vice Captain, silver and white badge glittering on her upper left arm flashed into his thoughts, her eyes bright and eager and her hair sticking out around her head like a straw halo. She had been scatty and disorganised, rarely wearing a proper pair of *tabi*, or turning up with a Clan *obi* instead of a shinigami one holding her *shihakushou* together, but the infectious sound of her laughter had always helped soothe any nerves

Atsushi might've had on entering the Rukon or the Real World, and so he had overlooked these imperfections in favour of the bigger picture. Well, maybe then they had been friends, he reflected grimly. Even though rank had separated them by one position, she had never bothered to speak to him formally, treating him more like a former playmate than a senior officer and teasing his rigid, stick-in-the-mud approach. He was not a popular man — Atsushi himself was under no illusions about that fact, for hard disciplinarians were rarely well liked, and he believed in running his squad in the proper way, without any of the emotional claptrap he knew the Thirteenth went in for. Mareiko had been an exception — even now he did not know why or how — but everything had changed after their last joint mission — everything, beyond the point of no return. Now, when she called him Atsushi-dono, and adopted formal, polite language, he was aware of the gap between them and how much that gap now hurt.

But how could it be otherwise? He had worked to make it that way — he had intended to build that separation. Because everything had changed that last day. *Everything*.

Atsushi sighed, grabbing his light, functional cloak from its hook behind his desk and pulling it over his shoulders, determined to push the cobwebs from his brain and clear his head. His division were all hard at work at their various drill exercises — he knew that even in Ikata's absence, they would not dare be otherwise, for Atsushi had always been a hard task master and his demands for physical prowess had increased ever since that last mission over the divide. He would expect nothing but military perfection from his officers and so showed them no kindness or affection, barking orders and inflicting swingeing criticism, but seldom offering praise. They would be stronger, fitter, ready to face anything and everything, no matter what the ask. He would not make the mistake again of allowing one of them close enough to him to skew his judgement — perhaps, in that sense, having Ikata as a second had been a positive move. There was no risk of him becoming fond of this subordinate, he mused to himself grimly as he made his way along the thin, twisting path that led around the side of the Eleventh to the stretch of green at its rear. Not this time around.

He paused as he reached his destination, his gaze flitting across the grass to the hewn squares of grey stone that divided the sea of green. Most were small, only big enough to carve a name on, and not much more, and Atsushi ignored these, stepping over them as he crossed the garden towards a taller, more polished slab that stood at the very rear. It was nothing more than a memorial, he knew, for the funeral and all other formal arrangements had taken place in District One, where his

body had been interred, yet it had seemed right all the same that there be mention of it here, alongside those of his fellow, fallen comrades. Especially, Atsushi reflected bitterly, resting his hand on the top of the stone plinth that reached up almost to his waist, since it had been his idea to begin this garden in the first place.

Atsushi had never been a man to bother with sentiment, and so the whole exercise had seemed a pointless one to him, yet in the end he had given in, allowing this small, insignificant scrap of Eleventh Division's barracks to be turned over into a memorial garden for those officers that had fallen in the line of duty. Recognising their sacrifice was a way of building divisional unity, was that what Sakanoue had said? Atsushi rubbed his temples, attempting to remember the man's words, but it was so very long ago now, and all he could do was draw forth a faint recollection of his face.

It was hardly surprising, since he had spent twenty five years trying to forget.

He stood back from the memorial stone, his gaze running down the five characters that made up Sakanoue's full name.

Another person he had been weak enough to like, to respect, to train... another person who had gone far far away, leaving him behind.

Atsushi's eyes narrowed to slits, as another, less welcome image suddenly flooded over his brain.

"Tai... chou..."

The words were forced out with difficulty as gasps of air from sword-slit lungs, the bloodstained fingers clawing at the fabric of Atsushi's *shihakushou* as the man struggled to make himself understood. The thick dark hair, normally so neatly pinned back in straggling, matted clumps around his shoulders, specked with whiteish chalk that even now made Atsushi feel nauseous, and his wild eyes rolling and staring in desperation as he fought to make himself understood.

"Help... me..."

The glitter of sword blades, Sakanoue's, Atsushi's own, in the dim haze of the weak Rukongai sun, and then that prickling awareness that they were not alone, that someone else was watching them with burning, judging eyes. Sakanoue's incoherent groan, his eyes fluttering shut for the last time, and then, the most awful of sounds that not even the loudest of Twelfth Division's explosions could erase... the

final death rattle, as life escaped the Vice Captain's body for the last time.

He had slumped on the grass, blood pooling all around him, and Atsushi had thrown his usual austere demeanour to the wind, abandoning even his own weapon in his distress. He had tried in vain to revive the man, but it had been to no avail, and the crimson-soaked, shredded corpse had lain heavy against his arms. He had heard rumours that the dying saw flashes of memory before their eyes in the moments their soul left them, but even though he did not know what Sakanoue's eyes had seen in those last moments, his own head had become an unbearable morass of recollections, each one coming unwelcome and unbidden to unsettle his usual composure.

Images of the young boy he had selected as an apprentice had flooded him, the lad's hard work and dedication inspiring Atsushi's grudging respect. The Captain had never married, and had not had any interest in children, but the careful, efficient diligence with which Sakanoue had learned every skill had, in time, forged a bond between them, a bond which had been the closest thing to father and son that Atsushi had ever known. When Eleventh Division had come his way, there had been no hesitations on selecting Sakanoue as adjutant. He had prided himself in being able to set up the division to run smoothly and effectively and had even boasted at Captains' meetings how having an adjutant he had trained himself meant a superior level of performance. Yet, cradling Sakanoue's broken body, he had, for the first time, known the helplessness that grief placed on the flipside of absolute trust, and at the same time, he had vowed that he would never, ever forgive.

Twenty five years on, the world had moved on and changed, but Atsushi's convictions had not.

He patted the stone pensively, turning back towards the barracks.

Mareiko was lucky. She never saw what I saw. Never knew what I knew. She never had to live with the things I've lived with for all these years. Perhaps I pulled away from her, but it was for the best. Having friends makes you weak, it lays you open to vulnerability and attack. She never has understood the need to become stronger, that all her science and research can't possibly protect her from the evil in this world. Evil that wears the colours of the Gotei, and taints everything it was ever designed to stand for.

"Taichou!"

Ikata's bellowing tones cut through Atsushi's reverie, and he grimaced, quickening his pace towards the main military complex so

that his adjutant did not find him in such a place. Ikata had mocked its existence the first time he had seen it, and Atsushi had no mind to reveal his deepest thoughts to his second.

Your cousin, Sakanoue, and yet in all ways inferior. Still, if I can hate him, so much to the good. If the enemy kills him, I will simply march on and cut them down... and this time, there will be no looking back.

“Taichou, where are you? I have to report to you — about the meeting this morning!”

Ikata’s yells were getting louder, and Atsushi was sure they could probably be heard at both Twelfth and Tenth, but as he rounded the corner of the courtyard, he saw the broadset man standing there, hands on hips, gazing around him with a mixture of irritation and insolence.

“There you are, Taichou. I was looking for you.”

“Yes, I heard, and so, I believe, did the rest of Inner Seireitei,” Atsushi replied waspishly. “Well? I trust this morning’s meeting had a purpose other than to get you out of my hair -tell me at once and don’t delay. What discoveries from Rukongai? And don’t leave anything out. Even your small brain must have absorbed a good amount of it, and I want to know as much as you can tell me.”

Ikata glanced at him for a moment, then he snorted, shrugging his shoulders.

“Yes, sir,” he said frankly, a touch of familiarity in his tone. “Whatever you say... you’re the boss.”

39. Aki

Chapter Thirty Eight: Aki

There were birds singing in the skies of the Real World that morning, wheeling and arching as they chirruped their greeting to the sun below the lazy wisps of white cloud that drifted across the blue. The dew had dried quickly, leaving an expanse of green that stretched from the river's edge far into the mountain valley, and the shadow of the volcano's snow-tipped peak watched over everything, serene and dignified, as though self-appointed Emperor of the lands below.

The girl stretched out her arms, slipping her hands behind her head as she gazed contentedly up at the sky, her bronze eyes watching the sway of the tree branches as they moved back and forth in the gentle breeze. The air was fresh and clear, and there was no sign of bad weather on the horizon. All in all, it was a perfect day — a perfect day which was all her own.

She closed her eyes, allowing the mottled rays of the sun to brush over her skin through the wooden boughs.

It had been a long time since she had had any day which was all her own, let alone one in such aesthetic harmony.

Her lips thinned slightly as she tried to draw the memories together. They were not altogether coherent, she reflected, but then, apparently that was to be expected. She recalled a lot of screaming — perhaps her, perhaps others, she couldn't be sure. A place of gloomy darkness, where there had been rats rustling in the shadows, and the imposing lines of steel bars shadowed faintly against cold stone. When she thought of these things, she felt a mixture of emotions, but piecing those things together was difficult when everything was so out of context.

She opened her eyes, frowning as, once again, she forced her thoughts back to the beginning and tried to build a sequence of events.

There was a big manor house, she remembered. It had been tall and impressive, and she had stood before it many times, the bitter winter cold whipping through the thin fabric of her clothing. For some reason, she had come here, although the big, bulky man who had guarded the gate had given her a clip around the ear and sent her

packing into the snowy night. She had kept returning, staring up at the furthestmost tower as if looking for someone, but in the hazy darkness, she had never managed to locate what she had sought, and eventually, she had stopped looking.

She had returned time and time again, but in time, her reasons for going had changed. She had felt... something.

Her eyes narrowed.

What had it been?

Something that had driven her there, but not hope, nor plaintive desperation. It had not been hunger, and she had not gone there to beg. It had been something else. Something that had lit... fire through her body.

She sat upright, leaning back on her hands as she reflected on this.

Yes, there had been fire. A red shadow looming down through the night. Screams of fear and panic... maids flying this way and that. Had she been inside the gates, then, that time? Inside when the fire had begun?

She frowned, scratching her head in frustration as the answer was not forthcoming.

It was because she had slept so long. That was what the man had said. She had slept for a long, long time, and so she was confused. It would take a day or two to remember, and she shouldn't panic in the meantime. Everything was all right, because he would help her. That was what she had told him... he would help... her.

She rubbed her temples.

He called me Aki. Is that my name? Am I called Aki? If he knew my name, then he must know who I am. If he knows that, then he must be able to help me. He said he was a friend — and he knew how to help me. Me and the others... the ones still sleeping when he opened my cage. Do I know them, too? Maybe I do. Maybe... but everything is so muggy and dim. Faces, names, places, colours... and none of them mean anything much to me at all.

She got to her feet, turning to gaze up at the mountain with a pensive, considered expression on her young face.

He told us not to go far from the cave, but when I heard the birds singing, I wanted to see the sun. It feels as though I haven't seen sun in such a long time... I suppose he won't be mad, not if it was only for a little while. It can't hurt, can it, walking around these parts? He said we'd get

lost, maybe hurt — but I saw people when I was walking down and not one of them even turned to look at me. I'm not dressed strangely, and I haven't grown an extra head. Maybe I can't remember everything, yet, but I'm sure I won't come to harm just seeing the local scenery. It's so very beautiful here...

She tilted her head on one side, examining the mountain more carefully.

Though I'm certain this wasn't where I came from. The memories I have... none of them show a mountain. The land is flat. A dry river estuary leading to a ruined harbour, and then that big imposing house... but no mountains. I'd remember one as beautiful as that one, I'm sure I would. Maybe that's why he doesn't want me wandering around too much... that... what he did he call himself? Oh yes. Keitarou.

A smile lit up her features and she nodded, remembering her disorientation as she had stumbled from the dark depths of what had seemed like a cocoon, his gentle voice and reassuring hand guiding her forward onto the cold stone floor. He had been nice to her... warm and unthreatening, and although she didn't know why, she felt as though it had been a long time since anyone had spoken to her with such kindness. He had led her through into an odd looking chamber, surrounded by carved units, shelves and scrolls, and at the sight of it she had gasped, a suffocating swell of fear lodging in her throat and threatening to paralyse the entirety of her body, yet he had caught her, patting her comfortingly on the arm and assuring her that she would come to no harm so long as he was there. It was then he had called her 'Aki', and promised that he would help her, if she helped him.

Of course, she had agreed. Though she didn't know who he was or even who she was, yet, she knew that he had rescued her from something. Something terrible had happened in that room, a morass of kicking, struggling, biting, screaming and the fair haired demon who had borne down on her, weapon in one hand and cold, empty pale eyes staring through her as though she were no better than a captive animal. She had fought, spitting and hissing, scratching and struggling against the restraints that had dug into her fair skin and left angry red weals. She could remember none of his physical features clearly, they were nothing but a blur to her, but those eyes... they still bored deep into hers, every line and fleck of their unusual pale colour tattooed onto her recollections.

Automatically she glanced at her wrists, but the marks of her most recent restraints were already fading, thanks to Keitarou's kindness. He had cut through them, one by one, being very careful not to cause

her more discomfort than he could manage, and his soft, muddy brown eyes had been a welcome change from those cold orbs that had gazed at her so impassively whilst causing her so much pain.

Fair hair, pale eyes. Keitarou called him... what did he say now? Ah yes. Kusakawa.

Aki clenched her fists briefly, a shadow clouding her bronze gaze. *I wish I remembered why that name mattered, or what exactly happened to bring me to that place. Perhaps I will remember, soon enough. Keitarou thought I would. He said I'd have companions, then, too. He said there were others... others like me. The ones still sleeping — I wonder what he meant, like me? I wish I knew. He said that the seals were hard to break — harder than he anticipated — and so he only managed mine, but he'd come back. I should return to the cave... he might think I've run away, if I don't, and even though I don't like being there, I don't want him to think I've gone. He said he'd help me, and I believed him. He was kind to me. I want to... trust him.*

To think was to act, and she turned on her heel, making her way purposefully back up the pathway that led towards the inner depths of the volcanic mountain. It was so beautiful from the outside, yet so bleak and dark within, and the dichotomy puzzled her. Could something so pretty really conceal such a cold, ugly heart? But then Keitarou had said that the heart of the mountain was far, far hotter than she could even imagine — so perhaps it was just another of those things she didn't understand, yet. Coming outside to see the sun had helped, but it had created so many more questions. Maybe Keitarou would answer them. Surely he would, when he came back?

As she rounded the path that led to the clutch of trees that shielded the cavern descent, the air suddenly warped and wobbled in front of her, making her jump back in surprise. Her body knocked against the trunk of a young elm tree, sending two or three birds flying in startled indignation up into the air above her head. Gathering her wits, she stared with a mixture of fascination and disbelief as the air warped again, then, very definitely began to split open, a black line that became a gaping hole yawning wider and wider until it was easily as big as the cave entrance through which she had stepped only that morning. Curious, Aki skipped cautiously forward, eying this odd phenomenon with eager, inquisitive eyes, but as she drew within a foot or so of the opening, she heard the sound of voices and sprang back, alarm flooding her gaze as she realised something was coming out of the hole.

Was it another cave into the mountain? Was it Keitarou, returning to wake her companions from their sleep? Or was it something...

someone else? Was it an enemy? All the hairs prickled up on the back of her neck for a reason she did not understand, and she hugged her arms tightly to her body, staring with apprehension at the opening yet somehow unable to flee into the surrounding undergrowth. Whatever that thing was, and wherever it had come from, she needed to know what was coming out of it. She had to see it for herself, although beads of cold sweat had begun to form across her brow and she knew that her body was trembling.

What was she afraid of? She couldn't tell. Had she seen one of these before? Somewhere in her memories, had bad things happened in one of these strange black holes, or was it just the unnaturally surreal sight of the air itself being parted, forced asunder to allow something or someone entry into this tranquil place?

The next moment, an individual stepped out of the hole, and Aki's entire body froze with disbelief as she took in the man's appearance.

Fair hair. Pale eyes.

She swallowed hard, taking a step back, but feeling only the hard trunk of the tree up against her spine.

He was dressed in black... black and white. Black and white like the demon who had cursed her and chained her and treated her like she was his property. In his slipstream followed another, similarly dressed, with the same fair hair and pale eyes that frightened her so much. One of them moved in her direction, and as he did so, Aki could make out the hilt of a weapon sheathed at his waist.

Was he going to... hurt her? Had he come to... kill her?

She dragged air into lungs which suddenly felt stifled and reluctant to obey her body's command to breathe. The memory of a silver sword, its sharp edge against her skin flashed to the forefront of her mind, coupled with pain and fear, a childish voice begging him not to harm her. It was her voice, she realised detachedly. She had begged someone to stop, and yet they had persisted, pinning her down when she fought to get free and deriding her behaviour, those eyes looking at her as though she were no more than an animal intended for slaughter. A stinging sensation as rough cloth was pressed against the wound, something being forced down her throat, and then an explosion of emotion, a kaleidoscope of one harsh sensation after another, blurring and confusing her till she felt dizzy and disorientated. Her hands were burning, dripping blood as her nails ripped away, the bones erupting through the torn skin of her fingertips into the open air, and then the whiteness closing in over her face, blinding her eyes, choking shut her airways and muffling the

sound of his voice till it became an eerie roar.

Tears glittered on her lashes and she grabbed her head, trying to force the images away, but they continued relentlessly, a tide of pictures washing through her like a tsunami, leaving nothing but devastation in its wake.

And then, somewhere deep inside of her, something dark and cloying reached out to grab a hold of her heart, pulling it down, down down deep into blackness until she could no longer see or feel anything but the dull throbbing of anger and hate against her senses.

Urahara.

The voice in her head was no longer her voice, but at the sound of the word her body tensed, the fear replaced by a stifling wave of hatred.

Kill them. Kill them all. You must kill them. Kill them all.

Suddenly calm, Aki raised her head to meet the gaze of the foremost blond demon, her bronzish eyes glittering strangely as the pupils twisted and distorted, the pretty shade of their natural colour becoming harsher and more feral with every passing moment. The demon was speaking to her, she could see his lips moving, but she could no longer hear his words. Through her head rippled only the murmurs of this voice, this dark voice, urging her to kill.

She clenched her fists, then flung her left hand out in the direction of the demon, and there was an explosion of crimson light as the two made contact, the man falling back with a gasp of surprise and pain at her sudden hostility.

No, perhaps it had not been light. Perhaps it had been an explosion of blood.

Aki raised her fist to glance at it, noting the long sharp claws that now extended through the skin of her slender, delicate fingers, their surface coated in the slick red liquid of her memories. She tilted her hand slightly, watching mesmerised as the blood ran down over the knuckles and across the palm to stain the edges of her ragged sleeve. Slowly she brought the limb closer to her face, examining it for a moment, then licking the tips of the claw-like nails clean.

The substance was tinny and strangely sweet, and the taste of it sent another swell of memory through her slight form.

Now she knew. Now she understood. These were Urahara... the fair haired demons she had sworn on her mother's grave that she would kill, and again, in that dark cell, and again, deep under the mountain,

every time she had been beaten and prodded and forced to do things she did not want to do. Time had flowed for everyone else, but for her it had often seemed to stand still. To kill the hours, she had spent each passing second planning, plotting, even dreaming about it — that one day she would take this Clan and rip them limb from limb. She did not care who, or why, or where... just that they were Urahara, and that was reason enough.

And now they were here, before her.

Aki smiled, her bloodstained lips in direct contrast to the strange, chalk white substance that had begun to spread like a shield across her features, fangs protruding down over her teeth and shell like discs flattening over her ears like horns.

Yes. It was a good day. A day in which she would finally take her revenge.

“Are you sure it’s all right for us to go on ahead like this, without the Taichou with us, Yunosuke-nii?”

Kamitani Jun fastened together the last of the long trailing pieces of wire, turning to cast a glance at his companion, doubt glittering in his pale eyes. At about the same time Aki had decided to take her stroll away from the mountain cave, the two Third Division officers had been hard at work setting up the coordinates for their Real World trip. In the absence of firm data, Nagesu had decided that it was best to make a base in familiar territory, and so had instructed Yunosuke to set the gate coordinates for a region frequented by scientific field parties for the collection of minerals and other substances. For this reason, both Yunosuke, who frequently headed such parties, and Kamitani, who, at Sixth seat was also a regular participant on account of his quick brain and good analytical skills had been sent on ahead, but there was a definite sense of unease hanging over the small courtyard.

Unlike the other divisions, who used their equivalent space for drills, Third preferred to keep their military practices under cover, and instead this stretch of paved land had been turned over to Senkaimon research. Though Gates now littered Seireitei, it was this Gate which was the most stable and secure way of travelling between Soul Society and the Real World, and so all of Nagesu’s senior officers had been well drilled in how to not only activate the opening but also control and stabilise it upon arrival. But, despite it being a common state of affairs, Yunosuke could read the tension in his subordinate’s lean frame and, if he was honest with himself, he had felt it keenly, too.

"I know he said he'd join us as soon as Fukutaichou was back, and that the place we're going to is a familiar location for scientific field trips," Kamitani continued now, "but even so, if we're really going looking for..."

He faltered, then mouthed the word, and his companion sighed, leaning up against the frame of the archway and folding his arms across his chest.

"Taichou's orders, so there's no time for us to wonder about it," he said softly. "I know, after our trip to the Rukon, I didn't expect us to be flung out again so soon... but I think it's for that reason Taichou's leaving it to us to form the vanguard. He's said very clearly that he won't risk Fukutaichou, and we've got the background from Rukongai to be going on with."

"But just us two?" Kamitani looked troubled. "I'm not undermining your skills, and it's not like I don't feel confident in my own, but... a Vice Captain was killed by one of... them. If we really think..." he mouthed the name again, "is in the Real World, shouldn't we be sending a whole army out looking for him?"

"I think that's what Taichou's got in mind, to be honest," Yunosuke glanced over the last of the data settings, pulling his *zanpakutou* from its sheath and turning it over so that the flat of the horizontal blade glinted in the sunlight. "Make sure you've got everything, because we're not going back and forth like we do on a scientific run. Keitarou's a slick customer and he always thinks in ways we don't expect. He's probably imagining a whole flotilla of Shinigami will go to the Real World after him, and so... conversely..."

"Only we're going," Kamitani murmured. "I see. But it's still dangerous, isn't it?"

"Very, I imagine, if we stumble onto him," Yunosuke said matter of factly. "But Rukongai was dangerous, too. Listen, Jun — I know how you feel, because I feel it too, but the truth is that we don't know where in the Real World to begin looking. If we go, and we hunt around, and we find him, well, at worst the two of us might get killed, and that's not awesome for us. But, in terms of the Gotei, it's less damaging. We're soldiers and this is a war. We accept the possibility of giving up our lives for our uniform every time we put it on. Soujadoso probably felt that way, too. I don't really want to die, but if my doing so helped in some way, well, so be it."

He shrugged.

"For an Urahara, dying in the service of Nagesu-sama, under the

Third Division banner... there's no fate more honourable," he added. "You remember Shougo-dono, don't you? Oh, wait, you weren't with the squad then,"

He paused, looking thoughtful.

"Do you remember? I wonder if you do."

"I remember," Kamitani's pale eyes clouded, and he nodded. "I was still at the Academy, so not in a squad sense, but yes, I remember. I remember his dying, and I know what you're saying. If we don't find Keitarou, sending two of us on a wild goose chase doesn't break down resources in Seireitei. Nagesu-sama is coming too, so we should be safe enough, and if we're unlucky, then, well, this is our job. I'm apprehensive about going, Yunosuke-nii, but I won't run away from it. You're right — this is our duty and I'll do what I can to help."

"Good lad," Yunosuke offered him a grin. "Right. Then let's go."

He drove his sword into the gate release, feeling the soft hiss of spiritual energy as his *zanpakuto* released composedly into its shikai shape and activated the perimeter, disabling the security safeguards and causing the atmosphere to fragment and split apart, revealing a line of ebony that expanded gradually from the top of the frame to the foot. Kamitani pressed his hands together reluctantly, forging a small, if stable butterfly which fluttered and flapped slightly into the wind before making a bee-line for the black void. He cast a glance at his superior, who nodded, taking a step into the darkness, sealing his weapon once more and returning it to its normal position at his side.

"It's ironic that it's Keitarou we have to thank for being able to go hunting him like this," he observed, an amused look on his clever features. "When I graduated, *Senkaimon* were still a bit shady, and coming to the Real World a life and death scramble. Nobody ever attempted it without a Captain in attendance, and even then it was a bit hit or miss whether you made it safely. That's one of the reason Shougo-dono spent so much time in the Real World — he was about the only Urahara other than Nagesu-sama who had a chance of opening the gate without killing his whole platoon."

"I thought Shougo-dono died in the Rukon?" Jun frowned, but Yunosuke was glad to see some of his companion's apprehension fade with the introduction of a new subject. "Is that not the case?"

"No, you're right, he did," Yunosuke agreed pensively. "First and Third generally took care of mopping up the Rukon and the Real World, basically because the Urahara invented *Senkaimon* and the Yamamoto had Genryuusai-sama to open gates safely when things

were really at their most hairy. I think it was about a year or two after I graduated, when Nagesu-sama made all the improvements based on Keitarou's notes. Before that, Shougo-dono was the only other Captain who led frequent patrols to the Real World. Then when the Gates became safer, and as the squads grew and developed, Shougo-dono and Atsushi-dono of the Eleventh became effective caretakers of the Real World and the Rukon. Shougo-dono died in the Rukon... but he spent as much time cleansing the Real World of Hollows and transient souls as he did sweeping Soul Society. He wasn't afraid of the Gates... he'd laugh and say there were worse things out there that were more likely to eat him than the Dangai."

"Maybe he was right," Kamitani pressed his lips together thoughtfully. "I wish I'd known him better. I haven't heard a lot of things about his work — I didn't know he did so much."

"Nagesu-sama relied on him a lot," Yunosuke agreed. "Well, now he has Mareiko-dono, who everyone knows is just as clever, so the Urahara moved on... but he was a loss to us. He was smart... and he wasn't scared to try new things or go to new places."

He added a wry smile.

"Plus, he managed to work successfully with Atsushi-dono," he added dryly. "I've heard that's quite a job, though it's only a rumour, so don't go around repeating it."

"No... I've heard the same," despite himself, Kamitani laughed. "But the Eleventh and Twelfth don't go to Rukongai any more, do they?"

"No. Not at all," Yunosuke shook his head, his expression becoming grave. "After Shougo-dono's death, the Twelfth pulled out. Their clearance to go was never revoked, just Mareiko-dono really didn't want to. Atsushi-dono flat out refused to consider returning there, and I think Fukutaichou took me and a couple of others there on speculative missions after that happened, to make sure the danger was eradicated... but all in all, it stopped. Fourth wanted to extend their healing projects over there, and the Spiritless Zone concept was created. A lot of things has happened in a short space of time... but I think it's no bad thing that all those changes came out of Shougo-dono's death. That's what I mean about dying for the uniform — if your death carries the rest forward, it's not in vain."

"And it's why we have to stop Keitarou from interfering, so the Spiritless Zone can get back on track," resolution glittered in Kamitani's pale eyes. "All right, I'm ready. I'm fine now, Yunosuke-nii."

Thank you for putting it into perspective for me — I know what we need to do.”

“Good, because we’re there,” As the darkness began to part to reveal daylight and the chirping of birds, Yunosuke clapped him on the shoulder reassuringly. “Let’s go do what our Captain sent us to do, all right?”

“Yes, sir,” Kamitani saluted sharply, hurrying forward after the Hell Butterfly as it broke into the hazy summer atmosphere of the Real World, and Yunosuke grinned, following along behind him at a more leisurely pace.

As he stepped out of the opening, he saw that they were not alone, for beneath a tree stood a young girl, no more than her late teens. She was slightly built, with dreamy bronze eyes and wavy, tousled auburn hair, her attention apparently captured by the beauty of nature that surrounded her. Despite her countenance, there was something slightly surreal about the girl’s presence, and as he stepped out of the gateway, Yunosuke saw her turn, her eyes widening as she took in both the Gate and their *shihakushou*.

She can see us. Is she a Plus Soul, then? Or one of those humans who can allegedly see shinigami?

Yunosuke’s brows knitted together in consternation.
She’s young... but she has reiatsu. I can sense it. She doesn’t seem like the suspect in Souja-dono’s murder case, but even so...

“Are you all right? You look lost.” Kamitani was speaking to her now, walking forward with his hand on the hilt of his *zanpakutou*, and Yunosuke realised with a jolt that his companion had also sensed her spiritual presence, making the assumption she was a Plus soul who had not yet experienced Soul Burial.

As Kamitani approached her, however, something in the girl’s aura changed, sending chills rippling down Yunosuke’s spine and making the whole of his surroundings appear to fluctuate into a world of black and white before jerking rudely back into vivid technicolour. The girl’s eyes had changed, he realised in alarm, and then it dawned on him what it was that was so surreal about this unknown individual.

She looked like a Plus Soul, and she could see them, but there was no chain at her chest. She had not died in this world, which meant...

“Jun, get back! Get away from her, she’s not what you think!” Yunosuke’s words ripped out across the clearing, but even as they left his lips the pulse of darkening *reiryoku* around the girl’s body

intensified, and with a sweep of her arm that came too quickly and viciously for either shinigami to do anything about, she raked her fingers ruthlessly through Kamitani's uniform to his body beneath, sending a spray of blood into the ether.

No, they were no longer fingers. Yunosuke's blood ran cold as he realised that shafts of bone had erupted through the girl's fingertips, elongating into sinister looking claws, which had ripped across his companion as if he were no more than a rag doll, his body cloaked in a sinister cloud of red. The force of the blow sent Kamitani flying backwards, a mixture of surprise and fright glittering in his pale gaze, and Yunosuke darted forward, sword already half drawn from its sheath as he moved his own body to defend his wounded comrade. The world slipped into wobbly black and white again, yet the pooling droplets of Kamitani's blood on the ground seemed to remain a vivid, blazing crimson, and despite himself Yunosuke felt nauseous, his mind racing as he contemplated the severity of injury his companion must have suffered. Kamitani was not moving, having struck his head on impact with the ground, but Yunosuke knew that if he let himself be distracted by his companion's plight, it would be doom for both of them.

I can't focus on it now. If I let my guard down, we're both dead. If he's still alive, his only chance is me. I have to deal with this... this...

His eyes widened in consternation as he realised the girl's face was slowly being obscured by the white of what was unmistakably a Hollow mask, the chalk-like substance spreading down into fangs that concealed the top half of her jaw from view. Across her brow and over her ears the mask flattened into horns that jutted upwards in spikes as sharp as those which had penetrated Kamitani's body, and Yunosuke swallowed hard, his grip on his weapon tightening so hard that he did not even notice he was drawing blood.

What the hell is that?

And then the creature spoke.

"Urahara,"

The word was faintly muffled by the overhang of the mask, and there was a sinister, echoey quality to it that rattled around Yunosuke's shattered senses. "Well? What are you waiting for? I'm done with him. It's your turn now."

"Who or what the hell are you?" Somehow Yunosuke stood his ground, the anger and indignation that had flown through him at the sight of Kamitani's body being tossed through the air fragmenting and distorting as the noxious reiatsu began to penetrate more deeply into

his senses. It was as though he was suddenly drowning in a mire of choking, seeping energy, washing away his composure and his conviction and sweeping him over the edge of an emotional waterfall before sending him plunging like a stone to the depths below. Try as he might he could not put together the words in his mind to release his sword, and though he could hear his *zanpakutou* calling out to him, the words were garbled and sounded more like the cries of a frightened child than the reasoned advice of the weapon he had worked so closely with for more than thirty years.

“Nemesis.”

The girl laughed, every syllable clawing through Yunosuke’s nerves. He was trembling, he realised in dismay, but although he tried to calm himself, his body was not listening. The pulsing waves of reiatsu that had been trifling and inoffensive a few moments before were now growing thicker and more cloying with every passing moment, and as he gazed at the half-hollow, half-human creature that stood before him, he could read the madness that now glittered in those once dreamy eyes. Whatever she had been when they arrived, she was not it now. Had she been waiting for them? Was this another of Keitarou’s traps?

“Nemesis?” Somehow Yunosuke managed to force out words, though he knew he was already breathing heavily, struggling to absorb enough air in the *reishi*-deprived atmosphere of the Real World. “What do you mean, nemesis? I don’t know who you are, or why you attacked Jun. Hell, I don’t even know *what* you are... so how can you be nemesis, when we haven’t even met?”

“You’re an Urahara,” The girl scowled, flexing her claws as she took a step or two towards him. Her feet made no sound against the grass, but to Yunosuke’s frightened wits it was as though the vibration of each step pounded through his entire frame. “I don’t care which. I don’t need to know that. I’ll kill all of you, and then I’ll find the one I want.”

“Which is who?” Yunosuke demanded. The girl snorted.

“I don’t need to tell corpses secrets,” she said dismissively, raising her right hand and, to Yunosuke’s alarm he saw a glitter of red begin to form against the palm, raw and unfinished yet clearly some kind of reiatsu attack. It was not Kidou, however, but, like the mask, the dark edge to its aura made it seem more like a Hollow’s cero, and Yunosuke racked his brains for any study he might ever have done which explained this encounter, coming up blank.

“I only need to kill you,” the girl added. “Stand still and I’ll do it quickly. I don’t have much time to waste with you.”

“Jishin o yobe, Sekizanha!”

The words sliced through the darkness of the atmosphere, bringing blessed relief to Yunosuke’s ears, as the earth beneath his feet wobbled and split apart, creating a deep cavernous divide in the ground between him and his would-be assailant. The girl leapt back from the widening crevasse, hissing like a feral cat at the interruption. She swung around, Yunosuke momentarily forgotten as she unleashed her Cero-like attack in the direction of the newcomer, but unlike Yunosuke, Nagesu was neither intimidated nor overwhelmed by the flare of malevolent reiatsu, and he glanced the raw blast off his blade, sending it searing harmlessly into the trunk of an unsuspecting tree. It blazed right through the wood, splitting the unfortunate tree in half, but Nagesu did not even flinch at the sound of the upper boughs crashing down, nor at the raucous complaints of the now homeless birds who had been nesting there. As Yunosuke managed to turn his head to look, he saw his Captain’s gaze was fixed on the half-girl, half Hollow, and the cold impassiveness that glittered behind his glasses made the Third Seat realise that for once his serene, measured Captain was actually angry.

“Yunosuke, take Kamitani and move back,” Nagesu did not turn to look at him for one moment, his words spoken in soft, even tones that somehow terrified Yunosuke more than the girl’s reiatsu had moments before. “This is clearly a matter I should deal with, and I will, so I want you to sheath your sword and fall back.”

“But Taichou...” Yunosuke began to protest, but Nagesu raised his weapon, sunlight glittering eerily off its released blade.

“That was an order,” he said, his tones carrying an edge Yunosuke had never heard before. “Take Kamitani and see what you can do to help him. Unless you want to be disciplined for insubordination, I’ll hear no more questions. You studied long enough with that Unohana boy — prove to me that friendship has some material use and do as you’re told! I’ve no need for you to remain in combat position. I am putting his life in your hands.”

Yunosuke stared at Nagesu for a moment, eyes huge and jaw dropping at the harshness of the command, but he did not press the issue any further. In silence he sheathed his weapon once more, hurrying down beside Kamitani’s still body. A cursitory glance told him the man was alive, but deeply unconscious, and he slipped an arm beneath Kamitani’s shoulders, shunpoing the pair of them a safe

distance from the chasm that now split the peaceful valley in two. He laid Kamitani down on the grass, then turned to glance once more at the confrontation below. Here they were out of the immediate range of that toxic reiatsu, pulsing forward in waves of black despair and rage, yet though the thought of it still made him shudder, Nagesu did not seem overly troubled by its presence.

Taichou is always so calm and composed and conservative, but I've heard from other people that when one of his men is down, he takes particular exception to it. I don't know if he blames me for Jun's injury, or if he's just tired and frustrated with everything we've had to do lately, but like this, he's not someone I want to argue with, let alone confront.

He turned his gaze back to Kamitani's injuries, pulling away the ripped *obi* and tugging back the black cloth to examine the extent of the wound. Though the gashes were ugly, they were not as deep as he had first feared, and whilst blood still gushed from the wound, it was simple work for him to fashion a tourniquet from what was left of his junior's sash. For a few moments he focused all of his attention on stemming Kamitani's bleeding, binding the wound as neatly as he could with the sleeve of his own *shihakushou*.

Taichou might have been harsh, but he's also right. Studying so closely with Madeki at the Academy means I learned things about healing that most militant shinigami don't get to know. We all do basic first aid, but having a friend so high up in the Unohana was an advantage I used to help secure my place in Third in the first instance. If I can't use that to save Jun now, it will have been pointless. I should have sheathed my sword and dealt with this the moment Taichou appeared — hopefully he'll forgive my insubordination, when we get back to Soul Society.

Checking once again to ensure the blood had stopped flowing, he put red-smudged fingers carefully to Jun's throat, nodding in relief and approval at the steady beating of his companion's pulse. The bloodloss had made a mess of them both, but had not been severe enough to affect Kamitani's blood-pressure, and already colour was returning to the man's pale cheeks. He smiled faintly, patting the younger boy's arm in a gesture of reassurance that he knew was more for his own benefit than his unconscious subordinate.

"Nothing more I can do for you, now," he murmured, fingering the ripped ends of his sleeve absently. "Better you stay out for the count, Jun-kun. That's gotta hurt like hell, and from all the reiatsu swirling down there, I don't suppose either one of us would stand our ground. That girl is out for blood... and Taichou... this time, Taichou means

business.”

Well, so far, so good.

Juushirou glanced over the provisions list, scrawling three or four notes alongside particular entries before finalising it with his particular Captain’s seal and placing the document on the top of the others ready for them to be delivered to the relevant suppliers. He let out a sigh, resting his chin in his free left hand as he contemplated everything that had happened over the course of the last twenty four hours. Shunsui’s comments and the foreboding in his warning still bothered him, for he knew how perceptive his friend was, and yet no matter how he considered it, he knew that he had already made up his mind where Koku was concerned. Winning his trust was the priority — that, and protecting the *hime* of the Kitsune Clan whose life had been entrusted to him by Joumei’s sober-faced, wary associate Hiko.

So young, and so fragile to look at. Such a child, really...

Juushirou watched the black ink drip slowly from the end of his brush back against the inkstone.

Though I suppose she’s not a child, is she? Joumei said the Kitsune’s lives are shorter, and there’s nothing wrong with her intellect, either. I understand that Joumei wanted her out of danger — I’m sure she’s far from helpless, but I wouldn’t be confident of her chances if Keitarou was to launch an attack. Her life really is in our hands... and I’ve given my word, so I can’t let anyone down. More, I can’t let the rest of the Division know I’m watching her especially. I want them to consider her just one of the team... but with her muteness and her lack of sword skills, is anyone going to believe she attended Sensei’s Academy?

It had been Naoko’s idea to assign Ketsui as Izumi’s mentor. As she had prepared for the trip to the Rukon, she had mentioned acerbically that, at Tenth seat, it was about time he showed himself responsible for junior officers. More specifically, though, she had pointed out to her doubtful Captain that of all of Thirteenth, Ketsui was the one who might most understand Izumi’s position.

“I’ve trained the lad, and he hesitates to begin with, but when he’s made up his mind, that’s it,” she had said, as she had slid Dokusou Houshi’s sheath through the crisp fabric of her *obi*. “Besides, he needs a distraction. Thirteenth is far too busy for him to spend spare time worrying about his brother or what’s happening in Seventh. This is a way he can be useful to us and prove the skills he’s learned are worthy of his rank. I think he’s the best choice for the job, Taichou. I’ll see to her uniform, and all of that, when I get back — but in terms of mentorship, I think it needs to be Ketsui.”

“Taichou?”

The sound of Kira’s voice at the door startled him from his reverie, and he turned, seeing the skinny, fair haired officer standing apprehensively in the doorway of Ugendou. Juushirou had left it open, wanting to waft a breeze through the stuffy chamber. From Kira’s expression it was clear the Seventh Seat had been debating how to politely interrupt his Captain without anything to knock on, and despite himself, Juushirou smiled.

“What is it, Kira? Something I need to know about?”

“I’m sorry to disturb you, sir, but Sekime-taichou is at the gate.” Kira bowed his head, relief flooding his blue gaze. “She wants to know if you’re free to discuss something with her — is it all right for me to show her in?”

“Sekime-taichou?” Juushirou frowned, then nodded. “Of course — does that mean there’s news from the Real World already?”

“I don’t know, sir. She didn’t say,” Kira admitted. “She just said it was something of importance and she hoped to consult with you.”

“Then please, assure her she’s quite welcome,” Juushirou instructed warmly.

“Yes, sir,” Kira turned to go, then hesitated, turning to glance at his superior officer.

“Taichou, I’ve finished the written report on the Rukon Investigation. Fukutaichou asked me to put it on his desk when I’d done, but his office is locked and he’s not there. What should I do with it?”

“If Naoko is about, ask her for the key. She has a copy,” Juushirou grinned. “Enishi won’t mind... I suspect he’ll be back soon enough, but if you’ve other things pressing, speak to her. You can tell her its on my instruction. All right?”

“Yes, sir,” Kira looked relieved, bowing fervently before hurrying away across the wooden walkway to obey the commands.

Juushirou sat back on his heels, setting his brush aside.
I wonder what this visit is in aid of? I suppose I shall find out soon enough, but if Nagesu-sama’s team are still investigating the Real World, I don’t see how anything can have changed since Naoko and the others came back. I can’t imagine she’d come in person unless it was important... I hope it’s not a negative kind of important.

“Ukitake-taichou?” At that moment the fair-haired Captain of the

Twelfth Division appeared in the doorway, offering him a sheepish smile as she took in the confusion in his expression.

“I’m sorry, I’m descending on you unawares, and I should’ve probably sent word that I wanted to speak to you,” she apologised. “Your subordinate told me it was all right for me to come now — I’m not interrupting anything important?”

“No, only authorising Enishi’s routine supply order sheets as I do every month, whilst considering the information my officers brought back from the Rukon,” Juushirou shook his head, indicating for his colleague to come into the office. She did so, closing the door carefully behind her before stepping neatly over the *tatamimat* floor to take a seat. “You’re always welcome, Sekime-taichou, advance memo or otherwise — but I don’t suppose this is a social visit.”

“Unfortunately, Captains don’t seem to have time for such things, these days,” Mareiko groaned, shaking her head. “No, it’s on another matter — and it connects to the Rukon trip. Did your officers say anything of interest? Your Third Seat was, I believe, of great help to Nagesu-sama in processing data relating to the *Senkaimon* they found at the scene.”

“Naoko’s told me about that,” Juushirou agreed, “and the official report is, I believe, about to be submitted to my adjutant for review and overall consideration.”

“Fast work,” Mareiko looked impressed. “In that case, I hope you won’t mind that I’ve come with more work along the same lines.”

“What kind of work?” Juushirou looked curious, and Mareiko smiled.

“Nagesu-sama passed the data back to me before he left for the Real World,” She said, fumbling around in her *obi*, then pausing for a moment with a look of consternation on her face. “The data you gave to him, at the Captain’s meeting, I mean. I was sure I brought it with me... maybe I left it on the desk in my office? Perhaps I should’ve sent Aoi to check, but I was sure that... ah, no, here it is. I have it.”

She pulled out the battered sheet of paper, offering Juushirou a rueful smile.

“I know you can’t confirm the source that gave you this,” she said matter-of-factly, setting the sheet down on Ugendou’s small table between them, “and I won’t ask questions about it if it’s really not possible for you to answer them. What I’m interested in is the sample material that was used to generate this data. Nagesu-sama asked me to

do some investigating under my own steam, and I confess I've gone a little beyond his original request because some small details were bothering me. I went to Seventh but Kitabata-kun told me that Tenichi's damaged uniform from the night of the kidnap was incinerated because it was beyond repair. Since these notes clearly indicate that samples were cut for tests to be run, I wanted to know if there were any further pieces remaining."

"Ah. That I don't know," Juushirou said regretfully. "I realise it's unhelpful of me, but all the information that I have is in that document. I didn't write it and I only understand enough of the theory to realise it relates to Tenichi and the likelihood that he was held in Rukongai. How the samples were tested or even where any extra material might be kept is beyond my knowledge."

"I see," Mareiko sighed, running an absent finger through her wild fair hair and sending the black clip that had been forced into it pinging loose as though unleashed from a catapult. It struck the doorpost with a clatter before dropping to the floor, and the Twelfth Division Captain jumped, swinging around as if trying to locate the source of the noise.

"Did you hear something?"

"I believe you dropped your hair-clasp," Juushirou reached out a hand to retrieve the clip, glancing at it before holding it out. Mareiko took it in apparent surprise, glancing at it, then shrugging her shoulders.

"Thank you. I wonder how that got there," she murmured, more than half to herself, and Juushirou frowned, turning his gaze back to the sheet of paper.

"The truth is that I wish I could give you more data," he admitted. "I really wish I could answer all your questions and ensure that Keitarou is found more quickly — but I don't and I can't."

"Hrm," Mareiko turned her gaze back to the notes, reaching into her sleeve for a rolled up wad of parchment which she dumped down on the table with a thud.

"These are preliminary analyses that Nagesu-sama did when plotting the course for entering Rukongai," she said pensively. "He left them with me when they went into the Rukon, and since he came back, I've been trying to patch together his notes and the samples he took — but I feel as though there's a great yawning hole between the two and I'm struggling to fill it. Before he went to the Real World, we went over this data with a fine tooth comb and added about twenty

pages of research to the back of it..information which we need to break down and analyse as quickly as possible. Using all available sources.”

She pursed her lips.

“Your data suggested that someone went to the Rukon and took samples, but I can’t see how that could have been done. Still, to be so accurate with the mineral deposits...”

“Have you ever been to the wasteland Rukon?” Juushirou asked curiously, and Mareiko frowned.

“Why do you ask?”

“You just seemed overly against the idea, when Nagesu-sama mentioned it at the meeting,” Juushirou explained. “You reacted as though the very thought of it frightened you — as though being dispatched there was a fate worse than death.”

“I see,” Mareiko was silent for a moment, then she nodded her head.

“Twenty-five years ago,” she said softly, and Juushirou was surprised to see the sudden clouding that filled the Twelfth Division Captain’s usually scatty gaze. “It was a time before the Gotei gathered in official barracks like we do now, so I’m not surprised you didn’t hear of it. You must still have been deployed in Seventh District at the time — or no, perhaps it was even before your inauguration took place — but it was not long before I was forced into accepting my *haori*.”

“Forced?” Juushirou blinked, and Mareiko shrugged her shoulders.

“I felt that way, at the time, so soon after,” she agreed pensively. “Tell me, did you ever meet my predecessor?”

“I don’t know,” Juushirou mused, “If I did, I don’t believe we ever exchanged words. It wasn’t until Thirteenth’s base here was permanently established that I really got acquainted with those Captains and Vice Captains I hadn’t yet crossed paths with. By that point, you must have been Captain of the Twelfth Division.”

“Then perhaps it was before you were appointed,” Mareiko reflected.

“Perhaps so,” Juushirou agreed. “I remember very well how warmly you welcomed us as your new neighbours and how kind you were in sharing officers to help put together those final bits and pieces because we were still quite small in number. I’m not sure I ever did

really know any other Captain of Twelfth Division than you.”

“Well, the Gotei is supposed to operate as a team,” Mareiko’s eyes twinkled, but there was a sadness in them that Juushirou was not used to seeing. “Truth to be told, I welcomed the change and the distraction. Eleventh are such... combative neighbours, noisy and often abrasive. It was so much more pleasant to learn that the Thirteenth Division appreciated other things than fighting... and I had heard much about you from Nagesu-sama. I knew he had ratified your *zanpakutou*...”

She grinned, looking abashed.

“I suppose the scientist in me was curious to see another double-bladed weapon in close proximity,” she admitted sheepishly. “Kyouraku-taichou doesn’t seem to like the idea of a scientist poking and prodding around at his too often, so I’d only heard rumours, but never been priveleged to encounter the phenomenon first hand. You were kind enough to show and share Sougyo no Kotowari with me, and so sending over officers to help was the least I could do. Twelfth had had its fair share of upheaval, and it was a sign things were maybe beginning to settle down.”

She frowned, folding her hands absently in her lap.

“But I avoided the crux of your question, and that wasn’t polite,” she murmured, and Juushirou had the impression that she was scolding herself for her ill manners. “You asked if I had been to the Rukon, and though it’s a memory I don’t like very much, in the current circumstances, I feel I should try and answer fully.”

She pursed her lips, and Juushirou sat back, waiting for her to continue.

“Whilst the Gotei didn’t have assigned territory, divisions like ours were surplus to requirement within Clan lands,” Mareiko reflected softly. “The inauguration of Eighth Squad meant that Eighth District had its own shinigami once more, and your own people were taking care of the Seventh — both District and squad. Ninth, Tenth, Eleventh and Twelfth were considered... additional forces. Supplementary, if you like. Whilst the Ninth and Tenth spent most of their time in and around Seireitei, mopping up extra work wherever they were needed, Eleventh Division and Twelfth Division came to take on other duties — sometimes to the Real World, and sometimes to the Rukon. For the most part, we were involved in cleansing both areas of corrupted spirit matter, and we would take it in turns to be dispatched wherever we were needed. Sometimes we would work in tandem... and I’m sure

you can imagine, working in partnership with Atsushi-dono's Eleventh was never the easiest of tasks. But then, it wasn't me who had to liaise with him, but my Captain... and he had a way with difficult people, far more so than I."

She pressed her lips together.

"I was Vice Captain of Twelfth Division the last time Eleventh and Twelfth were dispatched in force to Rukongai, and it was... not a pleasant mission," she recounted sadly. "We were attacked by mutated residents and my Captain was killed, along with three or four other seated members of my squad. I took an injury..."

She faltered, putting a hand to her right shoulder, and Juushirou frowned, inwardly berating himself for raising the subject.

"I'm sorry," he murmured. "I didn't mean to pry... I didn't know."

"Seireitei decided it would be better if people didn't talk about it too much." Mareiko lowered her hand, offering him a sad smile. "I think that was largely thanks to pressure from Atsushi-dono, since he felt the whole business cast a bad light on the Eleventh Division. Atsushi-dono lost his adjutant Sakanoue-kun in the same incident, you see, and the rumours were that the Vice Captain had died defending the Captain."

"I see," Juushirou's eyes became slits. "I remember when we were about to graduate, Minaichi-dono was looking for a new adjutant and Enishi was one of his candidates. Enishi turned him down and came with me instead, and there's been bad feeling between us ever since. I wonder if Minaichi-taichou thinks Enishi refused him on account of this business — but I'm sure I never heard any of this before today, and so I doubt Enishi did either."

"Atsushi-dono is a proud man," Mareiko agreed, "and would have hated to think such stories would spread. Well, you saw how he reacted at the meeting just when the Rukon was mentioned... though he doesn't like the subject raised, I think it's still very fresh in his mind, even now. Sakanoue-kun was one of his own hand-picked and trained officers from before the time Eleventh was even set up — they had a close working bond."

"That's true," Juushirou acknowledged. "Minaichi-dono did seem unnaturally agitated when the subject came up."

"Whatever the truth of it is, I suppose only he knows," Mareiko shrugged her shoulders. "Wherever he and his force were fighting, it was far enough away that I wasn't a witness to any of it — and even if

I had been, it wouldn't have mattered. We had enough on our hands. I was cut down and I lost consciousness. When I came to... Atsushi-dono and his remaining men were with ours, and the Taichou was..."

Her lip trembled slightly and she paused to regain her composure.

"The deaths were officially recorded as having happened in active service, but more than that was hushed up," she said at length. "My Captain was a principled man, and because of him, I believe some of us were able to escape. Truthfully, I understand the feelings that drove Atsushi-dono's adjutant to battle how he did, if indeed the rumours are true. I would have happily done the same for my Captain — we all would have. The mutated residents were stupidly powerful, though, and more than half Hollow when they attacked us. They weren't... normal hollow souls. They were something... else."

"Something else," Juushirou echoed. "Something Keitarou might have created, maybe?"

"I never had the opportunity to personally analyse the remains of any of these creatures," Mareiko said regretfully. "I don't know if they formed naturally or someone mutated them on purpose. My Captain was convinced that they were someone's handiwork, but all the effort we put into trying to link their appearances with Keitarou's known locations following the assaults on the Kuchiki... came up with no matches. We had to give up, so really all I know is that they were there and primed to attack. One of them ripped a claw through the ligaments in my right shoulder. I can wield my sword adequately, if I need to, in my right hand, but it lacks the strength it once had and I'm not like you, I can't swing a sword with my left. That's why Twelfth Division focuses its attentions more on the pursuit of Kidou, Ukitake-dono... because in that respect at least my strength remains undiminished."

"I see," Juushirou rested his chin in his hands. "Then that's why you wanted to avoid the Rukon, and why Nagesu-sama allowed it."

"Yes," Mareiko agreed. "He knows that I'm probably no match these days for an individual that killed a Vice Captain. I am a Captain because I am an Urahara, and because I have scientific knowledge and good Kidou skill — but I am no longer a combat fighter, and he would prefer not to have to bury another member of his kin on account of actions in Rukongai. If Keitarou is the enemy, Ukitake-dono, I am completely helpless. I am not a match for him — unlike yourself, I am only a Captain because there was a need for someone to fill the post, and I was the only candidate available from the correct Clan. It seemed a bad way of doing things to me — so I work as hard as I can

to deserve a status that deep down I know I shall never properly earn.”

“I’m sure that’s not the case,” Juushirou looked startled. “Your research into Kidou has been pivotal and continues to be groundbreaking, and everyone likes and respects your work a good deal. Holding a sword isn’t all of being a Captain of the Gotei, Sekime-taichou — and I’m sorry I raised a subject that makes you feel that way. You came here on scientific grounds — I didn’t mean to be insensitive about the past.”

“The past is what it is, what it always was,” Mareiko said philosophically. “I took the *haori* in my Captain’s memory, to finish the things he began. Whether I’ll succeed or not remains to be seen, but it’s the only way I can keep him alive within me and within Twelfth — so I do. And to that end, I need to try and get to the bottom of this mystery. The area of Rukon that Nagesu-sama and Kyourakudono investigated appeared to have been inhabited but whoever was resident there left the area not long before we arrived. We have to consider the disturbing possibility that Keitarou and his allies fled to the Real World. If so, tracking them down there will be next to impossible. I hoped that, if samples of Kotetsu Tenichi’s clothing remained in storage somewhere, I could run additional tests on it for foreign reiatsu.”

“I thought those tests were run and came up blank?” Juushirou questioned, and Mareiko looked troubled.

“What we had came up negative,” she agreed, “but now we know we didn’t have a complete sample. If someone was scientifically astute enough to take these kinds of readings, I expect they were also astute enough to take samples which were saturated in interesting spiritual data. It’s quite possible that the evidence we need to prove or disprove Keitarou’s involvement — or the involvement of anyone else — remains with the samples that are currently out of our hands.”

She eyed Juushirou expectantly, and the Thirteenth Division Captain sighed.

“I don’t know anything about it,” he said slowly, “but if I can find out the answer, I will try. I can’t reveal my source, Sekime-taichou, not even to a trusted colleague. I haven’t even told Shunsui the name of the contributor, and I haven’t discussed it with anyone more than was mentioned at the meeting. But I understand what you are saying and I will do my best. That’s all I can say — the material isn’t here within Thirteenth, or I would pass it over to you right away.”

“I thought that might be the case, in which case, I’ll leave it in your hands,” Mareiko’s pale features took on a look of relief and gratitude. “In fact, that’s why I brought that data with me. The Rukon data is probably not so vital now, but the Real World findings are important, and we’re potentially running against the clock to crack them. Even if you can’t reveal your source, Nagesu-sama hoped... maybe you could find a way to ask...”

She faltered, but Juushirou had read the intent in her question, and he nodded.

“I’ll do my best,” he repeated.

“Then my visit has been worthwhile,” Mareiko looked reassured. “This whole business is messy and unpleasant and I’d like it to settle down again.”

“We all feel that way,” Juushirou said fervently.

As Mareiko got to her feet to leave something small and green scuttled out from the hem of her *hakama*, and she let out a muttered exclamation, bending to pick it up and slide it back beneath her *obi*.

“I’m sorry, I seem to have brought a lab experiment with me by mistake,” she said apologetically, offering the bemused Juushirou a sheepish smile. “We were doing some tests on the transference of *reiryokucells* into basic organisms, and it seems that I wasn’t as careful as I thought when I returned them all to their confinement units.”

“I’m sure there was no harm done,” Juushirou managed, and Mareiko laughed, shrugging her shoulders.

“No, because I caught it, but sometimes they can chew rather large holes in bamboo,” she reflected. “We’ve had to line their cages with harder material, else they gnaw their way out. You should see the chaos when they get into the dormitories — they’re so much harder to catch once they’ve found a hiding place in the blankets of a slovenly recruit. Oh well, I suppose that’s why we operate such firm discipline about tidiness and organisation, isn’t it?”

“I imagine it might be?” Juushirou blinked, his gaze flitting automatically to Mareiko’s *obias* if expecting an army of green minibeasts to invade and consume his precious Ugendou. As soon as she had left, he decided to himself grimly, he would get Enishi into the office and together they would do a firm and thorough sweep for anything vaguely resembling an insect.

Mareiko reached the door, turning to look at him pensively.

“I have one other question I wanted to ask,” she said slowly, and Juushirou jerked his thoughts away from the scuttling critter, forcing him to meet her gaze.

“Yes? What about?”

“Your waif and stray. The boy... Koku?” Mareiko leaned up against the doorpost. “I wondered if you’d managed to speak to him?”

“Mm, somewhat, but not particularly productively,” Juushirou shook his head with a sigh. “He didn’t see Souja-dono’s attacker, and I tend to believe his story. He has no weapon, and wouldn’t have been able to fight off someone capable and determined to end the life of a Vice Captain level shinigami. I’m afraid that Koku might be a dead end... we’ll see him healed, but more than that... I think we’ll probably end up just letting him go.”

“Back to the Rukon?” Mareiko’s eyes were suddenly sharp and focused on Juushirou’s face, and the Thirteenth Division Captain started, staring at her disconcertedly.

“Sekime-taichou?”

“Koku came from Rukongai with Souja-dono,” Mareiko said simply. “There’s no need to look so startled, Ukitake-dono — it’s common sense. Apply scientific logic and there’s only one conclusion. Souja-dono was too badly hurt to get back here alone, so he had help. Koku was with him, so Koku was the help.”

“Do you think I should report it to the Council?” Juushirou asked quietly. “Shunsui warned me other people would think of it too, and I knew he was right, but... I feel bad that the kid was struck how he was when he was only trying to help bring Souja home. He didn’t come here on purpose. The death penalty for crossing the divide is strict and inflexible. I wanted to protect him from that, because he only tried to help one of our colleagues. I want to win his trust — so I told him I’d keep it back, and I don’t want to betray that promise when the stakes are so high. I don’t know how much he does or doesn’t know about anything — but making him feel we’re hounding him or wanting to hurt him won’t induce him to confide in us about anything.”

“I don’t really want to see anyone get executed, either,” Mareiko reflected. “Nor do I want to see a young boy harassed to reveal information about anything — interrogation under stress often produces false results. My interest in him isn’t for that purpose, don’t worry. I’m sure there are others who know, but if there are, they’ve had other priorities, and I don’t see the need to burden the Council

with unimportant technicalities. No, I was wondering what had happened to his clothing when he first came here. I was hoping that I might examine them to see what traces of spiritual energy I might find there. If we theorise that Kotetsu Tenichi was held in the same location that Souja-dono was attacked, then it also makes sense that Koku was in that vicinity, too. It's possible that some of the spiritual data I'm lacking from Tenichi's case might be present on Koku's clothes instead."

"I see," Juushirou rubbed his chin with a sigh. "I'm afraid that I'm fairly certain his clothes were also destroyed. They were in bad shape and bloodstained — I'm sorry. I didn't realise they would have a deeper purpose."

"Oh well. It was just an idea," Mareiko pursed her lips. "I would say I'd like to see him myself, but that might frighten him... I've heard he's a little skittish of shinigami, and I wouldn't want to put him on his guard."

"He's wary. A little feral, perhaps," Juushirou agreed, "but understandably so given the provocation. I'm sorry, Sekime-taichou. I'll do what I can about the scientific data, but I think that's all I can manage."

"Then that will have to do," Mareiko smiled, her usual, happy-go-lucky smile, and Juushirou returned it hesitantly. "I'll leave you alone, then. My apologies for intruding and making so many demands — I'll just have to work with what we have until I hear from you."

The air was thick with hostile *reiryoku*, the scent of blood mingled with the fragrance of the many flowers that dotted the lower slopes of the fertile mountain peak.

Beneath his feet, Nagesu could feel the flowing lifebeat of the earth, hot and impatient to burst forth into an explosion of seismic energy, but he gritted his teeth, resisting the urge to allow his spirit power to answer the enticing call of the Real World's lava pulse. It was so much more difficult, he mused darkly, holding back Sekizanha's hungry spirit when the living soul of the Real World's core belched and spat from deep within the crevasse. His sword's release had carved through the soulless ground, splitting it in two with the sheer force of its reiatsu, and now there was a veritable river of molten rock separating him and the masked apparition that had materialised on the mountain slope.

It had been close to here, on a scientific foray into the Real World

with his late father Rikaya, that he had first heard Sekizanha's voice call out to him. His father had told him then that the mineral composition of the Real World was a mirror reflection of Nagesu's own *reiryoku* nature, with a thin and fractured crust concealing the furious magma fighting to bubble and spew over the landscape. Those elements lived within him too, Rikaya had told him gruffly, as they had surveyed the scenery together, watching the sun set over the mountains before returning to their training and hard work, Nagesu too would someday command the fiery elements that lurked beneath the surface of his calm, cautious composure. Sure enough, before he had reached his eighteenth birthday, he had achieved his first shikai release and, after long and gruelling training with Kyouki of the Shiba, had mastered the basics of his weapon's power to a level even the demanding Rikaya had been forced to acknowledge.

In sealed form, Sekizanha was, like Nagesu himself, unassuming and quiet, often mistaken for an *asauchior* a common training sword by recruits when lined up with the other weapons in the Third Division Captain's office. In release, however, there was no mistaking the golden lustre of the blade nor the gleaming obsidian guard which curved in tongues of volcanic rock towards a hilt it seemed determined to devour. Nagesu was known among his peers for his caution, his reason and his reserve, but Sekizanha was not a quiet weapon, and, with Keitarou's presence always at the back of his mind, he had worked tirelessly to master all aspects of his blade, at last nailing the elusive Bankai release that was the root of the earth blade's true power.

Rikaya's words echoed back to him now, one of the rare warm moments he and his father had shared, for Rikaya had been strict and demanding and Nagesu had never fully forgiven him for the decision that had killed his uncle and exiled his cousin Keitarou. Now, so many decades on, the ramifications of that decision were still heavy over the heads of the Urahara Clan and Nagesu knew that, for all his hard work and compromises had forged peaceable settlements with his neighbours, the matter of Keitarou was still unresolved.

Because of that, Endou Shouichi, Kuchiki Ribari and Endou Souja had died. And, standing here now, taking in the malformed figure, blooded, razor sharp claws protruding from delicate finger tips and glittering reptilian eyes that darted out from behind a swathe of sinister white chalk, he felt certain that this creature was the shadow of his cousin returning to haunt him once again.

Nagesu knew that Keitarou had turned souls to Hollows before. Although his cousin had left not a single trace of his scientific theory

relating to these trials, reams of witness reports from the Eighth District refugee camps of thirty years before, coupled with testimony from those among the shinigami squads had left the head of the Urahara in no doubt. Whether Keitarou was deliberately trying to create Hollows, or simply searching for a test subject strong enough to manipulate his chemical *reidoku* formula, Nagesu neither knew nor cared. At the moment he had exited the *Senkaimon* and seen his Sixth Seated officer flung halfway across the grass in an explosion of blood, he knew that he had had enough.

Whatever his reasons, whatever his past grievances, Keitarou would be stopped. There would be no mercy, no negotiation, not this time. As Rikaya had done before him, Nagesu knew that the last of his emotional ties to his cousin had been sliced away.

He glanced at Sekizanha's blade, twisting it slightly in the sunlight to examine the gilted surface. The cero-like attack had not done any particular damage, though it had left a thin line of soot against the normally polished surface, and Nagesu was sure his weapon's proud spirit would protest heatedly about this indignity once the battle was over. There was no time to worry about such details now, however, for although his appearance had initially surprised the girl, her hesitation had not lasted for long and with a shriek of rage that sounded more animal than human she launched herself towards him, speeding over the break in the ground as though it were no more than the tiniest crack. Landing nimbly on the tip of her left foot on Nagesu's side of the bank, she used it as a springboard to dive towards him, extending her clawed hands once more. There was nothing but madness and hate reflected in her gaze as she drove the needle-sharp protrusions towards Nagesu's eyes and throat.

"Tsuchi no Tate!"

Nagesu flicked Sekizanha's blade at the ground, sending a mound of earth up to block her attack, yet she made no attempt to stop, hitting the eathern wall with force and determination strong enough to send a spider's web of cracks right through its dense structure. A second flare of crimson light exploded through the crumbling earthwork shield, and Nagesu found he was forced to leap backwards to avoid being singed by the intensity of its flare. It was indeed like a cero, he realised with some consternation, forcing his scientist's rationale to take precedence over his sword's hunger to attack. Like a cero, but not quite the same as a cero — the edges ragged and malformed, yet powerful enough to kill a lower level shinigami on impact.

His mind flitted briefly to the incapacitated Kamitani, momentarily

thankful that it had been her claws, not a deadly flare of spiritual energy that had cast him to the ground. Now more sure than ever that this girl had something to do with his missing cousin, Nagesu readied himself for the next attack as she finally broke through the wall completely, those blood-specked claws coming at him once again. She let out a growl, her spiritual energy flaring around her body and momentarily foxing Nagesu's senses, for one instant she was coming at him from the front, the next she was behind him, and only a sixth battle sense drummed into him through years of Kyouki's unforgiving training regimes allowed him to duck out of her way. Her claws scraped against the fabric of his *haori*, staining the white with Kamitani's blood, but even as Nagesu swung Sekizanha in her direction she was once more gone, zipping in and out of a flash-step that looked like shunpo, but clearly was not. This was no shinigami, nor had it ever been. This was a monster, like the ones who had killed his kinsman in the Rukon twenty five years before, and at the recollection of this fact Nagesu's frown deepened.

There were always rumours that Keitarou was involved in that. I dismissed them due to lack of evidence, but perhaps I am about to be proven wrong.
"Why won't you just die?"

The girl re-materialised three or four feet away from him, and to Nagesu's surprise she was breathing hard, her gleaming eyes frustrated as she glowered at him through the eyes of the mask. She had used more energy than he had thought in breaking through his wall, he realised with a jolt, noting the chips and cracks at the edge of her mask, and, even more disturbingly, how her thick auburn hair was disintegrating at the ends, fragments blowing away from it like ash on the wind.

"You can't defeat me," he said frankly, not adjusting his hold on his weapon for a moment as he tried to gauge whether or not this was a trap. "I'm far beyond your level and I haven't really begun to release my sword, not yet. If you don't want me to carve you into pieces for your attack on my officer, you'd better tell me the things I want to know."

The girl's body tensed, indignation prickling through her entire form like a cornered cat determined to stand its ground. She hissed, claws flexing threateningly in his direction, but although the flow of *reiryoku* from her body was just as intense and noxious as it had been before, Nagesu's sharp senses now picked up on its instability. She was pushing herself beyond her means to fight with him, yet she showed no sign of giving up, and Nagesu knew she had been primed to fight till the end, even if it destroyed her.

He frowned, eyes narrowing behind his glasses as he put the pieces in place.

Kyouraku Shunsui's testimony about Ukitake Juushirou's fight style was much the same, when he was under the influence of Keitarou's sword. He fought as though he would destroy himself and keep fighting. True, Ukitake was never turned Hollow, but that was a long time ago. There is the matter of Seiren-dono's transformation, too — in which Guren-sama remains convinced Keitarou played a part. Though I have no evidence to connect this with the events that killed Shougo-dono and hurt Mareiko, it is becoming increasingly possible that such a link is there.

"Aizen Keitarou," he said aloud now, raising his sword and allowing the faintest amount of reiatsu to flow forth from his body into the surrounding ether, causing the ground to tremble and shake slightly beneath his feet. "Tell me what I want to know about him. You know, don't you? Where he is."

"I won't tell an Urahara anything!" The girl spat back, apparently preparing to make another assault despite the increasing instability of her spirit power, and Nagesu swung his sword around, pointing the tip of the blade against the grass.

"I can bring this whole mountain down on top of you," he said softly. "I can bury you under so many layers of stone and ash that you will never, ever see the light of day again. You will be crushed into nothing more than dust, unless you answer my question. Your body is already under strain. Your cells are breaking down, bit by bit, and there's no way that you can fight me any further. Tell me what I want to know about Keitarou... else the mountain falls and so do you."

"And kill your own men?" The girl's gaze flitted to the ledge where Yunosuke was still sitting protective guard over Kamitani, and Nagesu's lips thinned.

"They're soldiers. They're trained to give their lives for the sake of Soul Society," he said quietly. "Finding the answer to my question is more important."

He lowered Sekizanha slightly, allowing the blade's very tip to penetrate the topsoil, and as he did so, the ground lurched and shook again, the waves of seismic energy pooling out from where the Captain stood. Though Sekizanha was barely touching the land, the force of the suddenly jerking earth was enough to make the girl stumble, and rocks shook loose from the mountain slopes, clattering down towards them with an ominous rattle.

"Last chance," Nagesu murmured, his eyes darting briefly towards

Yunosuke as he said an inward prayer that his Third Seat's shunpo and reactions were as good as he hoped they were. "Aizen Keitarou. I want to know what you know about him."

"Kill your men for me," the girl folded her arms across her chest, but further fragments of bone-like chalk began to break away from the mask around her eyes, and to Nagesu's dismay, he could see tears of blood forming against her white-dusted lashes. "Bring down the mountain, I don't care. This mountain is my friend. It won't hurt me. Kill your men and kill yourself too. I won't tell you about Keitarou. I won't give him to demons like you."

"So you do know who he is," Nagesu's heart sank, but he lowered Sekizanha's blade deeper into the soil, meeting her gaze with a grave one of his own. "Believe me, child, what I do now is a mercy, no more than that. I don't know what he did to you, or whether you understand the severity of your situation, but if he promised you salvation, he was lying. He'll kill you to satisfy his own ends — that's the way he works."

"Did to me?" The reptilian eyes widened, then a peal of muffled, sinister laughter echoed out from beneath the fangs of the girl's mask. "He didn't do anything to me. He's not a demon. He's not like you. You and the rest of your family... Urahara scum. People like you should be clawed into pulp and mashed into the ground, and that's what I'm going to do. If it kills me, so be it. I don't care. If you're dead too, then it's all worth it."

With that she launched herself at him again, zipping into the shunpo-like movement and re-emerging at his left side. Nagesu flung up his left hand instinctively, muttering the words for a basic kidou deflection, and the girl tumbled back onto the ground, struggling to pick herself up and renew her offensive. The earth shook again, a stronger tremor radiating out around the whole vicinity and Nagesu cast his sword a look of dismay, for this time he had not given the direct command.

*What are you doing? You'll destroy the whole valley!
It's not me, Nagesu. It's the valley itself.*

Sekizanha's voice snapped back, indignant and a little on edge.
The Real World's soul is different from Seireitei's. There I can control the earth in any number of ways, and pour fourth molten rock to support your cause. Here, though, the world has its own mind. We've woken it from its sleep, and its acting of its own accord. You mean?

An earthquake... perhaps more. That mountain is a volcano... and

one over which I have no power. I've tried negotiating with it, but it doesn't seem to hear my voice.

Nagesu's gaze flitted once more to Yunosuke and Kamitani.

"Yunosuke!" he exclaimed, and the Third Seat glanced up, meeting his Captain's gaze with a questioning one of his own. There was no sense of apprehension in his expression, and Nagesu realised that he had mistaken the tremor for one of Sekizanha's trademark attacks, rather than the threat of an impending natural disaster.

"Yes, sir?"

"Can Kamitani be moved?"

"Yes, sir," Yunosuke looked startled. "He's stable, just knocked out. I stopped his bleeding. He's fine."

"Then prepare to open the *Senkaimon*!" Nagesu's expression became grim as he yanked Sekizanha from the earth, using the flat of his weapon to push away the desperate stretch of the girl's claws to reach his upper body. She was staggering now, her speed gone and at the contact she stumbled, unable to steady her balance as quickly as she had before. Nagesu, now aware of the impending threat beneath their feet knew he had no more time to spare in questioning her, nor holding her at bay, and he swung his weapon up through the edge of her mask, causing a network of hairline cracks to split through the white surface before it crumbled into dust, causing the girl to collapse unconscious to the ground at his feet.

Alive or dead, I'll take her back with me. We can restrain her properly if she turns violent, and maybe we can learn more. She's still breathing, but there's no time for me to do examinations here. Not if Sekizanha is right about the seismic activity.

He gave his sword a shake, sealing it and returning it to its sheath as he hurried to crouch at the side of the collapsed figure. Crumpled on the ground, the claws crumbled into powder beneath the red-spattered curl of her hands, she appeared fragile. She was clearly little more than a teenager, tears of blood drying on her cheeks and the ragged ends of her hair splayed out like a shock of flame across the ground. The earth shook again, however, a tremendous roar that sent a jagged crack zig-zagging from the valley beyond towards the foot of the mountain, and it was answered by an ominous rumble from the volcano itself, a slight curl of smoke beginning to twist and settle closer to the peak.

"Taichou! Look out!"

Yunosuke's shriek jerked him back to the matter at hand, just in time as a searing bolt of *Byakurai* cut through the thick, spirit-drenched atmosphere, causing him to hop back and grasp his weapon once more as he searched for the person who had fired it.

"It's not like you to let your guard down, Nagesu-nii."

The words were at his right ear, softly mocking, and as the Third Division Captain swung around, Sekizanha more than half pulled from its scabbard once again, he heard a chuckle of amusement. There was a whoosh of shunpo, and then Nagesu saw his attacker for the first time, his pale eyes widening with disbelief behind his glasses as he registered the rough tail of sandy brown hair and the mud-slurried eyes that could and did belong to only one individual. Those eyes had once looked up to him in adoration and admiration, but now, so many years on, they were filled only with derision, and Nagesu's body tensed as he struggled to place his cousin's tightly suppressed reiatsu in the Real World atmosphere.

Try as he might, he could not. Even though the man was standing before him, he could not pick up even the faintest flicker of his companion's presence. Despite himself his grasp on his *zanpakutou* loosened, as confusion and consternation momentarily distracted him from the urgency of the situation. Keitarou had snuck up on him entirely unawares — despite the fact Nagesu had achieved Bankai and honed his skills, he had still been taken off guard yet again by his enigmatic cousin.

Does this mean he's moved beyond my level of reiatsu awareness? Or has he lost so much spirit power since taking that reidoku that all he can manage now is a basic spell like Byakurai to make me pull back?

"You look surprised," Keitarou seemed amused, and at length, Nagesu found his voice.

"Kei-kun."

The word dropped from his lips, half stunned, half angry.

"As ever, your memory seems to be your best functioning faculty," Keitarou was at the side of the collapsed girl, lifting her up into his arms as the earth juddered violently once more beneath their feet. Fresh cracks seared through the ground, uprooting two trees that creaked and crashed down onto the cero-severed remains of their fellow. "I had credited you with more scientific common sense, though. Your sword is an earth type. Using that power in a place like this... are you really ready to kill yourself and your subordinates to track me down?"

“I’m willing to do whatever it takes if it means you don’t hurt any more people!” Nagesu exclaimed, Kidou glittering from the fingers of his left hand, but Keitarou chuckled, shaking his head.

“So uncharacteristically impetuous,” he chided gently. “You’ve become impulsive in the years since we last saw each other, Nagesu-nii. Well, this from the man whose sword has probably just sounded the death knell for whole settlements in these parts...” he shrugged nonchalantly. “If you don’t mind, I’ll take what’s mine and leave you to enjoy your natural disaster in private.”

“I’m not going to let you go anywhere! Not this time!”

“Why do you think I chose this place?” Keitarou grinned, hopping neatly aside to avoid a fresh split forming in the earth. “I knew that you would come and follow me. I knew your sense of responsibility and duty would drive you to investigate on your own behalf. I’ve seen your sword, Nagesu-nii. I know what it can do, and where it is most useless. Here, you can’t possibly fight me — not unless you want to destroy the whole of this area for miles around. You know it, and I know it. So I’ll take Aki, and I’ll go. And you can wonder and regret the fact that, yet again, I’ve proven too smart for Seireitei’s primitive scientific understanding.”

With that he was gone, as the entire section of grass between Nagesu and the scientist’s former position erupted and collapsed into a bubbling, seething lake of magma, and Nagesu dropped into shunpo, re-materialising on the slope of the mountain proper and gazing up at the darkening curl of smoke which had begun to spew forth from the peak. Slowly he drew his weapon, watching the surface shimmer from dull silver to bright gold. He dropped to his knees, checking briefly to see where his two subordinates were. To his relief, Yunosuke had obeyed his instruction to the letter. They were just about within earshot — but, judging by the wind direction, out of the direct line of fire should the volcano decide to unleash its worst, and there was a good chance of Yunosuke being able to open the gate and escape before any lava flow reached them.

Keitarou’s right, damn him. We have to try and stop this, Sekizanha. Somehow, we have to do something. Killing people in the Real World is not on our agenda. Even if you can’t talk to the mountain — I want you to use whatever strength you have and prevent things from getting worse. Block it as much as you can — absorb as much of the seismic energy as you can take. If it kills us, so be it. If Yunosuke can get Kamitani back safely, it won’t have been in vain. So long as there’s someone to report on Keitarou being here... that’s enough. Right now... that’s enough.

Sekizanha's spirit rippled sadly, but then Nagesu heard the sword speak, his response a single word, laced with resignation.

Understood.

"Yunosuke!" Nagesu exclaimed. "Listen and do as I tell you! I'm going to try and stop the earth exploding... but I don't know if I can. If it goes wrong, I want you to open the gate. I want you to take Kamitani back with you and see to him getting proper treatment. I want you to go to Third, report in full to my son everything that happened here — and, most of all, that Keitarou is here. He's here in the Real World — understand?"

"Taichou?" Yunosuke's expression became one of alarm, but he was already drawing his own sword, and, reassured, Nagesu turned his attention back to the task at hand, plunging the weapon deep into the earth at his feet. Closing his eyes, he drew on his strength, tightening his hold on Sekizanha's hilt as he pumped more and more of his own *reiryoku* deep within the core of the unhappy mountain.

Forgive me, Shiketsu. You said you didn't want this fight, but it might well end up being yours to take on.

The volcano rumbled ominously once more, the drifting smoke above its crater intensifying into heavy black clouds, and as the entire world seemed to shake and rattle around him, Nagesu was aware of the thickening ash dust filling his lungs, the falling fragments of pumice coming down more and more quickly around him.

"Yunosuke!" he managed, coughing and choking to make himself heard. "Go! Go now! Go before the gate is buried — go on!"

An explosion of red and black from the top of the volcano drowned out any hope of a response, but as the slick lava flow began to bubble and ooze forth, Nagesu felt the reassuring shift in spirit power that marked the opening and closing of the spirit gate. They had left safely, then. They would report to Shiketsu, and all would be well.

The lava was melting the snow that dusted the peak now, snaking its way slowly but ominously downwards. Another burst of ash and pumice, till Nagesu could barely drag any air into his lungs, but still he held on to the hilt of his sword.

Composing himself, he unleashed the final restraint on his spirit power, forcing himself to stay focused on the task at hand.
I'm sorry, Sekizanha. If I had been more decisive sooner...

Right now, all that's to be done is to do what we both swore to do, the moment you became Head of the Urahara.

Sekihanza's voice was quiet, yet in Nagesu's soul the roar of the volcano was suddenly drowned out by his sword's resolute, calming voice.

We're here to protect people. We're here to protect lives. You told me that, when we began to fight together, and so we will. Unleash the floodgates, let me do what I can.

Very well.

Nagesu said an inward prayer for help, his body tightening as its demands for air grew ever greater in the ash-thick atmosphere.

"Bankai," he murmured, through dry, grey-coated lips. *"Kazan-ha."*

Author's Note:

So this chapter introduced Aki. Friendly kid, isn't she? o.O. The other two from Keitarou's cave find will show up next chapter... but in Aki's memories are clues to some of the things going on in this story that, till now, have stayed fairly deep beneath the surface...

40. The Masked Militia

Chapter Thirty Nine: The Masked Militia

“You took your time.”

Keitarou dropped out of his flash-step into the forest clearing, some miles upwind from the erupting volcano, finding a bulky, broad-built individual barring his path. Tree-branch-like arms were folded impatiently across his barrel chest and an accusing gleam glittered menacingly in his indignant dark eyes. “And what did you do to Aki? She’s not as strong as we are. You said you’d help us — you’ll get her killed.”

“You seem to have regained your recollections quite nicely,” Keitarou ignored the threatening stance of his companion, neatly sidestepping around the blockade and laying Aki down carefully on the grass, using his hand to brush the messy red hair out of her face. It was peppered with specks of chalk-dust, and at the sign of blood on her cheeks, he sighed, slowly shaking his head.

“I didn’t think she’d go wandering off on her own like that,” he admitted. “I went to retrieve her from the cave shelter where I left her, and found she was gone. We encountered a bit of trouble — but she’s all right. Fortunately for her she met someone whose will to kill is not particularly decisive — he broke her mask and I don’t think she’s done herself any major damage. She’s not going to die from this, Haruya, so stop glaring at me as though I attacked her myself. I told you to listen to my instructions and she didn’t... maybe when she wakes up, you can impress on her how important it is that she does from now on.”

“It’s hard not to be angry, when the whole earth starts shaking fit to burst and then you show up with my sister covered in blood and debris.”

“Not my doing, I promise you, but I imagine that there won’t be an eruption of any particular magnitude,” Keitarou dismissed this with a casual flick of his hand. “Even if there is, though, it won’t come this way. I think it unlikely, though — that same well-meaning soul who doesn’t have the killing edge is probably blowing himself up right now doing everything he can to stop it, so I left him to it and came back. If it kills him, it’s one less person to have seen Aki and I — though in truth it does no harm if they do see us. Let them know that this place

is not undefended — and let them believe that this is where I am.”

“Are you really going to help us?” Haruya eyed his companion suspiciously, the tension not leaving his muscled body. “You’ve made all kinds of promises, and maybe Aki believes you on your word, but I’m not so easy to persuade. She’s just a kid — she’s innocent, and easy to take in... if you’re just going to get her hurt to meet your own goals, we might be better off on our own.”

“Where is Moe?” Keitarou did not answer the question directly, turning to glance around for the missing member of the party, and Haruya grimaced, shrugging his shoulders.

“Up a tree,” he said disparagingly, jerking his head towards a nearby elm tree and Keitarou raised his gaze, seeing a huddled shape part-concealed by the thick foliage. He raised an eyebrow, and Haruya shrugged.

“He’s been up there since you left, pretty much,” he added. “Don’t ask me to tell you why. He was always a bit of a loose cannon. Kusakawa’s experiments broke what little sanity he ever had... you’re wasting your time if you expect him to give you a straight explanation for anything he does. Just be glad he’s sticking around — he’s unpredictable, and I couldn’t promise what he might do, if left unsupervised.”

“He’s not unsupervised, though,” Keitarou offered Haruya a grin, getting to his feet and brushing the chalk-dust from his hands. “I left him in your care, and you’ve not let me down. I’m grateful to you, Haruya. Kusakawa’s notes said that you were their leader... clearly Moe will listen to you, even if he won’t listen to me.”

“You should bear that in mind,” Haruya muttered. “He could kill you, too, if I told him to — so stop changing the subject and tell me what I want to know. Are you really going to help us, or are we just tools in your plan to right old wrongs?”

“We have some shared wrongs,” Keitarou ambled over towards the dying embers of a camp fire, rubbing his rheumatic leg with an involuntary wince. “I’m really not getting any younger or more agile, either. My spirit power is just fine, but I’m not as nimble as I once was and I have to accept my weaknesses. You aren’t tools to me, Haruya, but allies. Powerful, potential allies whose abilities I need in order to achieve my goals. I won’t lie to you about that — I want your cooperation, but I don’t consider you pawns in my master plan.”

“Then what?” Haruya lowered his substantial frame down beside Aki’s still form, stroking her hair absently as he fixed Keitarou with a

quizzical look. “What exactly do you want from us, then? You set us free from that cave, you know all about Kusakawa and what he did to us — but how do we know that you can really do all the things you say you can? More, how do we know you’re not an ally of Kusakawa and his son? I came with you, because Aki was missing and you were the only one who knew where she might be — but now she’s here, what’s to stop me from taking her and fleeing into the wilderness?”

“Nothing, if you want to see your sister die,” Keitarou said matter-of-factly, and Haruya’s eyes widened, dismay glittering in his dark gaze. Keitarou laughed, holding up his hands in mock-surrender.

“Oh, no, Haruya-kun, I’m hurt. I already told you, I don’t mean you any harm. And right now, your sister’s life is not in danger. But Kusakawa’s experiments did permanent damage to her cell structure — hers, yours and Moe-kun’s up there, too. I’ve read the files, and I understand the processes used to mutate you into the creatures you’ve become — but I also know that there are serious drawbacks to the system that he used. I am a scientist, but I am no ally of Kusakawa. In fact, the man who first took you for his test subjects died at my hand, some several decades ago. His son is also dead — and I came by the secret of your existence through an unexpected source. I’ve studied spirit power and *reiryoku* enhancement myself for many years, and I’ve observed at least one other example of what you are. Kusakawa called you *Kamen no Gunzei*, and that name intrigues me. It sounds as though there were once more than three of you — but I could find no records of survivors other than you.”

“I don’t know. We were never let out of the cave, because we were special,” Haruya said bleakly. “Kusakawa the father, then Kusakawa the son, treating us as objects and nothing more. Our lives were forfeit to his cause, he’d tell us, because the Urahara had deemed it so. We were his property, and he would use us as he saw fit. It hurt Aki, it broke Moe, and it made me determined to get my revenge. But I don’t know about any army. There may have been more, but there may not. I only ever knew of Aki and Moe. I don’t know what Kusakawa wanted us for, but he kept us separate and that’s all I know.”

“That’s what I suspected,” Keitarou pursed his lips. ‘You were the elite, and any others would have been the fodder. You all three have Clan genetics, don’t you? Ah, yes,’ as Haruya flinched, “that’s what I thought. You and Aki, both illegitimate children of the same philandering Lord. And Moe..?”

“Mm,” Haruya raised his gaze upwards, then, “Locked in a cell in the basement of one of the Southern Clan manors. The idiot son of a

Third Degree Lord. He's not illegitimate, not like Aki and I. He's a pureblooded son, but his mother died birthing him and he was born too soon. His brain was damaged, and his father rejected him. He had spirit power, but they couldn't tame him... so they caged him like an animal and pretended he was dead. But this isn't answering my main question — so don't think I've forgotten that I asked."

"You're intelligent," Keitarou observed wryly, "I like that. You should ask questions. It's a good sign, especially given your genetic heritage. But fine. Why should you ally with me? Aside from the fact I released you?"

"We didn't ask you to, therefore we owe you no debt," Haruya said gruffly, and Keitarou nodded.

"I can fix Aki's cell structure," he said softly, sliding his hand into his *obi* and pulling out a rolled up scroll, laying it down on the floor and unrolling it carefully, making sure it did not go anywhere near the fire which Haruya had half-heartedly begun stoking since the beginning of their conversation. "Hers, and yours, and Moe-kun's too. I found Kusakawa's notes, and I can see where he went wrong. He was a good scientist, but not a great one, and his son took shortcuts which made your weaknesses even worse. As it stands, now the seal over you three has been broken, you are probably running on borrowed time. Like this, in rest, the damage isn't so obvious, but releasing your power causes a tremendous strain on cells that just can't cope. Your body can't produce new cells quickly enough to replace the old ones, and as a result, your bodies are breaking down. I can't really detect it from you now, but I suspect that the moment I broke your seal, that process began again. Slowly, its true, but enough to cause tangible long-term damage. In a fight, unleashing the mask could cost you dear — as Aki-chan proved earlier on."

He patted her lightly on the shoulder.

"But I can fix it," he said at length. "I've looked it over, and I'm sure that I can. I can certainly stabilise your current forms... and I very much hope that I can do the same for you when your power is released. This is power you didn't ask to have, power Kusakawa mutated and damaged so that instead of developing into shinigami and entering legitimate training, you became monsters whose souls are stuck between shinigami and Hollow. Well, I don't very much like shinigami, and I believe there's purpose for a Hollow that can retain conscious control over their actions."

"You say you've seen people like us before?" Slowly Haruya picked up the scroll, glancing at it and eying Keitarou doubtfully.

“Not as developed as you, admittedly,” Keitarou responded. “The one example who came the closest was created from a natural birth deformity — his spirit power, like yours, was twisted away from the so-called natural line — the one the shinigami believe in — and over towards that of a Hollow. Knowing that such a thing could happen naturally sparked my interest, and in the years since I’ve done a lot of theorising. Unfortunately I have not met any more examples, but I have investigated the potential of Hollows a lot more since I came to live in Rukongai. My knowledge, therefore, is wider than either Kusakawa or his son could possibly have imagined.”

He sat back, shrugging his shoulders.

“I will leave it up to you,” he concluded. “I can’t force you, nor will I lie to you. Fighting shinigami is dangerous. Aki met a powerful opponent tonight, and it was fortunate for her that he so dislikes shedding blood. There will be risk involved. However, without my help, you three are walking dead. Walking time bombs, simply waiting for nature to take its course and consume you completely. You have some conscious control in Hollow form now, but that control will doubtless waver as you become weaker. I can change all that — if you’re willing to take risks for me, too.”

Haruya glanced at the sheet of paper once more, then he sighed, holding out his hand reluctantly to his companion.

“I don’t think we really have much choice,” he admitted. “At least you negotiate your terms, you don’t force them down our throats like that cursed Urahara demon did. I’d like a chance to settle some scores with that Clan, even if I care nothing for the other shinigami. I suppose if shinigami are their allies, that makes them enemies. And if you can help us — and prove it, by making us stronger... then I guess we’ll fight for you in return.”

“Thank you, Haruya-kun,” Keitarou took the proffered fist, shaking it firmly. “That is precisely what I hoped you’d say. It won’t be long, I’m sure, before bigger parties come to the Real World in search of me. I’ll be counting on you three to hold the line here, and I’ll do whatever is in my capacity to increase your advantage in battle. You can kill any shinigami you like, and treat them as you see fit. All I ask is that you keep them occupied, and distracted from Rukongai whilst I finalise my plans. I have one more errand in Seireitei which it now becomes pressing for me to complete, and then I’ll begin work on helping you three, providing you do what you can to help me. Is it understood?”

“I guess it’s a deal,” a grim smile touched Haruya’s lips, and he

nodded. “Make us the kind of warriors you need, and we’ll kill for you. Just tell us when and we’ll be there.”

The mood around the Second Division had changed.

Masaya set aside his book, leaning up against the cool stone wall of his cell as he contemplated the activity that had gone on around him in the last couple of days. Kai had not been to see him since the time he had brought the Kotetsu boy, and no matter how he considered it, Masaya knew that this was not because the Onmitsukidou leader had lost interest in his case. Rather, he suspected Kai had found another line of enquiry — but try as he might, Masaya had not managed to overhear anything specific about his opponent’s intentions.

His gaze flitted to the cell bars, sizing them up pensively. He could escape from here whenever he felt like it, using his special skills to morph his body through the gap between the wood and then disappearing into the shadows. He could have left the first night he had been brought here, but he had chosen to remain, hoping that he might pick up something of use to take back with him to Keitarou. Tenichi’s appearance had amused him, for the shinigami was clearly too intimidated by Masaya’s threats and Keitarou’s influence to betray anyone, and even when they had been face to face, Tenichi had claimed they were strangers.

He’s an idiot, but I don’t need to trouble myself with him. He won’t talk. He’s not strong enough inside to put his life on the line to betray Keitarou-sama, and so I can probably let him alone now. Keitarou-sama said that he was an ally, and perhaps cowardice is a way of forming an alliance — anyway, I won’t waste time and energy worrying about him. He’s not a threat, and that’s more important.

His gaze flitted to the book which had been provided for him as standard along with food and bedding of a basic nature since he had been taken captive.

Funny how the Onmitsukidou have become so courteous. Kai-dono clearly feels he can coax something out of me if he treats me gently.

His gold eyes flickered slightly as he remembered their previous conversation.

He asked about Kohaku. Interesting that he should. They’re dabbling in things they don’t understand... but it doesn’t trouble me if they encounter Kohaku or are killed by him. Very few have seen Kohaku face to face and known the monster for what it is... but I’m one of those few. Knowledge is power... in a case like this, perhaps ignorance is death. Oh well. Onmitsukidou deal in death — a few losses of their own won’t be too

grievous.

“As far as I know, they’re still there,”

The voice of one of his current guards drifted through his thoughts and he turned towards the sound, moving nimbly across the cage as far as his chains would allow him to listen more closely to the conversation. “Kai-dono said that there was enough evidence in the Rukon to indicate the mark travelled to the Real World — Saku-dono said we should be prepared in case the follow-up arrest team comes from us.”

“Nagesu-sama went on his own?” The second man seemed doubtful. “That doesn’t seem sensible. If they really think the Aizen guy is there, wouldn’t you expect them to at least take some of us, if not an army of your own?”

“Beats me, I’m just telling you what I’ve heard,” the first man let out a sigh, and, pressing his face against the bars, Masaya could just make out the tall, slender form of the speaker around the corner of the narrow corridor that led down to his cell. “We need to be ready if we’re called out. Nagesu-sama’s pretty tough, anyhow. They say he has bankai — he can probably look after himself.”

Nagesu-sama. Urahara Nagesu? Interesting information... Keitarou-sama will want to know about that.

Masaya’s eyes became contemplative slits.

Kai-dono, the quality of your men has fallen. In my time, nobody would ever talk so freely within earshot of prisoners. Unless it’s a trap...?

He considered this, eying the body language of the two men for a moment, then discarded it.

No. I sense no tension, no unnecessary excitement in their words. They are careless, not conniving... perhaps they’ve forgotten who Kai-dono believes I am... or maybe they don’t know. Either one is fine. I can take advantage... so let them talk.

He frowned, a sudden image of Minami’s face flitting across his thoughts, and he shook his head, trying to dislodge it from his focus.

Remembering things about the past is a bad thing. Keitarou-sama told me that — confusing thoughts and conflicting ideas can compete for my attention and distract me from what’s really important. The girl is no longer relevant and I shouldn’t think about her now. I’m here to gather data for Keitarou-sama — nothing could be greater than that.

“I don’t understand why we’ve been so sidelined this far, anyway,” one of the men was grumbling now, bending to pick lint from his

white *tabias* he spoke. “I know Kai-dono went to Rukongai, but he wasn’t in command of his party, and the Third are taking over in all kinds of ways now. So what if the exile is an Urahara? There are certain jobs we ought to be fielded for from the start and that’s all. Why else are we here like this, if not to take on the bulk of this kind of work?”

“Nagesu-sama has pull,” the other man responded dryly. “He’s head of the Council this year — you must know that. Means he and Third can do pretty much as they please, and are. I guess he has personal grievances to settle in all of this too. All we can do is sit back and wait to be dispatched.”

“You don’t think it’s because of that heathen locked up down here?” Masaya’s lips twitched into a smirk of amusement as he realised that he was now the subject of their conversation. “There are rumours he was once part of this operation... I’ve only been here five years, so I wouldn’t know anything about it, but, well, there are rumours. Rumours about him and that guy... the one kept in Deep Cell Nine... Kounou?”

Masaya’s eyes widened as the familiar name jerked roughly across his unprepared senses.

Kounou still lives? He’s here in captivity, but he’s alive?

A flash of uncharacteristic rage flushed through his body, Keitarou’s interests momentarily forgotten as years of old grievances and old bitterness overwhelmed him. Kounou, the man who had shamed his name, parted him from his family, slaughtered his allies and his mother... and then, when he had appealed to the main house for help, had hunted him down over the hills of District Two, shooting him full of venom designed to rot his body from the insides out. Kounou who had chosen him as a scapegoat, and who still lived, somewhere in the Onmitsukidou’s complex.

Masaya’s hands clenched tightly into balled fists, his ragged nails digging deep into the flesh of his palms without him registering even a flicker of pain. He darted towards the bars of the cage, half-inclined to smash them open in his fury, but then a familiar voice penetrated his memories, the words calm and reasoned as they acted like a balm to his distress.

If you are going to be of use to me, you need to swallow that hatred and put your focus into the bigger picture. You still have life... and destroying one man is less than destroying the whole society who supported that man and allowed him to wound you so deeply. Let me help you... let me take it all away.

Masaya closed his eyes, forcing his breathing to return to a more regulated rate. It was not like him, he berated himself, to become so easily distracted. Perhaps it was being here, in the heart of the realm he had once helped to police... or maybe it was the sleeping recollections of his hatred for Kounou and the grief the man had caused him ten years before. Still, that was then, this was now. Keitarou had helped him... had refocused him... even Masaya didn't know quite how, but he had relished the ability to shut out the pain and bitterness and focus simply on the task ahead. He did not need or want emotional ties and Keitarou had helped him suppress them. Now it was his duty to put Keitarou's needs first, and that meant paying attention to the shinigami's conversation, not worrying over ancient betrayal.

"...something to do with the whelp who brought back Souja-dono," one of them was saying now. "I don't know what his deal is, or why the Thirteenth are being so protective over him, but according to Saku-dono, they've forbidden anyone entry to see him without formal clearance."

"Probably that Ukitake-taichou has decided to adopt him into his family of strays," the second man snorted in amusement. "You know what folk say about Thirteenth's recruitment policy — the more pitiful and desperate the more likely they are to get in. True, there are some good fighters in the Thirteenth's ranks, but some of their recruits... seriously. And the scrawny guy who brought the prisoner here...? Looked like you could knock him down with a feather. That is, if he didn't get spooked and flee by one jumping up behind him."

"Well, Thirteenth is District. Ukitake-taichou kinda has to take in anyone and everyone, whereas other divisions can choose," the first man said dismissively. "In any case, Saku-dono said they've not managed to establish much detail on this Koku kid and what his involvement is in this business. He came through some kind of *Senkaimon* with Souja-dono and that's all that's official."

"A District kid isn't much of a challenge after they've hit the Academy, so one from the wilds of Seireitei probably isn't much to worry about from our perspective," the second man ruminated. "Still, he should be here, so Kai-dono can quiz him, rather than being mollycoddled by the Thirteenth and their strange philosophies to life." *Did he just say Koku?*

Masaya's golden eyes hardened, his lids twitching closer together as he digested this information.

A boy called Koku came through a Senkaimon with Souja-dono? Souja-

dono, the murdered Vice Captain from the Endou Division? The young lad that Sakaki-sama apparently killed in one of her fits of pique? Well. That does make things interesting. No... it makes everything different. Staying here is no longer an option. Tenichi might not be a problem, but clearly there's another potential leak I should've seen coming from the start. How far does that wretch think Keitarou-sama's protection will cover him? A traitor is a traitor, and that changes the rules completely. I'm not obliged to pander to traitors.

He flexed his hands, watching the fingers elongate and stretch out of their normal shape, his wrists narrowing like stretched elastic as the cuffs fell with a clatter onto the floor of his cell. There was a yell from one of the guards at the unexpected sound, followed by the appearance of one stocky man and another taller and leaner figure, looks of suspicion and annoyance on their faces as they converged on the small holding pen.

"What are you playing at? You're meant to keep quiet in there, else we've orders to hurt you!" One of them exclaimed, brandishing what looked like a short dagger in his direction, but Masaya merely returned his limbs to their normal formation, rubbing his wrists absently and fixing the duo with a benign smile.

"I'm sure Kai-dono hasn't ordered me to be killed just yet," he said lightly, getting properly to his feet and moving towards the bars, resting his pale fingers against the thin strips of reinforced wood. "I'm certain that's something he'd like to do himself... given that he's convinced himself the two of us have a history."

"Get away from the bars!" The nearest guard struck the wood of the cage, clearly trying to intimidate Masaya back into the corner where he had sat reading so quietly and unobtrusively for the majority of his captivity so far, and Masaya took a step back, holding up his hands in a mocking gesture of surrender.

"I'm sorry. It's just your conversation was so interesting," he purred, a sinister glitter in his golden eyes. "I wanted to hear every single syllable for myself."

"You were eavesdropping on us?" The second guard was furious, and Masaya let out an amused chuckle.

"In my day, Onmitsukidou didn't speak to each other much when on duty, and certainly not at all in front of prisoners," he said quietly. "I suppose standards have dropped since my time... either that or, with everything else going on, sentry duty has been entrusted to the dregs of the force. Sadly I won't be able to thank Kai-dono for his charmingly nostalgic hospitality... but I'm most grateful to both of

you for telling me everything I needed to know.”

He lowered his hands, turning his palms to face his companions as an ominous purplish light beginning to ooze out from the tips of his fingers, spreading and drawing together into spectral petals that drifted spookily down like cascading flakes of tainted snow.

“Now, however, I’m going to take my leave,” he murmured, as the eerie aura began to spread out across the whole of the cell complex, taking the two men completely off guard. “*Hakufuku.*”

Kamitani’s wound had begun to bleed again.

As he bundled his subordinate officer into the gaping hole of the *Senkaimon*, Yunosuke sent an apprehensive glance down at the makeshift tourniquet, taking in the spreading stain with genuine consternation. True, the blood was not flowing like it had done before, but it was seeping through the fabric nonetheless, and it was all he could do to bear his comrade’s weight as he navigated the uneven trackways through the Dangai back to Soul Society. His Captain’s orders still echoed in his mind, those desperate commands unlike any Nagesu had ever given before. Yunosuke had not liked it, but he had known better than to disobey his leader when the man sounded like that. He did know whether Nagesu’s powerful earth sword could make any difference to the juddering mountain terrain nor the slick sweep of angry lava that was winding its way slowly down from the peak, nor did he know whether Keitarou would be waiting and watching for an opportunity to strike his cousin at a moment of weakness. Nagesu had ordered him back to Third, and Yunosuke had accepted the command.

Jun’s life rests with me, and, more importantly, so does our proof. Our witness testimony that Keitarou was in the Rukon — only Taichou and I can confirm that, and one of us has to get back safely. Taichou’s sword is the only one that might be able to make a difference to the mountain, so Jun and the report rest with me. Fukutaichou will be angry that I left Taichou without complaint — but this is a military decision and I can’t look back. Much as it would be an honour to die at my Clan leader’s side, defending innocent life... this is more important.

He glanced down at his limp burden once more, relieved at least that his companion’s complexion was not greying out. Despite the bleeding, Kamitani seemed more or less stable and, though he had not regained consciousness, Yunosuke was fairly certain his younger kinsman would survive to fight another day.

Providing I get him to a healer quickly, he should be fine.

Shifting the heavy form of the injured man in his grip once more so that he could raise his *zanpakutō* to a more horizontal angle, he swept the sharp blade through the blackness, watching with a measure of relief and regret as the air parted, revealing colour and light on the other side. A few more paces and he would be back in the Third Division's barracks, surrounded by his subordinate officers and able to seek proper help to patch up his friend. As he stepped out onto the cobbles of the Third Division's courtyard, he was aware of footsteps hurrying to greet him, and as the black hole closed up behind him, he rested his body against the side pillar of the Gate's metal frame, reassured by its firm stability. Carefully he lowered Kamitani's body to the ground, being careful not to jar the injury any more than was necessary, and as he did so, he realised that his own body was still trembling from the intensity of what had happened in the Real World.

"Yunosuke-san!" That was the Third's fourth seat, horror in his pale eyes as he surveyed the blooded form on the ground, then, "What happened? Where's the Captain? What's wrong with Kamitani?"

"He took an injury but he'll be all right. Go send for help from Fourth — they'll patch him up good enough," Yunosuke knew that he had to take control, no matter how unsteady he was feeling now he was back on safe soil. 'Gai,' he rose his voice to address the Fifth seat who, two junior officers in tow had just stepped out into the courtyard, "come bring those men and take Jun inside so he can rest more comfortably. It's a nasty gash and it'll bleed less if he's somewhere secure — it's not life threatening, so don't stare at him like that. Do it quickly — I need to go speak to Fukutaichou."

"He's in his office," The fourth seated officer cast Yunosuke a troubled look, as Gai and his companions hastened across to obey the order. "Shouldn't we seal the gate first? Is Taichou coming after you?"

"Right now, leave it be," Yunosuke ignored the question, getting to his feet and wiping the blood from his hands on his dirty *hakama*. "There isn't time — first things first. Do as I've instructed, and do it quickly — I'll see to the gate myself when I've spoken to Shiketsu-sama."

"Yes, sir," The officer saluted, hurrying off to obey, and as Gai and the other officers gathered around Kamitani's unconscious body, Yunosuke gathered his wits, glancing at his hands as he tried consciously to stop them from shaking. The blood still flecking against his fingernails would alarm the Vice Captain enough, he knew, without him seeing how much what had happened had shaken his normally unflappable Third Seat, and so though his mind was racing,

Yunosuke drew on all his reserves of self-control, taking one deep breath into anxious lungs before marching purposefully towards the central hall of the barracks and the passageway that led to Shiketsu's office.

He rapped on the door smartly, waiting for his superior officer to call him in, and after what seemed like an aeon of a pause, Shiketsu did so, allowing the Third Seat into the spacious, well-appointed chamber that was the domain of the Third Division's second officer. Shiketsu was younger than Yunosuke, and had served with the Third Division for less time, but Yunosuke understood the hierarchy of Clan better than any other Urahara and had accepted his position with equanimity. Though Shiketsu was his cousin, there was a gulf of birthright that lay between them, and Yunosuke had always been content with this way of things, choosing not to consider the potential of higher rank in the subsidiary Twelfth to stay close to his Clan' Leader's side. Of all people in Third Division, therefore, he knew best the strong familial bond shared by Nagesu and his eldest son, and his heart quailed slightly at the thought of the report he needed to give.

But this was his job, this was his duty, and he would do it to the best of his ability, just as Nagesu would have wanted.

"Yunosuke?" As the Third Seat stepped over the threshold, Shiketsu was on his feet, surprise turning to consternation as he registered the state of his subordinate. "Yunosuke, what's happened? Why are you messed up like that — why did nobody tell me the Gate was being reopened for your return? What's happened in the Real World — what have you come to report to me?"

"We saw Aizen Keitarou, Fukutaichou," Yunosuke's words shook slightly, but somehow he managed to keep his composure, meeting his anxious Vice Captain's gaze with a sombre one of his own. "There was also a girl who fought for him — so we think. She had Hollow powers of some nature, but it was imperfect and she was no match for the Captain's ability. She hurt Jun, however, and that's why you see me in the state I am. I've given orders for Fourth to be sent for — but the injury isn't life-threatening, so far as my limited knowledge of such things goes. I believe he will make a full recovery."

"I see," Shiketsu bit his lip, mulling this over in his mind, then, "A girl with Hollow powers? What kind of Hollow powers? Elaborate more clearly, because I'm not sure I understand. This was a Plus Soul turning to Hollow, or something else?"

"Undoubtedly something else, sir," Yunosuke said grimly. "She was able to use Cero and she manifested a mask, but her body didn't

undergo a full scale transformation. She had reiatsu, and she did not show any sign of a soul chain at her chest. I don't think she was native to the place we found her... rather, I think she was some kind of barrier guard sent to keep us away."

"In case we breached Keitarou's kidou-barred Gate and penetrated the Real World near his hideout?" Shiketsu asked, and Yunosuke nodded.

"Yes, sir. That's what I believe... what the Taichou also likely believes."

"*Likely* believes?" Shiketsu's eyes widened, as he latched on to his companion's turn of phrase. "What do you mean, likely believes? Have you not discussed it?"

"I haven't had an opportunity to do so, sir, not yet," Yunosuke hesitated for a moment, then sighed, closing his eyes briefly as he prepared himself for what he was about to divulge. "The truth is that the Captain didn't come back with me from the Real World. I came back with Jun, but only the two of us have returned."

"Father... didn't come back?" Shiketsu's expression became one of genuine alarm. "Why would he not do that? You said Keitarou was there... do you mean to say he went after that man... alone?"

"No, sir. Not exactly." Briefly Yunosuke outlined what had occurred, trying to ignore the growing sense of panic rising in Shiketsu's aura. "It was a direct order, and I couldn't disobey it. We were the only ones who saw Keitarou — I would rather have stayed and fought to help him, but I would've failed in my duty to report to you, and therefore betrayed his faith in me."

"You just *left* him there?"

Shiketsu grabbed Yunosuke by the shoulders, giving him a shake as fear and panic flooded through his system. "Why did you leave him there? Even if it was an order... why..? Why didn't he come back with you? If Keitarou had fled, and the scene was no longer viable, why not just come through the Gate with you and with Kamitani?"

"Taichou didn't believe in letting innocent people die," Yunosuke said grimly, "even if those people were Real World people. I didn't like it either, but he wanted me to save Jun and to come back and report to you about Keitarou. He didn't know whether he could push back the mountain's explosions, and he wanted to make sure someone knew what we'd seen in Seireitei. With things like that, I couldn't not go. I'm sorry, Shiketsu-sama. An order is an order, and one given like

that has to be obeyed.”

“But to just abandon your Captain like that?”

“I was coming back to get help,” Yunosuke admitted. “I couldn’t do anything with Jun unconscious, and I understood his instructions, but he didn’t say anything about not reopening the gate nor going back to get him. The gate’s still active, I haven’t disconnected it yet. I’m not powerful enough to fight against Keitarou, nor against a volcanic eruption, but I’m willing to try, if it’s to help the Captain. I thought, once I’d discharged my duty, then maybe...”

“We’re going,” Shiketsu broke across his words, grabbing his sword from the shelf of the Vice Captain’s office and ramming it through his *obias* he half ran for the door. “You come with me. Jun will be fine, now, but I need to know where Father was and what happened. Did Jun see Keitarou, by the way?”

“No. He was knocked out,” Yunosuke shook his head, hastening to follow his superior officer out of the doorway and back along the hall towards the courtyard. “I stabilised him, but that’s about as much as I could manage. The girl-hollow’s reiatsu was strange and it shook me up pretty badly. I guess it affected him, too, though I think he hit his head when he fell. Taichou held his own against her, and she seemed overwhelmed, but then Keitarou appeared, and the volcano was about to erupt...”

He shrugged.

“I don’t know exactly what happened, just that Taichou’s still there, and we don’t know whether Keitarou is with him.”

“We don’t have time to waste on more detailed reports right now,” Shiketsu admitted. “We can do that when Father’s back and safe. It’s a risk, if only you and I know the things you saw there — but it’s a risk I’ll take if Father’s life is on the line. I’m not willing to sacrifice him in the name of hunting Keitarou — so you can follow my orders now, Yunosuke. We’re going to get Father back — understand?”

“With pleasure,” Yunosuke saluted grimly. “If not for Jun, I might have disobeyed him and risked trying to drag him back through the gate with us, even if it meant facing a disciplinary later. I’m with you all the way, Fukutaichou. Lead the way.”

“Then we’re going into the Gate,” Shiketsu said purposefully. “Father is strong, we both know that. I believe he can fight against almost anything, but even so, he might need help. If Keitarou is there... he could do anything, and I don’t like that thought. I don’t

want to fight Keitarou either, but I also don't want to inherit the Urahara Clan just yet."

"Fukutaichou! Yunosuke-dono!" before Yunosuke could respond, the Fourth seated officer hurried to greet them with a breathless exclamation, saluting hastily before glancing up at the Vice Captain that stood a half head above him in height. "Fukutaichou, the *Senkaimon* is still unsealed! We picked up a signal — there's something activating it on the other side!"

"Something? Do you have a reading on who or what?" Shiketsu sounded harried, and the officer shook his head apologetically.

"There's no reading we can detect, sir," he said regretfully. "We're trying again now, but it's not clear. Whoever's activating the gate, we can't detect their reiatsu at all."

"Keitarou?" Yunosuke's eyes widened. "Taichou's said he can open the gate without anyone detecting him — and he was right there, watching us. What if he didn't flee? What... what if this..."

"Stop it," Shiketsu snapped, his usual cool lost in the heat of the moment. "It's not like you to panic and dwell on probabilities. I need your head clear, and I need you focused. You can draw your sword, can't you?"

"Yes, sir, but..."

"Then draw it and keep your thoughts in your head, where they belong." Shiketsu said grimly, his hand moving towards the sheathed weapon that hung at his side. "Whatever comes through that gate, we're going to be ready for it, and we'll take it off guard. If it's Keitarou, all the more so. We'll have his head rolling around the floor before he's managed to set two feet inside the compound."

Yunosuke's gaze flitted to his companion, but he made no comment, obediently grasping the curved hilt of his sword and drawing it forth from its scabbard. There was a moment's pause, then the Fourth seat reluctantly followed suit, clearly on edge as he hopped from foot to foot to try and dispel nervous energy. There was a moment of absolute stillness, then the air between the pillars of the gate began to seam and split, parting into an ebony gape, the edges of which clung lovingly to the metal frame. From within the depths of the tunnel beyond something moved, then, as Shiketsu moved purposefully forward to sweep in a decisive attack, a dusty, ash-coated figure stumbled forth onto the cobbles, coughing and hacking as he fell to his knees among them.

“Taichou!” It was Yunosuke who found his voice first, dropping his sword with a clatter and ignoring the *zanpakutou*’s indignant protests against his senses as he hurried forward to help the older man. Shiketsu let out an exclamation, managing somehow to sheath his sword before following Yunosuke’s example, bellowing to the Fourth Seat to go prepare the Captain’s quarters and to send further word to the Fourth Division as he did so. Nagesu did not speak for a moment, hunched onto all fours and hanging his head. To begin with he could only rasp gulps of clean air into volcano-ravaged lungs, but little by little he seemed to realise that he had company, and with as much strength as he could muster he raised his gaze, meeting first his son’s, then Yunosuke’s. He was no longer wearing his glasses, Yunosuke realised, his usually pale complexion white as chalk thanks to the pumice and ash thrown out by the angry mountain, yet there was a tiny gleam of relief in his unfocused eyes that gave the Third Seated officer reassurance.

“Otousama,” As another bout of coughing wracked through Nagesu’s lean frame, Shiketsu moved to support him, coaxing him into a more upright sitting position. “Yunosuke reported to me everything that happened. I’ve sent for medics to see to Kamitani, and for you too, now you’re back here. Please don’t worry — everything will be fine.”

“I’m... all right. No need... for fuss,” with a Herculean effort, Nagesu pulled himself to his feet, using his son and the metal frame of the gate to get upright and reaching up dusty hands to wipe an equally dusty face. “Just... tired. Used... a lot of power... stopping... volcano. Just... need to wash... and rest. Will be... fine.”

“We were coming to get you,” Yunosuke admitted, and Nagesu shot his companion a startled look.

“But I said...”

“You told me to come back here and bring Jun. I did, and I reported everything to Shiketsu-sama,” Yunosuke told him sheepishly. “Only we didn’t like the idea of abandoning our Captain, so...”

“Foolish... sentiment,” Nagesu’s words were reproachful, but Yunosuke could hear the warmth in the hoarse tones, and he grinned, the tension of the situation suddenly lifted.

“Yunosuke, seal the gate,” Shiketsu cast the Third Seat a glance. “We don’t want anyone else coming through. This time it was Father, so leaving the Gate unfastened was a good decision, but we’re a whole division again now. There’s no use tempting fate.”

“Yes, sir,” Yunosuke saluted, reaching to grab his discarded *zanpakutou* from the cobbles. “Then, if you don’t mind, I’d like leave to go change and then check on Jun’s condition.”

“Granted,” Shiketsu nodded. “Father, let me help you to your quarters at least. You look all in, and if healers are coming to see Kamitani, it wouldn’t hurt for them to see you too, surely?”

“Just... need to rest,” Nagesu shook his head. “Too many... things... to bother... Fourth about. I’ll be... fine, Shiketsu. Don’t... fuss. A Captain... doesn’t fuss... over duties like... this.”

“I’m not a Captain, not yet,” Shiketsu said quietly. “I don’t want to be one, nor do I feel ready for that responsibility. Please don’t push me away, Father. It might be unprofessional, even un-military, but I want to do my bit as a good son, so please don’t stop me. Yunosuke can take care of the Gate and things here... you haven’t slept since Rukongai and I know Mother would want you to humour me.”

“You... won’t say a word... of this... to your mother.” Yunosuke saw genuine consternation in Nagesu’s bleary gaze, and he chuckled despite himself.

“It’s all right, Taichou. Shiketsu-sama is right. I can manage here,” was all he said, however. “I’ll seal the Gate, and then...”

“Fukutaichou! Fukutai...”

One of the Third Division recruits skidded into the courtyard, stopping dead at the sight of the ash-dust monster that was his Captain. His jaw dropped open into an O of surprise, his eyes bugging out of their sockets as he tried to work out exactly what could have occurred to make the usually neat and tidy Nagesu look such a state, but as he caught Shiketsu’s eye he seemed to realise that staring was not polite, for he blushed, lowering his gaze and bowing hurriedly towards his senior officers.

“Taichou, Fukutaichou, I’m sorry to interrupt,” he began nervously, “but there are people here from the Second Division. They’re saying that a prisoner’s escaped their cells and they want authority to search. Gai-san is trying to hold them back, but their orders come from Kai-dono and Midori-sama, and so... he sent me to speak to you.”

“An escapee? From Second Division?” The momentary levity dispersed in an instant as Shiketsu’s fine brows drew together into an expression of concern. “They want to search the Third Division? Do they have evidence to suggest this individual came here, or is this just another whim from the Onmitsukidou to take over as much of

Seireitei and invade private space where and how they see fit?”

“Let... them search,” Nagesu held up a hand, shaking his head slightly as his son gazed at him in dismay.

“But Father, you know what they’ll...”

“The prisoner is the man Ukitake arrested, correct?” Nagesu turned his gaze on the apprehensive recruit. “The one that’s been interrogated in their cells lately — the man they call ‘Suzuki?’”

“I don’t know, sir,” the recruit admitted. “They won’t tell us anything, just that he’s escaped. Also that he might be armed. They told Gai-san that he’d knocked out his guards with Kidou and killed a prisoner in one of their secure cells before disappearing... and they want to search the surrounding area for any sign of where he’s gone.”

Nagesu’s expression became grim, and he nodded.

“In a war, there are no such things as... personal sensibilities,” he said softly. “This man is... dangerous, and may prove... a threat to all of us. He may be... allied with the demon we... seek to snare, and we have... nothing to hide. Tell Gai to... let them in. They may search our... Division if it will... put their minds at rest.”

Author’s Note: Kanji and Kamen

I’m sure you can’t help but notice how epically dense the Third Division were in this chapter, not realising that the most likely candidate to open the gate was Nagesu himself. But this wasn’t an error on my part, it was deliberate (before I get reviews asking just how dumb the Third are?) Shiketsu panicked. The point was to show that Third are far from ready to lose Nagesu and hand over the baton yet. Shiketsu is about the same rough age as Juu and Shun, perhaps a little older, but he lacks leadership experience and has always counted on Nagesu being there. In the heat of the moment, knowing that his father was missing and that Keitarou — with his track record of moving through gates undetected — had been witnessed, he and the other Third members jumped to conclusions, forgetting their own Captain is a Bankai level shinigami and therefore capable of doing the same now too.

This is... if you like... an indication of the importance of Captains in this story... and the huge gaping hole the loss of one of them might cause...

Also, Kamen no Gunzei. I’ve used this term a couple of times already, but I should explain it for anyone who doesn’t know. A lot of the terms in Japanese Bleach are written in Japanese characters, even

if they are given foreign pronunciations. Vaizard

(ヴァイザード) is one of these — the term is written in Kanji as 仮面の軍勢 (Kamen no Gunzei). This literally means “masked armed forces”, or, in my nice alliterative translation, “masked militia”.

There are also many ways of writing Vaizard in English — Visored, Vizard, they're all the same thing and all of them are correct. I just use Vaizard because the Japanese katakana pronunciation is written Vaizaado and so IMO it's the closest to the original of the Anglicised versions. I strongly believe that Aizen and Urahara both working on the Hollow-ka process independantly of one another is indication that this wasn't an idea that began randomly around the time of the Pendulum but really had much deeper, older roots. If you've read Meifu 4, you'll remember I brought in a naturally occuring vaizard-type mutation. This is a more scientifically mutated project... what you can call the groundwork and origins that inspired the later studies of Aizen Sousuke and of Urahara Kisuke.

The characters' names in Japanese script, for those who are interested, are **Aki**秋 (autumn), **Haruya**春 夜 (Spring night) and **Moe**モエ. Whilst Moe's name COULD have kanji, somehow it seems right that it doesn't have a tangible meaning attached. It's actually written “Mowe”, with the archaic character 𪛗 (we) that is no longer regularly used in modern Japanese. Why? Aside from the vintage setting of this story in regards to Canon Bleach, I actually got the idea to write it this way from seeing As Nodt's speech style in the recent manga. As Nodt uses a lot of katakana in dialogue, which is unusual, and even more unusual, uses one archaic katakana character which is not in common usage in modern Japanese, 𪛗 (wi) instead of イ (i). As Nodt is a little unusual, and so is Moe, so I figured, why not? However it is usual to romanise these letters in the modern style, hence MoE and not MoWe.

The kanji behind some commonly used Bleach terms is also somewhat a theme of this story. I'm not going to explain that any further at this point, though...

41. Killer Instinct

Chapter Forty: Killer Instinct

The spy had escaped.

Tenichi stood in the courtyard of the Seventh Division barracks as he watched the sun slowly beginning to set over Seireitei. He had been in the middle of an intensive sword training session with two of the Seventh's newest recruits when the message had come, and as a result Hirata had ordered all individuals under the rank of Tenth to take positions within the squad headquarters, sending his higher seated officers out to man posts around the Division's frontier. Though Hirata had said that he did not believe an attack here was likely, Tenichi knew otherwise. Unlike his comrades, who had greeted the news with annoyance, frustration and mocking remarks about the Second's security system, Tenichi's heart had leapt in his throat, anticipation and adrenaline flooding his whole body. When Hirata had asked for volunteers to man the outer perimeter, Tenichi had spoken up immediately, and as a result, here he was, the first line of defence for his division against a maurading escapee.

Though to Tenichi it didn't feel that way. He had never had such a rush of emotions cascade through his body before, and he hopped from foot to foot, trying to dispel some of the nervous energy. Unlike the day he had slipped into the Thirteenth Division's barracks with the intention of stifling Koku, he felt no sense of guilt or desperation. On the contrary, he was eager to hunt Masaya down and put an end to him once and for all. It was only natural to feel that way, he told himself darkly, since it had been Masaya who had taken him to Rukongai, Masaya who had threatened him over Souja's disappearance and Masaya who, from behind the bars of that Onmitsukidou cage had made it clear he knew far too much to be allowed to safely roam Seireitei. He had not divulged Tenichi's secrets yet — perhaps that was true — but unlike Koku, Tenichi had no confidence in Masaya's general secrecy. He did not understand why the spy had revealed so much about Aizen Kohaku, except to intimidate Tenichi into keeping his mouth shut and the more time that had passed, the more resolved the Eighth Seated officer had become.

He had learned from Kitabata during one of their morning inspections the full details of the Spiritless Zone, and the murders that had taken place there. Expecting to be shocked by this confirmation of

Sakaki's involvement, and therefore the likelihood of Keitarou's guiding hand, the news had instead given him even greater determination to keep his trip to the Rukon a secret for as long as he possibly could. Though he knew infiltration of Onmitsukidou land was both unwise and unlikely to be successful, he had spent most of his free moments — not that there had been many — since his conversation with Koku trying to work out a possible line of attack to get in and silence Masaya before any more could be said. The people from the Fourth, their deaths were sad, but there was nothing Tenichi could do to bring them back. Souja, too, for though the thought of his Vice Captain's corpse still haunted most of his nightmares, he could only do what Koku had told him and try to rise above the speculation by being strong. He had to protect what was important to him, and when he had considered this point most seriously of all, he knew what this was.

Ketsui has father's blood as sure as I do. Kirio too knows Keitarou-san came to our home and spoke to us before Mother died. If those things were to be known, my complicity with Keitarou-san's schemes will be assumed, even if there's no truth in it whatsoever. Even if all I wanted was to help get food to starving people, nobody will believe that. Keitarou-san laid a path, spun a web that I couldn't escape from even if I tried. I saw him all those years ago and none of us raised the alarm. We pretended we had not, and hoped it would go away. Keitarou-san didn't, though, did he? He came to see us in order to find out where we were and what we were doing. From the start he intended to involve me to a point where I could not speak... because of Father, I got snared in, and because of Father, I can't get out.

He tightened his grip on his sword, reflecting on this fact bitterly.

I don't remember the things Father did as a scientist or as a rebel. I remember him as the man who played with us, who told Ketsui stories, who joked with mother about my growth spurts. When he died, I don't know what I felt. Was I angry? I don't even know. Even though I know Hirata-sama's grandfather murdered him, and I know how and why, I don't... hate the Taichou. I didn't hate Fukutaichou, either. Mother raised us away from Father's values, so we wouldn't become tainted. What would she say now, if she knew how much danger I'd brought us both into because of my own foolish naivety? I spoke to nobody about that meeting all those years ago. I allowed myself to be abducted. I was in the Rukon when the massacre in the Spiritless Zone happened. I met the girl who probably did it — nobody would believe that she was trying to kill me too, since I escaped there unscathed. I was found at Father's grave, by those silver haired people I'm not allowed to talk about. Kurotsuchi threatened me and

threatened Ketsui, and because I was abducted and found there, Fukutaichou died and Koku came here.

His brows knitted together in consternation.

I suppose that's someone else I need to protect. He said himself that Kurotsuchi might come after him, if he had the chance. If that's where he's heading, he'll have to pass through Seventh's patrol space to get there. Koku can't fight and defend himself, but I can and I called us allies. Whatever that really means, Koku hasn't betrayed me, and I'm running out of options to choose. I have to trust in him — I already know I can't trust Kurotsuchi, so the simple answer is to kill him. Do that, and a danger disappears. My past isn't important — Mother broke the link when she moved us to Eighth District, and that's what I have to cling to. Any hint of a more recent connection between Keitarou-san and I must be buried again... and we can go back to normal. Whatever that is.

His mind flitted to Kikyue who, pale faced and shadow-eyed, had given him and his fellow patrol members their specific orders before they had dispersed.

For her sake too, it would be better if things were at an end. This would be one step towards that. Acting this way isn't wrong. Killing is, but this is different. This is to protect people. Didn't Ukitake-taichou teach us that we hold our sword to protect? Surely, then, killing someone who's a threat to so many people and a nuisance for the Second Division is justified, even merited?

"You look thoughtful tonight, Kotetsu Tenichi."

The words echoed out of the shadows that were lengthening into full scale blackness along the wall of the division barracks, and Tenichi started, swinging around in the direction of the sound. He could make out nothing in the gloom, but a disembodied chuckle told him that he had not imagined it, and the subject of his thoughts was mocking him from somewhere nearby.

"I imagine that face is for my benefit?" the voice asked smoothly, and Tenichi's eyes narrowed into slits as he raised his sword, brandishing it in the direction he hoped the speaker stood.

"Show yourself, Kurotsuchi," he demanded angrily. "I'm not going to be baited by you this time."

"I think you are," A figure oozed out of the shadow, little more than a silhouette himself to begin with, but as he gained more and more definition, Tenichi could make out the cold gold eyes glittering with derision and he thrust his weapon forward once more, using it to keep space between them.

"If you think I'm going to let you lay a hand on me this time, you've another idea coming," he spat out. "You don't have the Second Division to protect you in a little cell now, and I have my spirit power uncapped and ready to go."

"You're going to fight me?" Masaya stepped into the dim light of the brazier lamps, the odd flicker of brightness glittering off damp patches of the man's clothing, and as all of his body came into clear view, Tenichi was aware of the bloodsoaked knife that he clutched in his left hand. It was a Shihouin dagger, not a regulation Clan affair but one carried by most members of the lower ranking Onmitsukidou, and at the sight of it, Tenichi's brows knitted together.

"Who did you hurt?" he murmured, his mind flitting to Koku.

"Nobody you know," Masaya glanced at the knife before giving it a casual flick, sending a spray of blood cascading onto the cobbles. "An old acquaintance."

He smiled, an unpleasant twist of lips stretched against a row of gleaming white teeth, and despite himself, Tenichi suppressed a shudder.

"You're wrong, by the way," he added casually. "The Second Division weren't protecting me — from you or from anyone else. You were protected from me by them. That and the fact I decided to sit put to see what I could find out. I've learned all I need to know, now. So I left. I hadn't planned on making a personal call, but considering the last time we met, I thought I should re-establish some ground rules. Starting with what might happen to you were you persuaded to talk to anyone about what happened in Rukongai."

"Like I plan on doing that," Tenichi retorted coldly. "I know who you are — who you really are — and you don't scare me. Some former Onmitsukidou with the power to twist his body — that's all. I graduated first in my class, and I was given Eighth Seat in this division over members of the Endou Clan because of my ability. I was head-hunted to come here. I'm not a weak fighter. You had me in your power before because you took me by surprise, and I cooperated because, like you, I wanted information. Now the situation is different. You can't kill someone like me. All I need to do is release my sword,"

He made a cutting motion across his throat with his free left hand.

"You don't even have a *zanpakutou*. That's a common sword, not even a proper *asauchi*. It's nothing in comparison to a released shikai. And I'm already angry. You talk to me about betrayal, but what about you? Leaking secrets about things you shouldn't be talking about to

people who you consider enemies!”

“Oh,” Masaya pressed his lips together pensively. “You mean, about Kohaku?”

“You know I do.”

“Like a child playing with toys he doesn’t understand,” Masaya mocked. “You don’t know what Kohaku is, where he is, or anything about him. I ascertained that much when I spoke his name to Kaidono. As for my betraying that secret... things run deeper and darker than you understand in Keitarou-sama’s world. That creature is not what he thinks it is. Nor what you do. Besides, you believing yourself a match for me is already entertaining enough. Imagining you — or anyone else in this place — is a match for that monster’s power is pure idiocy. It doesn’t matter if they know or they don’t know Kohaku exists. Unless they can see it for what it is and destroy it when its weak, they will never defeat it. And the poison spreads deeply and quickly. Deeper than even I imagined it did.”

“You’re talking in riddles,” Tenichi protested, and Masaya grinned once again.

“Intelligent people understand when they’re being given a warning to back down,” he said softly. “I’m a trained assassin. If you know who I am, you know I don’t shy from death. I didn’t come here to kill you, just to make sure you kept your mouth shut. But if you want to fight, I can do that too. I can kill you and leave you bloody on the cobbles here. Keitarou-sama hasn’t ordered it, but if you are hostile towards me, you are hostile to Keitarou-sama’s cause and therefore worthy of elimination. First you and then that turncoat hiding in the Thirteenth.”

“You know about Koku?” Tenichi’s eyes widened in dismay, despite himself, and Masaya let out a chuckle.

“And so do you, apparently,” he murmured. “Interesting. I wondered how you came to know details about my former identity. Now I suppose I’ve discovered the answer. You’ve formed an alliance, haven’t you? How cute. But I’ve heard he’s injured. Weak and unable to even stand, let alone muster the will to fight. And one other thing you don’t know about your new friend...”

He pressed his head close, and Tenichi slashed his blade up, aiming for Masaya’s jugular, but the spy was gone into shadow almost at once, re-emerging on the Eighth seat’s other side.

“That’s rude, when I’m telling you secrets,” he admonished, his

demeanour suggesting he was more amused than put out by the swing. “You have gained some conviction, though, which is good. Keitarou-sama likes conviction. He likes resolve. As I said, killing you isn’t my brief. I don’t have any interest in you except to ensure your silence. My business is with your new friend — who I should not trust, not if I were you.”

He gazed at his blade, then shrugged.

“Of course, that won’t matter, if I kill him,” he added. “Now might be the time.”

“I won’t let you kill him! Him or anyone else!” Tenichi’s blade glowed with energy as he prepared to summon its shikai release, but Masaya’s next words made him falter.

“Koku betrayed Keitarou-sama by bringing the boy back here,” he said quietly. “He acts for his own interests — unknown interests. He is not your ally, and he is not mine. Your only protection is in keeping silent and away from people as dangerous as that. Whatever face he shows you, you know nothing about him. You know all about me, by your own testimony, and I haven’t lied about it either. I was an assassin. An Onmitsukidou. A squad leader within the Second until ten years ago. These things are true. I kill, and I maim and I do it in Keitarou-sama’s name and no other. But Koku... what do you think his motives are?”

He shook his head.

“He will turn on you too,” he murmured. “To protect himself, to protect his agenda... who knows?”

Tenichi bit his lip, and Masaya chuckled.

“Ah, so your conviction only runs so deep,” he mocked. “Pity. I had hope for a moment that there was more to you than the fool I snared unawares.”

“Koku said there’s another spy somewhere in Seireitei,” Tenichi spoke in low tones. “Was that true, or was it a lie?”

“A spy?” Masaya’s brow twitched in momentary annoyance, then he shrugged his shoulders.

“I don’t know who they are,” he said reluctantly. “Koku probably does, though doubtless he told you he doesn’t. Keitarou-sama hasn’t trusted me with that information. He believes that, if he did, I would go and kill them, and probably, I would. I am the only eyes and ears he needs in Seireitei — and trusting a member of the Gotei is unwise.”

His eyes became slits.

“Ah, but *you’re* a member of the Gotei, aren’t you?” he mocked. “A child of Daisuke-sama, in a place like this, wearing the uniform of the people who took him, killed him, and who treated him like no more than rubbish. Are you sure you’re on the right side, Tenichi-dono? Or is it the ghost of your Vice Captain that frightens you? Because you can’t change what you are. You are a Kotetsu, child of the Urahara. You belong on the right side, not on the shinigami side. Forget Koku. Lower your blade. Honour your father, whilst you still can.”

“You leave Father out of it!” The rage which had abated into uncertainty at the mention of Koku now flared up once more in Tenichi’s heart

“I’m only telling you the truth,” Masaya was unmoved. “You are his son, you belong to Keitarou-sama. You and your brother, too... the one who even *lookslike* an Urahara.”

“What do you know about Ketsui?” Tenichi demanded, and Masaya chuckled.

“I’m Keitarou-sama’s agent, and I know everything,” he said smoothly. “Apparently your brother is the likeness of Daisuke-sama. You might think Keitarou-sama has no interest in Ketsui-dono, but I’m sure you’ll find his intentions will go beyond you if you prove to be useless. Or if I have to kill you. You are the eldest, but if you were to be inadequate...”

He shrugged.

“That’s how it is. You can’t escape, no matter how hard you try. Your job is to protect Keitarou-sama, and by doing so, you can protect Ketsui-dono, too. That seems a fair deal, really, given that you get to keep your current lifestyle.”

“If I kill you, then there’s nothing to escape. The link is broken, and you won’t be there to haunt me any more,” Tenichi snapped back. His blade glimmered once more with a sinister reddish glow, casting blood-edged shadows against the grey cobbles. “You think I won’t, but I will. You think I can’t, but I can. I’m under orders to attack with no hesitation if anyone meeting your description trespasses into my Division’s preserve. Since I know you on sight, I won’t be fooled by your games or your body’s deformations. You can hide, but I will find you. My sword and I — we will both find you.”

His eyes narrowed.

“I usually keep this for shattering Hollow masks,” he added darkly,

“but in your case, an exception can be made. You’re more than half dead already, from everything Koku has said. Killing you will just be finishing the job, and sending you to the place you really belong. *Kiba o muke, Reihahen!*”

As the words left his lips, the reddish energy that coated the surface of the weapon glimmered eerily, swallowing up the sword’s guard and digging deep into the hard metal of the blade, melting and reforging it in a haze of dull crimson energy. The hilt lengthened and hardened into a gleaming ebony staff, carved deep with criss-cross slashes which appeared dyed red by the reiatsu cloud that surrounded it. At its base, the molten mass of silver curved and sharpened, forming a razor blade edge which hardened and tapered to a needle-sharp point. A length of leather wrapped itself firmly around Tenichi’s right wrist, looping itself to the weapon at midpoint to strengthen his hold, and Tenichi clasped the end in his left, swinging the weapon around in an arc to dispel the last lingering fragments of spirit energy before thrusting the silver tip in Masaya’s direction.

“You better raise that dagger thing of yours,” he said softly. “Though it won’t be much use to you against Reihahen.”

“So your *zanpakutouis* a *naginata*.” Masaya arched an eyebrow. “Escaping a bladed weapon is much the same regardless of where the edge comes. Your reiatsu is impressive, but not enough to swallow me up. Your sword is pretty, but you won’t use something that flashy to catch an assassin. Haven’t you realised yet that we live in the...”

“*Kobahashi!*” Tenichi cut across Masaya’s words with a command that echoed through the night air, swinging his *naginata* down and thrusting the blade in the direction of the wooden boundary fence that crossed the divide between Masaya and the main *shinigami* thoroughfare that ran alongside the division. He wheeled the weapon back towards his own body, and there was an answering creak and groan, then the sound of something splintering and the fence exploded into a cloud of wooden shrapnel. Long thin shards of broken bamboo sped through the air like miniature javelins, sharp as arrow shafts despite the fact they lacked the metal tip. Despite himself, Masaya jerked back away from the blast, slipping into *shunpo* and re-materialising out of the line of fire before he could be impaled by a particularly large wedge of wood. Although he had avoided the worst of the attack, Tenichi noticed with some satisfaction that he had not evaded it completely, for the blood that now covered his dagger arm was now as much his own as his earlier victim’s, and a slick streak of red ran across beneath his eye, oozing slowly down his cheek like crimson tears.

He swung the naginata around again in satisfaction, pointing the weapon at Masaya once more.

“Still so sure you can escape?” he challenged. “I don’t need to see you to impale you. You can’t remove the physical presence of your body, even if you can stop me from seeing it. Blooding my blade would be a shame, but I don’t need to be able to touch you to kill you, not now I’ve released.”

His lips twitched into a grim smile.

“A naginata is a physical, contact weapon,” he added, “designed to cut, hook or slash an opponent within the range of its swing. It has more reach than a katana might, but mine has the added advantage of ranged attacks *beyond* the length of its swing. My *reiryokuis* in tune with the wood in the surrounding area, and Reihahen acts like a snake-charmer, luring it into the field of attack. You can see that here there’s plenty of ammunition for me to draw on — that’s why I volunteered for this location when we were dispatched to stand guard. I can use the whole barrier if I need to, if it’s to protect Seventh and my position here. I am not afraid of you, nor your history as an assassin. Coming to bait me was a mistake, since the tables are turning.”

He thrust his naginata blade at the fence on the other side of the compound, feeling the angry energy welling up within his sword once more in anticipation of a second attack.

“*Kobahashi!*”

“*Hadou no Gojuu-hachi: Tenran!*” As a second section of fence imploded in on itself, blasting debris once more in the spy’s direction, Masaya released his grip on the dagger in his hand, spinning it around before thrusting his palm up against its guard. A whirlwind of kidou energy poured out across the Division barracks, meeting the splinter-arrows head on and driving them back, scattering them across the cobbles as though dropped there by a sudden summer tornado. Tenichi’s expression twisted into a grimace of determination, his grip on the naginata staff tightening until his knuckles became white.

“Kidou isn’t going to stop me,” he said darkly. “If you hadn’t come here, I was going to come to find you. I was looking for you. Listening for you. Waiting for you. I was going to kill you, and that’s what I intend to do. You can run, you can hide, but you won’t escape me. I have too much to protect, and no reason to call you my ally. Koku might or might not be as you say. I don’t know, and I don’t care. Right now my issue is with you — the one who’s been a thorn in my side

since that night you took me from outside Twelfth. I've trained hard with this weapon since before I was a recruit, and I came here because my skills were valued and above the mainstream. My Kidou isn't bad either, however — and I can match you fire for fire if you want to play it that way.”

“And vandalise your whole division? I don't think so.” Masaya snorted. “Your Captain would have something to say, wouldn't he, if you brought down his barracks in pursuit of a fugitive? I'm sure your orders don't include killing me, since Kai-dono seemed quite keen to keep plying me with questions. It might be hard to explain if you succeeded, Kotetsu Tenichi... why you went to so much trouble to kill someone you had only been instructed to detain. Mind you, it would be even harder to explain, if you failed...”

His eyes narrowed, and he disappeared into shunpo, reappearing within the range of Tenichi's weapon and reaching out to grasp the other man by the throat of his *hakamashita*, forcing him physically up against the remaining post of the perimeter gate. Tenichi tried to bring his *zanpakutou* down against Masaya's back, but the angle of the assassin's hold was just enough to prevent it, and Masaya's lips twisted into another ugly smile.

“See, the Onmitsukidou train their people to exploit the weaknesses of all kinds of offensive weaponry,” he hissed. “At this range, you can't swing at me and you can't impale me without risking your own life. The only reason I won't kill you now is because I haven't been given the order. If you were to talk... if you were to open your mouth and say one word about things you should keep to yourself, I will know. I will hear of it, and I will make sure they're the last words you speak. You can shatter fences and walls as much as you like with that glittering toy of yours, but you can't kill me as easily as that. I'm blessed with life beyond life. You can't kill one who's already seen death and walked away.”

“Kotetsu-hasseki! Kotetsu-hasseki!”

The voice of a recruit, followed by the sound of footsteps hurrying across the courtyard towards them made the spy hesitate for a moment, then raise his hand in preparation to blast the youngster out of existence but, as his fingers glittered with the unmistakeable glow of *Oukasen*, Tenichi wrenched himself free, flinging the *naginata* out between himself and the recruit and spinning it around to deflect the golden flare up into the air. The recruit let out a shriek of dismay as the bolt made contact with the Endou logo that hung above the gate of the division, searing the corner off and melting the edge of the

chain so that it creaked and then hung at a precarious angle. It did not fall, but Masaya hopped back, clear amusement on his face.

“Stop picking on children when I’ve already said I’m your match!” Tenichi’s features were black as thunder as he wheeled round to face the spy once more. “Stop playing coward’s games and fight me fair with that dagger of yours.”

“I’ve no interest in fighting you at all, not now the cavalry are coming,” Masaya said with a dismissive shrug of his shoulders. Casting the recruit a look of disdain, he melted back into the shadows, and try as he might, the Eighth seat could no longer detect the man’s presence around the division grounds. He took a heavy breath of air into his lungs, knowing it was his duty to turn and make sure the recruit was not hurt, but it was with any amount of reluctance that he turned away from the devastated barrier fence, his eyes widening with dismay as he saw that someone else had reached the boy first.

“Hajime-dono?” he whispered, and Hajime raised his gaze, meeting Tenichi’s expression with a grim one of his own.

“We felt your sword release,” he said briskly. “Kikyue-hime already sent someone to Second, since the Taichou’s gone to Eighth to speak to Kyouraku-taichou about something, but it looks like the man escaped. Did he hurt you? I saw you deflect the flare of magic away from the kid here — he’s not hurt, but... that fence...”

“I did some damage,” Tenichi’s pulse was still racing, and it was all he could do not to snap at his superior officer, the urge to hunt Masaya down coupled with the fear of the man’s escape still uppermost in his mind. “I’m sorry, Hajime-dono. He was threatening me and threatening Seventh. I had to release.”

“Well, we’ll deal with that matter inside,” Hajime got to his feet, yanking the nervous youngster to his with a rough tug of his arm. “You too. Go inside, and don’t be so foolish as to disobey a command again. You were meant to stay within the barracks, and even if a senior officer releases his sword, you are not required to run out and gawp at it. Understand?”

The recruit gaped, then hung his head, trudging back inside with a desolate look on his young face, and Hajime sighed, turning back to Tenichi.

“Put your sword away,” he said gruffly. “We’ll talk inside. It’s better that way. Second will be here soon, and it’ll be enough to explain to Kai-dono why their prisoner escaped. Or why he was here in the first place.”

“Mm,” Tenichi swallowed hard, not trusting himself to speak, though he reluctantly returned his sword to its sealed katana state, sliding it slowly into its scabbard. Hajime cast him a keen glance.

“You wanted to nail him,” he observed. “That’s good spirit to have. You’re not an Endou, but perhaps you’re learning from being around us. I was impressed with the resolve I felt in your aura, and so would Fukutaichou have been. He thought you were a good acquisition for this Division, and I’m seeing now what he meant. You’ve worked hard and been a solid member of Seventh in a period of crisis — that won’t be forgotten, when things calm down and everything is regarded clearly.”

“...Sir?” Tenichi sent his companion a horrified glance, but Hajime laughed.

“You didn’t reel this one in. That’s experience, but it’ll come,” he said wisely, clapping his hand companionably across the other’s shoulders. “In the meantime...”

“I’m sorry to interrupt, Hajime-dono, but I’d like to speak to Kotetsu myself, if I may, before the Division debrief him.”

As they reached the door of the barracks, Kai himself stepped out onto the cobbles, meeting Tenichi’s gaze briefly, then offering Hajime a fleeting smile. “I realise it’s unorthodox, but the escaped prisoner has already killed once tonight, and I need to know as soon as possible what happened here.”

His eyes flickered back towards Tenichi, and he frowned.

“Particularly why it seems to be you who encountered him,” he said softly. “It is a very unfortunate coincidence, don’t you think?”

“Kai-dono, Kotetsu just protected one of our more stupid juniors from getting incinerated alive,” Hajime said frankly. “In the circumstances...”

“In these circumstances, witnesses are the first line of enquiry, and my rank supersedes yours,” Kai’s smile remained, but now it was flinty, his gold eyes every bit as predatorial as Hajime’s own. “I have the consent of Kikyue-dono to act as I please in this regard. I have important questions to ask your Eighth Seated Officer in relation to tonight’s events, and I mean to get to the bottom of it whether you cooperate or not. Your Captain is currently next door with the Eighth, comparing information and in his absence, I will have my way. Kotetsu?”

Tenichi stared at Kai, a mixture of anger and indignation flaring up

inside him once more at the brisk, matter-of-fact the other division's adjutant had asserted his rights.

"I didn't do anything," he muttered. "I was defending myself. And the recruit. Like Hajime-dono says."

"Yet there must be a reason why he came here, of all places," Kai's gaze bored into Tenichi's, and despite himself, the Eighth seat dropped his gaze, knowing that if he continued to glare at the Second's Vice Captain, he would be accused of insubordination.

If Souja-dono had been here, he thought bitterly to himself, clenching his fists.

"Then I'll proceed with my questions indoors, if I may," Kai cast Hajime a glance, and the older man's brows drew together in consternation.

"Kikyue-dono gave her authority?"

"She did, but I act in the authority of the Onmitsukidou, and as such, I have the right to overrule the views of a Third Seat or, indeed, a Fourth Seated officer if I feel they are obstructing my duty. I am invoking that right now." Kai spoke calmly, his words grating against Tenichi's last nerve. "I want to know everything I can about Suzuki Naoto, and his escape this evening. Particularly why, of all people, it should be Kotetsu Tenichi he apparently singled out. We believe Suzuki to be involved somehow in the events that led to your Vice Captain's death — in those circumstances, I advise cooperation. From *all* parties."

This last was directed particularly at Tenichi, who flinched in annoyance, but Hajime sighed, shrugging his shoulders.

"If that's the order, so be it," he said, though it was clear that he was not happy about it either. "I'll come with you, Kotetsu. We'll humour Kai-dono's request and then get back to some proper duties. This missing spy is Second's mistake and Second's problem — but he has the pull of rank and we can't argue with that. We'll just have to help them mop it up however best we can."

"You know, you could try and look a little bit more welcoming, when someone's taken the time and effort to come pay you a visit,"

Kirio unlaced the shutter ties on the window of the sickroom, pulling the slatted divides across to block out the sunset before turning to cast the drowsy Koku a teasing smile. "From what Tsunemori-san said outside the door, you barely spoke a single word

to him today — and Edogawa-san said you were in dead silence when she was changing your bandages and trying to persuade you to eat her soup. This is not the way a guest usually behaves towards his hosts, you know — you could make more effort to be sociable, when we're giving up so much of our time to see to your needs."

"I don't remember asking for anyone to do anything, and I don't think it's really a 'guest' situation when I don't have a choice about being here," Koku grunted, opening his eyes fully and swivelling his gaze across the chamber towards where the young woman was tightly re-knotting the lace cords over the hooks so that they would not bang in the evening breeze. "On the contrary, I was trying to sleep — now you're here, though, I don't suppose I'm going to get a chance. You don't need anyone to hold a conversation with you — you'll talk whether I ask you to or not."

"Well, if you don't respond, there's not much else for me to do, is there?" Kirio said matter-of-factly, coming to sit down beside the bed on the small wooden stool. "Tsunemori-san's quite retiring and quiet and not the kind of person to push his nose in where he's not invited, but I'm afraid that's not my way. Besides, it doesn't look very pretty if all you do is frown, pout and sulk. We already established that you're hard done by — so let go of the attitude for a bit and humour us, all right? Sooner you heal, sooner you can leave — and if you're miserable and glum all the time, nobody's going to want to cut you loose."

"I'm not a sociable person as a rule," Koku said mildly, nonetheless dragging his bandaged body into a more upright position with a sigh of resignation. Kirio grabbed a spare pillow from the pile by the door, handing it to him and the young man took it, glancing at it thoughtfully for a moment before slipping it behind his spine to support him more securely. "I told you, I spend time by myself. I'm not used to someone always being in my face... and here, it seems that no matter when I sleep or wake, someone's hovering around me waiting to do something."

"Feed you, change your bandages, check your wounds, take your temperature, ensure you're doing all right," Kirio counted off the tasks on her fingers. "You might think you're the victim in all this, but we're taking care of you on top of our other duties. Spare a thought for me coming in here after a long day's work and at least attempt a smile from time to time, all right? That's not too much to ask, is it?"

Koku eyed her for a moment, but made no response, and Kirio grinned.

“All right, you’re antisocial. I get it,” she said lightly, “but you could at least be a little grateful to me today. I’ve done you a favour, and it’s poor form not to thank someone properly. District people learn manners just as sure as Clan ones, so there’s no excuses.”

“The things you seem to classify as ‘favours’ are things I tend to read as ‘annoyances’,” Koku muttered acerbically, and Kirio laughed, amusement glittering in her gaze.

“See, Tsunemori-san never gets to see this side of you,” she said playfully. “Even though you say I get on your nerves and you want me to go away, you talk to me much more than you do anyone else. I guess you’re more lonely than you think you are.”

“Chance would be a fine thing,” Koku said bluntly. “You don’t take a hint, that’s all. You’re here more than anyone, smiling and cheery and acting like we’re life-long friends and it bothers me. We don’t know each other. You want information from me and I don’t know the things you want me to say, so it doesn’t matter how sugar sweet you are to me, it’s not going to change anything. You might as well be like your quiet friend and just let me to myself.”

“No, because I don’t like that way of seeing things,” Kirio shook her head. “We have something in common. You’re on your own, and I’ve been like that, too. You’re stuck in a strange place surrounded by people you don’t know and I know how scary that can be. I’m not going to leave you to stew, even if you want me to. It’s not good for you, not with all you’ve been through. Maybe you don’t know about Souja-dono’s killer, but that’s not really my business or my investigation. Taichou is the one who’s pursuing that and he’s made it clear to me that I’m just to do what I can to help keep you comfortable, not try and prise information from you. So it doesn’t matter whether you know things or not — I’m still going to be here, regardless.”

“I see,” Koku pressed his lips together, then a faint, droll smile touched the edges of his lips. “Well, and I heard that shinigami could be brutal, judgemental and violent. I didn’t realise they also excelled in irritation techniques.”

“It’s one of my specialties,” Kirio dimpled. “I don’t like seeing people unhappy, so if they are, I want to help. Even if that means they get annoyed at me, well, being annoyed at me often takes their mind off what’s actually bothering them. Tenichi and I used to have fights over stupid things all the time, but we’d always end up laughing about it at the end. He’d say it was a talent I had — to butt in and somehow make it better. I don’t know if it works on strangers, but since you’re

determined to be sorry for yourself, I figured I'd try."

"Ten... ichi?" Koku's expression flickered slightly with consternation, and Kirio nodded.

"He's a member of another division — he used to be here in Thirteenth, but not any more," she agreed, folding her hands pensively in her lap. "You probably don't remember, but he was here, briefly, the day you first roused up. We were students together, and I knew his family very well. He's one of my closest friends — more like a brother in some ways. He's never been good at admitting when things are on his mind, so I used to drag them out of him by getting him angry, and it always worked."

"So you think you can do the same to me?" Koku arched an eyebrow, and Kirio shrugged.

"You're a pretty challenging grump," she admitted, "and I guess you really aren't used to talking about things that bother you, or scare you, and so you're determined to play it tough with us here. It's fine, though. You don't need to. You're not that old, really, not yet — you don't have to take everything on your shoulders."

"I'm twenty one," Koku's response came stiffly, and Kirio knew she'd offended the youngster by her suggestion. Her grin widened.

"I wondered how old you were," she admitted. "All right, so you are an adult — but even twenty one is still pretty young. Some people are still at the Academy at twenty one — not out in the world fighting and killing Hollows."

"I don't kill Hollows, so I guess that doesn't matter," Koku shifted his position slightly against the pillows. "I'm not a child, Kirio-san. You wouldn't like it if I called you 'obasan', so don't make assumptions on my account."

"Oba... san?" Kirio's eyes widened, then she burst into a peal of laughter. "Oh, you are horrible. You're right, I would object if you called me that — I'm nowhere near old enough for that kind of a label, thank you very much! All right, I take your point — no more comments about your age."

"Then maybe you'll shut up and let me sleep?" Koku asked hopefully, and Kirio shook her head.

"Not quite," she replied. "It's early yet, and you slept a lot this morning, according to Tsunemori-san. You need sleep to heal, but it's not good for you to do it all of the time."

"There's not exactly much else for me to do," Koku pointed out acidly, and Kirio nodded.

"I know," she admitted, "so that's why I did you a favour. I told you that I had, didn't I?"

"Ye-es," Koku responded cautiously, a wary expression entering his brown eyes, and Kirio's smile widened.

"Don't look like that," she scolded. "It's not as though I'm about to drag you out of bed, dress you in kimono and parade you through the centre of the division. I just thought you might like something else to focus on."

She ferretted around in her *obi*, pulling a soft-cover book from beneath the folds and setting it down on the bedcovers. "I'm not meant to take books from the library, but Taichou said it would be all right to take something small if it was to keep you occupied."

"A book?" Despite himself Koku's eyes glittered slightly with excitement, and his fingers stretched out to brush against the soft vellum cover. Then he faltered, frowning and casting Kirio a quizzical look.

"You're assuming I can read?"

"Well, a lot of District kids can," Kirio admitted, "but I chose this book on the off-chance you couldn't. It's a book of Seireitei legends, and it's one of my favourites because it has several really pretty illustrations. I thought that if you could read the text it might amuse you for a bit, but even if not, the pictures might appeal to you."

"I see." Koku hesitated a moment longer, then curled his fingers around the spine of the book, pulling it slowly towards him and turning it so that he could see the cover. The characters across the front were old and a little faded, but a tiny smile touched his lips as he traced his index finger across them.

"Thank you," he said at length. "As it happens, I can read. And... I like reading. I like it very much."

"Really?" Kirio's expression became one of relief, then, "I sort of hoped you might. I mean, if you were able to read... because reading is something you can do on your own, and, well, you seem to like... those kinds of things."

"I suppose so," Koku glanced up in surprise at her perception, then another faint smile touched his wan features. "I suppose you win again."

“Well, regardless of whether we catch Souja-dono’s killer or we don’t, and whether or not you can help us with doing that, you matter to us too,” Kirio said honestly. “Taichou’s said it, and Fukutaichou too — that when things die down and you’re all healed up, it’s our duty to make sure you have a say in your future beyond here. If you need to get far from Inner Seireitei, then the Thirteenth will make sure you do — we won’t follow you, or even ask where you want to go, if you’re determined not to tell us, but we will make sure you have everything you need to survive on your own when we let you go. You might feel like a virtual prisoner at the moment, but we don’t see you like that. At least, I don’t. Actually, I’m grateful for having you here, believe it or not.”

“I can’t imagine why you would be,” Koku blinked, bewildered, and Kirio laughed.

“When Taichou first sent me to help you in the forest, I didn’t know anything about assisting wounded people,” she admitted, “and I didn’t know what to do to help you. It bothered me, but Taichou had made you my responsibility, so I had to act on it and do the best I could. Then I decided I wanted to help you and get you to trust me, because I was worried about Tenichi — Souja-dono was his Vice Captain, so I thought if I knew what happened to him, I could make Tenichi feel better. But Tenichi... the last time I saw him, he seemed all right, and you know, busy, but coping. And Taichou has been taking care of the investigation, so I guess I decided... that the most important thing I could do in all of this was help Edogawa-san in treating you. Annoying you is all my own talent, but I’ve learned a lot about first aid and basic medical treatment I would never have come to know without your being here. I know it’s been horrible for you, getting slashed up and dragged out here like this — but because you were, I hope that I might be able to be of use with injured officers in the future. And that might help save their lives. You might not have saved Souja-dono’s life, and I know that upset you — but you might have helped save other lives just by being caught up in things the way you were. Little things often lead to bigger ones — so in return for being able to learn so many new useful things, I want to try and make your time here less difficult.”

Koku stared at her, digesting this, then he sighed, scooping up the book and flicking open the first page.

“You’re really very annoying,” he murmured, more than half to himself. “I really didn’t want to start liking shinigami, but you make it very difficult.”

“Did you just admit you liked my company?” Kirio teased, reaching out a balled fist to bop him lightly on the arm, and he scowled, casting her a glower.

“I said nothing of the sort,” he retorted firmly. “You must be hearing things... maybe your Taichou is making you take on too much.”

“Perhaps he is,” Kirio grinned. “But I’m glad that you’ll at least talk like this with me. You don’t have to trust me or anyone else here if you don’t want to, or tell us anything about yourself or your life — but it makes me feel happier about you if you’re lively and answering back like this. Sometimes you seem so withdrawn and miserable, and then... I worry about what you’ll do when all of this is over.”

“That makes two of us,” Koku admitted, propping the book up against his knees, “but the future is as it is, and nothing can change it, so I guess I’ll face it — whatever it happens to be — when that time comes.”

“I suppose that’s true for all of us,” Kirio agreed, “though you sound like an old man when you talk like that.”

“Well, at least you’re not calling me a kid, now,” Koku said pointedly. “Are you going to let me read this book, then, or are you just going to keep talking regardless?”

“Seriously, who taught you your manners?” Kirio scolded, and Koku shrugged.

“I guess I didn’t have a traditional upbringing,” he said ironically, smoothing out the first page of the book and tracing his finger along the columns of kanji as he scanned through the contents page. The weave of a green stem adorned with blooming red and white roses trailed across the paper, and he paused, touching his nail gingerly against the first illustration.

“They are pretty. You’re right.”

“I love roses,” Kirio agreed. “They’re such a bold flower. Of course, officially I have to be loyal to the snowdrop, since it’s our divisional emblem, but secretly...”

“I don’t know what a snowdrop is,” Koku admitted, pursing his lips. “I don’t know the names of any flowers, or much about them at all, really.”

“Well, you’re a boy, so I guess it can’t be helped,” Kirio rolled her eyes. “Probably you spent your youth rolling in mud-puddles and

climbing trees — although you don't look like you'd be very good at either, to be perfectly honest."

"I never did either one," Koku shook his head. "I did spend a lot of time by the river bank, and I liked sitting beneath the branches of a tree to read — but that was about all."

"Can you fish?" Kirio eyed him doubtfully, and Koku snorted, shaking his head.

"I don't kill things," he reminded her, "and there were no fish in that river, anyway. Besides, I can't swim... so I would've drowned trying."

"Killing things for food is different from just going on a bloody rampage," Kirio objected, and Koku shrugged.

"I don't care. I can't do it," he admitted. "It makes me feel funny. I see it in their eyes, before they die... people, animals, birds... fish. It doesn't matter... I can see that last flicker of fear before all the light goes out and then..."

He faltered, clamping his mouth shut as though he had said more than he had intended, and Kirio sighed.

"You really don't like death at all, do you?" she murmured, and Koku shook his head.

"It's a fact of life," he responded gravely, "but it doesn't mean you have to like it. I don't like it. That's all."

Before Kirio could muster up a response or a change of subject, there was a sharp rap against the wooden door, and it slid back, revealing an anxious looking Makoto.

"Hikifune, we've had an alert from the Second," he said, casting Koku a doubtful glance then turning his gaze to his immediate subordinate. "Taichou wants everyone to report to the main mess hall immediately. It seems something's going down. He said not to worry about sentry duty, because Edogawa-san is here and will come and take over for you."

"Something at Second?" Kirio got to her feet, a look of confusion on her features. "Taichou wants all of us? Are you sure?"

"That's what he said. Everyone who's on site and not on patrol is to report to the mess hall at once," Makoto nodded impatiently. "Stop fussing and come on — your waif will be fine, I told you, and this is your real job, not babysitting a witness."

“I suppose if it’s an order.” Kirio grimaced, casting Koku a glance.

“I guess you got your wish,” she added ironically. “At least till Edogawa-san gets here, you have some peace and quiet to read your book.”

“I’ve no objections,” Koku returned the glance with a wry smile. “I’m not planning on running away anywhere in the ten seconds or so I’m alone, Kirio-san. It hurts far too much to go sightseeing, and I have something to keep me busy, so I’m sure I’ll hardly notice your absence.”

Kirio pulled a graphic face at the young man, but made no retort, instead following Makoto into the corridor and shutting the door behind her with a soft click.

“I guess the kid does speak,” Makoto remarked. “I’d understood he was pretty much mute with people flitting around him, but he seems to be fine with you.”

“I irritate him, and it gets him to respond,” Kirio dimpled. “I can’t help but fuss over him, Atsudane-san. It makes me think of my little brother... I think Koku’s about the age my brother would’ve been now, or no, he’d even be some years younger. It makes me want to protect him, even though he clearly wants nothing at all from us.”

“Well, right now you need to be a shinigami, instead of big sister,” Makoto said frankly. “I didn’t want to say anything in there, in case it put the spooks into the lad, bearing in mind he’s not used to all this crap we deal with, but I think something pretty major’s going down. It’s to do with the prisoner you guys took to Second — there was a message from Kai-dono and though Taichou hasn’t said in explicit detail, I think he’s got loose.”

“And he’s coming this way?” Kirio looked alarmed, and Makoto shrugged.

“Can’t see why he would. Taichou bested him once, and he’d be a fool if he did,” he reflected. “No, I think it’s a general alert, and I guess it’s not impossible that the Onmitsukidou might want to do a full sweep of our grounds. It’s not like them to let someone loose, but there’s something funny about this guy. I dunno what it is, but even though we’re pretty much as far as you can get from Second, Division wise, Taichou took the message seriously.”

He pushed open the door of the mess hall, ushering his companion inside, and Kirio could see that the rest of the Thirteenth were already present, Juushirou in his white *haori* at the front of the gathering. His

expression was grave, and at their entrance he gestured for them to join the rest.

“Makoto’s told you?” he asked, and Kirio nodded.

“Yes, sir. There’s been a message from Second about the prisoner we took in Outer Seireitei,” she agreed, and Juushirou nodded.

“I’m sorry to tear you from your other duty, but since you and Tsunemori were both there that morning, I wanted you present here now,” he said quietly. “Sadly it seems Second have failed to hold him. Mitsuki, I’ll entrust Koku’s well-being to you — though I trust he was in no distress when you left him, Kirio?”

“He’s quite sparky this evening, sir,” Kirio said dryly. “I think he’s feeling better than he was.”

“Good,” Juushirou offered a harried smile. “Then Mitsuki, with any luck your job will be fairly painless.”

“I’ll go gather together supplies to change his dressings, since I have to do that before he settles down to sleep,” Mitsuki said. “You can leave him to me.”

“I’ll come with you,” Naoko said firmly, and Juushirou cast her a surprised look.

“Naoko?”

“I don’t want Mitsuki wandering around the division alone if there’s an escaped felon on the loose,” Naoko said grimly. “You don’t need me here, Taichou, so I’d like permission to stick with her instead, please. I won’t intrude on her sickroom manner, but I’d be happier if someone was with her, in case Mitsuki’s still on a target list somewhere.”

“Naoko, I don’t need...” Mitsuki began, but Juushirou held up his hand.

“Naoko has a point,” he said evenly. “There’s no reason to suppose the felon will come here, but since Mitsuki is in our company and her life has been threatened, it makes good sense to ensure her security. Very well, permission is granted. Though Naoko, we’re under orders to catch the man, not kill him. Remember that, please.”

“I’ll do my best,” Naoko said crisply, meeting her friend’s gaze, and Mitsuki sighed, but nodded, leading the way out of the mess hall. Once the two women were gone, Juushirou took his own seat.

“Since you all know bits and pieces, let me give you the full outline

of the situation as it stands,” he said quietly. “Second sent a message earlier this evening to say that the man Tsunemori, Kirio and I captured in the forests around the District Two/Three border had broken loose from his holding cell. He’d used Kidou to knock out two guards, but had not harmed them, and to begin with they thought he might be close by, but then it was discovered that another prisoner held in more closed security had had his throat slit at some point, probably by the same individual.”

“He killed someone, then ran?” Ketsui’s eyes widened. “He escaped from the Onmitsukidou but stopped back to commit a murder before trying to get away?”

“This individual is good at concealing himself, and he has some unusual abilities,” Juushirou said grimly. “We saw his ability to extend his arms beyond their normal length, and I imagine he can probably do far more in this regard to slip through bars and escape. To begin with, Second were very cagey about revealing this but I’ve had leave to do so now and so I will. The escaped man is a former member of the Onmitsukidou division, by the name of Suzuki Naoto. Ten years ago he performed a similar escape from Second custody whilst awaiting judgement for an alleged crime. The main accuser in that case is the man who has now been murdered in the high security cell, so it seems probable that we are indeed dealing with Suzuki. He was believed to have died following his escape, but that now seems unlikely. Suzuki Naoto was a squad captain in the regiment and well trained in discretionary arts, as well as those of a shinigami. He is potentially dangerous. We do not know what weapon he might carry, or if he’s discarded the blade that he used to cut the other prisoner’s throat somewhere on his travels, but as I mentioned before, he has Kidou skills.”

He paused, his eyes flitting to Kirio then to Ketsui, pausing for a moment on the silver head of the new recruit Izumi, and Kirio saw the tension flicker in her Captain’s eyes.

“I don’t believe Thirteenth is his target, and it is possible he will simply flee Seireitei, but we don’t want him to repeat his antics of ten years ago and disappear into the unknown a second time,” he continued wearily. “That being the case, I want you all to be on your guard. When you head out on your patrols, and your duties here within the division, be prepared. Do not get taken off guard. It is highly likely this man was at the very least involved in abducting members of the Gotei for unknown purposes, including a former member of our own, and so we have to be on our guard at all times.”

Another pause, then, at length,

“Kirio, Tsunemori, since you’ve knowledge of this felon’s appearance, I’ve been asked to spare you to help Eighth and Twelfth to know what they’re looking for. Sekime-taichou is concerned that recent work she’s been doing on the investigation into Souja-dono’s death might be a target for the escapee, whilst as I think you are all aware, Eighth Division have been doing investigations of their own into the business and would like a more accurate heads up on the person they’re seeking. That being so, Tsunemori, I want you to go next door to Twelfth, and Kirio, I’m sending you to Eighth.”

“At once, sir?” Kirio looked startled, and Juushirou nodded, but before anyone could make a move, a small, slightly bedraggled black butterfly flitted in through the window of the chamber, dancing dizzily around in a circle as though unsure where it should land. Enishi let out an exclamation of surprise, reaching out a thick finger to provide the insect with a perch, and as it settled itself against the Vice Captain’s calloused digit, it fluttered its wings slightly before dissipating in a cloud of blue-black dust.

“Enishi?” Juushirou cast his adjutant a quizzical look, and Enishi’s brows drew together.

“Message from Kitabata of the Seventh,” he said grimly. “Sounds like the felon made an appearance there. There was a tussle between him and some of Seventh’s people, but he got away. He’s still in Inner Seireitei, though, by the looks — maybe it’s not a good idea, sending Hikifune alone in that direction.”

“At Seventh?” Ketsui looked anxious. “Is Ten-nii...”

“No details in the report, kid, just the basics,” Enishi replied briskly. “Kitabata didn’t mention any casualties, just that there’d been a skirmish, so take that look off your face. You too, Hikifune. Tenichi’s a strong lad and Seventh isn’t the kind of division you want to mess with in their current mindset. It’s more likely the felon’s the one who took some bruises, and that’s why he made a run for it.”

“But he is still here and he must have been around the Seventh for a reason,” Juushirou reflected. “You’re right, Enishi. Kirio, I’m keeping you here. Shu... Kyouraku-taichou will just have to do without you. If the land around Seventh has been compromised, well, Suzuki knows your face and might try to hurt you.”

“What about me, sir? Should I still go to Twelfth?” Tsunemori asked apprehensively, and Juushirou nodded.

“Yes, but I won’t have you go alone. Kira, go with him,” he said decidedly. “Makoto, I want you to gather your usual patrol group and do a sweep of the perimeter — everyone is to carry *zanpakutou*.”

His gaze fell on Izumi again, and he frowned.

“There will be *no* recruits stepping outside of the main barrack building until further notice,” he decided firmly. “All ranked officers who are usually numbered in Naoko’s patrol, I want you to take the area around the koi pond at the rear of the Division grounds. Enishi, I want you to send a message to Eighth to let them know not to expect any of our members, then take charge of that group please. Kirio, I’m going to put you in charge of the recruits instead — your duty will be to ensure all the usual routine duties are carried out and to provide back-up and support if Makoto needs it. Ketsui, I want you with Kirio, please. There’ll be no mad dashes into the night to see if your brother is all right, not when your own division members need you, and I’m sure there will be plenty for the two of you to oversee. While it seems unlikely that Thirteenth will be a target, it’s better to be safe than sorry, so I want you both to have your swords with you just in case. You all have permission to utilise Kidou within the barracks complex and Division grounds if you feel it absolutely necessary, but try not to set fire to any buildings if you can help it, please.”

He raised his hand, acknowledging Enishi’s rueful grimace with a wry smile, then,

“Division dismissed.”

“Was it really all right, do you think, letting them go without telling them the other report we had this evening?”

As Enishi made his way towards the door, he paused, turning back to face his Captain across the now empty mess hall. “With that Ichimaru kid here, and this shadow on the loose, do you think we should’ve given them more idea of what’s at stake?”

“That Suzuki’s escape and the secure message I received from Third Division may be connected?” Juushirou rubbed his temples, letting out a heavy sigh. “What should I have said, Enishi? Keitarou’s been sighted in the Real World. That’s as much as we know. Maybe Suzuki was waiting for some sign, maybe he wasn’t. Perhaps this is part of the plan, perhaps it isn’t. Maybe Izumi is in danger... but I’ve taken what precautions I can, and I don’t know how giving Ketsui, Kirio or anyone else information would be of benefit. Knowledge isn’t necessarily a weapon against someone like Keitarou.”

“True enough, on past evidence,” Enishi agreed grimly. “Just, that silver haired kid might be as smart as her brother told us, but she doesn’t give me a lot of confidence in being able to defend herself. Girl can’t hold a sword properly, let alone swing it, though Ketsui, give him his due, spent a good three hours this morning trying to teach her. If we’re attacked, it seems pretty sure to me that it’d be her, not Edogawa who’d be targeted. I don’t want to lose either Ketsui or Hikifune in a scramble to protect that fox cub.”

“Me either,” Juushirou admitted. “I’ve encountered Suzuki, though, and I believe Kirio would be a match for him, providing she was aware of his presence — which would leave Ketsui to, hopefully, protect the recruits, Izumi included.”

“And if Keitarou follows up his attack on Nagesu-sama with one on Seireitei?” Enishi asked quizzically. Juushirou frowned, eying his adjutant pensively.

“You’ve been giving this an undue amount of thought, haven’t you?” he asked softly, and Enishi hesitated, then lowered his head in a nod.

“I don’t like thinking in terms of intrigue,” he admitted with a grimace. “It knots up my brain, and makes my head spin. But I do understand that the Ichimaru girl being here is important, and us protecting her is, too. And I know that it’s not good to have a former Onmitsukidou roaming loose after already killing a guy when it was my Captain who first brought him into custody. Nagesu-sama’s report was just the icing on the cake. What I do understand is hostile intent. The report from Third makes concrete everyone’s suspicions about Keitarou, so that makes it real. And the last time he showed his face, he had it in mind to kill you. Add to that the Ichimaru girl, and it makes Thirteenth a pretty attractive target, don’t you think? Especially if you consider Shikibu and Edogawa are also here.”

“We don’t know, yet, that Mitsuki was attacked by Keitarou’s forces in the Spiritless Zone,” Juushirou objected, but Enishi shook his head.

“Even I see that she was, so I’m sure you do too,” he said gruffly. “I mean no disrespect if I’m speaking out of turn, Ukitake, but it doesn’t take a genius to know that if the girl who killed Souja killed the healers in the Spiritless Zone, well, then it’s unlikely what happened to Aomori and Edogawa was coincidence. Shikibu thinks that way too, because we’ve talked about it. Shikibu’s none too sane on the Keitarou subject, and I dunno what might happen if he turned up here. I don’t know, sir. It makes me uneasy.”

Juushirou was silent for a long time, then he let out another sigh.

“If it’s even getting to you, then I suppose I’m not imagining how oppressive the air suddenly seems this evening,” he murmured. “I know, and I understand your fears. This is my choice as Captain, though, Enishi. I don’t want to bring Keitarou’s name up here until it’s absolutely necessary. I have faith in Kirio and Ketsui to protect Izumi and the other recruits, and in Naoko to protect Mitsuki should it be needed. With any luck Suzuki will have been given a fright at Seventh and will try to skirt away from division land... or Kai’s men will track him down sooner rather than later. Right now that’s the threat we know about, and it’s the one we need to face. Keitarou... all of that, for now, will have to wait till tomorrow.”

Enishi gazed at his companion for a moment, then he nodded his head.

“Being a Captain ain’t always easy, is it?” he observed, scratching his brow absently, and Juushirou smiled faintly, shaking his head.

“Having other people’s lives in your hands is never easy,” he agreed. “I’m glad I have you backing me up, even if you have doubts behind closed doors. With any luck, this threat will be handled this evening, and then... as a Gotei... we can look to dealing with the other problem that’s now loomed up large as life on our horizon.”

Left alone in the small bed chamber, Koku turned his attention fully to the bound volume Kirio had given him, gazing pensively at the rose pattern once more. Briefly, flickers of memory from his first foray outside of the barracks returned to him, the vivid colours, scents and glow of life that had engulfed him for the briefest of instants before fear and panic had returned to rule his wits. Kirio had called them ‘roses’, he remembered pensively, touching his finger to the image again. In Rukongai, there were no living flowers, nor really many signs of dead ones, for such things could not grow. Yet the ones on the paper, inked in by a careful hand seemed more real somehow than the ones he had seen by way of Katsura’s Seireitei memories, and for a moment he thought he could smell that sweet, intangible perfume that had assailed him in the fresh Seireitei air.

Maybe I’ll like flowers too, if I learn more about them.

Koku’s eyes narrowed thoughtfully, as carefully and gingerly he turned the page of the book, running his gaze down the neat columns of text that a scribe had taken great pains to turn into an elegant, calligraphic masterpiece. Unlike the grimy, tattered volumes he had

thumbed to death in the Rukon, this book was clean and crisp, having been well looked after and carefully stored, and both the text and the illustrations were still in vivid, bold strokes. He was able to read the passages without having to squint to make out a faded or smudged kanji, and, as he absorbed himself in the first of the book's tales, images came unbidden into his mind, characters and scenes coming to life before his gaze as though conjured there by the author's words.

So this was what reading was in Seireitei?

He turned the page, smoothing it down as he devoured the next page of words, eager to see and experience more of the tale contained within the thin pages.

For as long as he could remember, reading had provided a soothing remedy to his headaches and the swirling images that made him dizzy and filled him with panic and fear. It had become a calming technique, and through its practice, he had learned things, but somehow, reading this book was different from those thick, heavy volumes he knew the text of almost by heart. Those he had read more to bring solace and rhythm into a place of confusion, relying on the certainty and reassurance of the same words appearing in the right order, just as he anticipated them to be. This, by contrast, was an entirely different experience. An unknown text, weaving in directions he could not predict or expect, that little by little dug its way into his sleeping imagination, pulling forth the colours and sounds into a sense of reality. Yet there was no fear in this illusion, rather an appreciation of a world created entirely by another's imagination. Koku had never read like this before, yet as he turned over yet another page to begin the next short story, he knew that of all the things that Kirio could have brought him, she truly had chosen the best.

Did she understand when she gave it to me what power this had? She said it was a favourite of hers, but could she have known... did she realise more quickly than I did that I would latch onto it in such a way? Or is it just a case that here, in Seireitei, there is life, and colour, and things beyond my imagining... things my mind now wants to understand?

There was a different kind of flower bordering this page, not a rose, yet despite Koku's careful examination, he could not make out what it was. Tiny, delicate pink blossoms adorned the branches of a tree like jewellery on the arm of a fine lady, small and insignificant on their own yet in such numbers they appeared like a cloud, almost cloaking the tree itself from view. Beneath the tree sat a man, grey eyed and dark haired, robed in greens and creams, his hair tied back in a style Koku did not recognise. Beside the picture were four characters which were clearly his name, but, unlike the neat graphs that told the story,

this was written in a cursive script he found much more difficult to make out.

His gaze flitted back towards the text, looking for clues to the identity of this individual and what kind of tree it was he was seated beneath. Forgetting for a moment that he cared nothing for Seireitei or its society, or that, until moments earlier, the existence of either person or plant had been unknown to him, he searched the text hungrily, determined to know who this figure painted so plaintively beneath the cloud of pink petals could be. At length he found his answer, his heart lurching slightly in his throat as he made out the words.

Kuchi... ki... Shirosuke. Kuchiki?

A brief image of Mitsuki's face flickered before his thoughts, and he bit his lip.

Edogawa-san's kin? This is a legend... about them?

He turned back to the text.

Long ago, there was a young man, [he read]

Being the son of a noble house and having completed the coming of age rites, he began to travel between the provinces of the old country in search of a consort of exceptional beauty, but, although he had travelled through many places, and met many beautiful women, his heart had been captured by none of them.

Knowing he would soon be called back to his family, he stopped for a night in a small village below which a river ran, and as he walked along the river's edge, he began to play a sad song on his flute, believing he must have come as far from the world he knew and understood as he possibly could. The people in these parts spoke with rustic tongue and he could barely understand them, and so he felt lonely and began to dream of home.

On the banks of the river, there were many trees, but, as the man walked beneath their bent branches, he was suddenly taken aback by the glow of pink that seemed to shimmer out from the midst of the willow green. Fleeting and intransient as the snow resting on the branches in winter, these first messengers of spring spread their delicate petals boldly beneath the sun, and the young man, drawn to their warmth and courage, hastened to catch them as they drifted towards the ground, cupping his hand to gaze at the perfect form of the flower that nestled in his palm.

If only a woman so beautiful as this flower could appear to him, he thought, he would be the most blessed man in all of Seireitei.

A local man was fishing by the river, and the young lord asked this rustic what the name of the tree might be. The man spoke in thick tones, his dialect so heavy it was hard to make out, but eventually the lord understood that the flower was a cherry blossom, and the tree that flowered with such forceful beauty was a blessed tree, known as the Great Sakura. Within the Sakura lived a spirit of nature so beautiful that by her presence alone, the village and its surrounds thrived and shone brighter than any other, and when the young lord learned this, he determined that he must meet the deity of the Great Sakura for himself.

For days he camped by the river, drawing fish from the crystal waters to feed his appetite, and spending his days sitting beneath the branches, writing poetry and gazing up at the gradually fading petals of the Great Sakura, but still he could not hear the voice of the kami within the tree.

Heart broken, he decided to return to his family, but, as he gathered up his belongings to leave, the last of the delicate petals fell from the tree, dropping onto the hilt of his sword. The petal glimmered in the bright sunlight, then, from somewhere, the young man heard a voice.

The flowers are here for a brief time, but the true beauty lurks far within. The flowers leave to bring forth fruit, and the the rotting leaves nourish life for the next generation. If you seek beauty, you must also seek decay. This is the reality of our world. If you wish to truly see me, you must look into the ugly weave of my bark, not the pink of my petals, for they are just an illusion.

Startled, the young man turned, facing the tree and, for the briefest of moments, he thought he saw a woman's face shadowed against the gnarled trunk of the tree. Reaching out to touch the wood, he felt the prickle of energy beneath the tree's surface, and realised with a jolt that what he felt was the life of the tree, burning and beating as strongly as his own heart.

Touched and moved by the experience, the young lord decided to make this place his home, and to live always within view of the Great Sakura and its true, inner beauty. In honour of her words, he took the name, "Kuchiki", and for generations since, in this place where the Kuchiki Clan's greatness was founded, the descendents of Shirosuke have worshipped the beauty of the Sakura as a symbol of their continued growth.

Koku gazed at the image again, chewing pensively on his lip as he took in the image with new understanding.

I've only heard of the Kuchiki Clan in terms of the man who hurt Keitarou-san, and the boy who Eiraki-san killed. I've only encountered them through meeting Edogawa Mitsuki... to think a family I associated with such ugly sentiments has such a beautiful story at their heart. I thought I understood the Clans of Seireitei, but maybe I don't understand them at all. Maybe I don't know...

He faltered, tensing as there was a sudden shift in the air in the chamber. A prickle ran up his spine as he realised he was no longer alone. He glanced around him, seeing nothing, but although his eyes were fooled, his spiritual senses were not and his gaze darkened, lips thinning into a hard line as he identified his companion's reiatsu.

"I should've known," he murmured. "Something is creating a ruckus in Seireitei — and now you're here to see me. That's not a coincidence, is it? You've been biding your time, that's all."

"I'm impressed." The voice seemed to echo out of nowhere, "Even though your eyes could surely not see me, and my reiatsu is suppressed far, far below the levels most shinigami can detect at, still you know I'm here."

Very gradually the colour of the wall shifted and changed, taking on shades and density until the golden eyed assassin's skinny form became visible against the bamboo panels. He was robed in the same dark fabrics that he had been wearing the last time Koku had seen him, but even though the cloth was almost black in colour, there were patches that seemed darker, giving away stains of what was clearly drying blood. The scent of death lingered around the assassin's cadaverous form, and Koku was unable to suppress a shiver of revulsion as the fragments of dissipating spiritual energy tugged against his senses.

"You've been killing people," he observed softly, and Masaya shrugged.

"Settling an old score," he said dismissively. "It's nothing to do with you. You needn't worry — I didn't blood any of your new friends."

"New friends?" Koku arched an eyebrow, and Masaya's lips twisted into an unpleasant smile.

"Since you expected my coming, I imagine you know what I'm alluding to."

"I think I told you once. I know everything about you," Koku spoke evenly, setting aside the precious book and fixing his visitor with an impassive stare. "Good things, bad things... everything. But what I don't know is why you're here right now. I would've thought this would be the last place you'd choose to come — if you've escaped the shinigami's prison, I'm amazed you haven't run back to tell Keitarou-san all about it."

"Keitarou-san," Masaya mimicked, derision glittering in his feline gaze. He snorted, tossing his head disdainfully. "I'm not fooled by

anything you do or say, not now. Things have changed since the last time we spoke. They've changed quite considerably, one might say."

"Oh?" Koku arched an eyebrow, and Masaya stepped neatly across the floor, pausing at the end of the bed.

"Katsura-sama made it safely back to the Rukon," he said quietly. "No harm came to him. I kept my end of the deal you imposed on me. I was taken prisoner but I knew I could escape at any time I needed to. I was hoping to learn something important to take back with me before I did. What I learned, however..."

His eyes became slits, and before Koku knew what was happening the other man was almost on top of him, the skinny fingers of his left hand grasping the collar of Koku's nightrobe so tightly the injured boy felt the edges of the fabric pressing ominously against his adam's apple. Masaya's grip was cold and determined, and he wrapped his free hand around the weakened Koku's shoulder, digging his nails deep into the joint until the younger man gasped in pain. Without missing a beat, Masaya thrust Koku up against the wall, the patient's spine thudding sickeningly against the bamboo panels. Gold eyes gleaming with triumph, Masaya pushed his own head closer to his victim's, boring that amber gaze deep into the startled brown eyes of his prey..

"You betrayed Keitarou-sama," he hissed, and for the first time Koku felt the killer instinct that flared at the edges of the spy's aura. "You came here without permission, you brought a shinigami back here... because of you, they know about Keitarou-sama and all kinds of other things. You lectured me and threatened me, but I see through you. I see what you really are. Keitarou-sama put false trust in you... but I won't be so easily blinded."

"I haven't betrayed anyone," Koku struggled to free himself from his companion's grip, all too aware of how physically frail his body still was as it recovered from Kikyue's strike. The collar of the robe tore slightly, allowing him to draw breath into his lungs unhindered, but Masaya was not to be discouraged so easily. Deftly he switched his hold from Koku's shoulder to his chest to pinion the other in place, adjusting the long, bony fingers of his left hand so that they pressed directly against the exposed skin of the young man's throat. The digits twitched and extended slightly, breaking out of their normal sockets to twist unnaturally around Koku's throat like a rope, and despite himself, fear flickered deep within the Rukon stray's heart. He tried to raise his own hands to push the former Onmitsukidou away, but Masaya had judged his moves carefully, and a simple shift of his body

was enough to block the attempts, leaving Koku's fingers flailing helplessly some inches from their target. He had been out-thought and outmanoeuvred in every way, and he swallowed hard, wondering whether he had underestimated the ability of Keitarou's hand-picked fanatic.

"I told you. *I'm not fooled*," Masaya could clearly see the distress in the dark brown eyes, for a sinister smile of satisfaction began to twist across his sallow face. "You say you know all about me, but you've forgotten that *I* know all about *you*, too. I've told Keitarou-sama that he doesn't need you. *Any* of you. Now you've betrayed him, you can't expect his protection any more. Your threats, your words... all lies. You're working for the shinigami and you know Keitarou-sama would never forgive that."

"I... am... not!" Koku managed to gasp out the words, but Masaya let out a contemptuous chuckle.

"What would the shinigami say if they knew where you really came from?" he asked, the gleam of the predator in his amber eyes. "What would they say if they knew what *I* know about you?"

"You don't... know anything... about me!"

"You're wrong," Masaya shook his head. "I know everything I need to know about you... enough to destroy you just by opening my mouth. However, I prefer a more permanent solution — shinigami are unpredictable and I like to know that I've cleaned up all the loose ends. That's what makes a secret agent... and I was very good at that job, once upon a time."

He grinned coldly, slowly tightening his grasp around the other's throat. It was not enough to cut off the airway, nor make Koku lose consciousness, but he had applied enough force to prove he had control of the situation, and Koku's heart began to pound unevenly in his chest. Masaya was not strangling him — not yet — but only because he had chosen not to apply the deadly pressure needed to choke his airway or, even worse, snap his neck like a twig. Koku's mind raced as incomplete images of similar death delusions flickered fragmented across his thoughts. Assassins were capable of such things, he realised dully. Assassins were taught to kill in a plethora of different ways — and in his current state, there was no way he could physically fight back. There was no mercy in Masaya's eyes, no sense of hesitation or regret, just zealous pleasure at the thought of removing one of his rivals for Keitarou's attention, and Koku struggled to keep his composure, fighting to get free but unable to improve his position under the firm hold of his opponent.

“You’re here, within the depths of their heartland, covered in their reiatsu and their bandages, and you say you’re not a traitor?” Masaya was mocking him now, tightening his hold around Koku’s throat momentarily to make the young man cough before loosening it just enough to allow him to gulp air desperately into panicked lungs. “You know, I was thoroughly trained in all the skills of the assassin, and I was once ranked quite highly within the Second’s covert organisation. You might have had pull in the Rukon, and you might have persuaded me to do your bidding — then. But as I said, things have changed. Keitarou-sama doesn’t protect traitors, and nor do I. And, in this physical condition,”

He paused, slapping his right hand cruelly against Koku’s bandaged torso, before pulling his fingernails across it with enough force to loosen the binding and make the young man flinch involuntarily. The hint of a yelp began in the depths of Koku’s vocal chords, but Masaya had no idea of letting him alert anyone to his current position, for he tightened his grip immediately, choking off the cry before it could break forth from Koku’s lips.

“They can’t sense me,” he said softly. “*You* might be able to, but *they* can’t. My reiatsu was always hard to find... now it’s even harder, thanks to Keitarou-sama’s help. They won’t come here... they’re looking for me everywhere *but* there. By the time they find you, you’ll be another broken corpse in the paper trail of their mystery. They won’t get a chance to prise out of you things that might hurt Keitarou-sama’s cause further.”

“He won’t... forgive you... if you... kill me,” Koku managed to gasp out, as the fingers loosened briefly at his throat, and Masaya smirked.

“The *shinigami* killed you, thanks to that war wound across your gut,” he said lightly. “That’s what happened, and that’s all he’ll know. He trusts me, and I won’t betray that trust.”

He pressed his face yet closer, till Koku could almost feel the man’s hot breath against his face.

“The best thing you can do is lie back and die,” Masaya whispered. “You won’t escape me. It’s bad to leave an Onmitsukidou with wounded pride... we don’t take that well. Finish us off when you have the chance, or prepare to be hunted down and killed in your turn. That’s how I was trained, and no amount of poison or exile can break those habits. You forget that here, the tables are turned. I’m used to Seireitei — you’re not. I knew the people who held me, but you don’t know the first thing about the people who have you in their clutches. I could escape from that cage at any time, while you’re helpless and

injured into the bargain. You made a fatal mistake... and it will be your last."

Does that worm really think that he can kill you that easily?

The words ricocheted across Koku's senses like a splash of cold water, and the entirety of the young man's vision exploded into a flare of reds and yellows, vibrating with an indignant anger that suddenly seemed more real and more terrifying than anything the spy's dislocated fingers could inflict. Koku felt his control slipping away from him, for, half-starved of air and boxed into the corner by Masaya's grapple-hold, he was helpless to the other man's sadistic whims. His lungs spasmed, desperately trying to drag in oxygen to steady himself, but already he could feel the prickle of dark energy rippling through his body, and he knew that it was too late to force it back.

Stop it. Stop it! Nobody called you here... go away!

I've told you before, and I'll tell you again.

The voice was cold and full of disdain.

You are weak, but I am strong. I own you, and I will conquer every inch of you and take you for my own. You're useful to me, and so long as I consider that the case, I'm going to keep you alive. I don't care if you'd rather die here... death isn't an option, as I've told you before.

I can fight him on my own.

Can you? Can you really?

There was a snort of derision, then,

It doesn't seem that way to me.

The pressure of Masaya's hands against his throat again sent Koku's lungs once more into spasm, and he battled desperately against his assailant's hold, face red and body gasping as he tried in vain to free himself. Masaya's grip was firm, and he was still weak from his wounds. Already the world was becoming hazy, the explosions of colour and light becoming more real and vivid than the gold eyes of the assassin and the plainly furnished Gotei room which had been his shelter for the past several days. Already he was losing touch with what was there and what was not... sinking deep, deeper down into the eternal darkness of death which he had seen claim so many other souls. He closed his eyes, forcing himself to grasp hold of the fragmented pieces of his sanity, but they were cracking and shattering beneath his touch, drifting into ever smaller shards that disappeared before him into the abyss. Overhead, he could sense the deprecating gaze of another's piercing eyes, judging him, hating him, but

ultimately standing back and letting him struggle. As soon as he gave up the fight, Koku knew, the demon would be in and it would be all over — for him and for Masaya — but he had no energy left to fight. He was going to die, but more terrifying than that, he was going to live... stifled and suppressed inside his own body as the dark, ruthlessness of the demon took control.

And then, just as he thought his entire body would explode from lack of oxygen, a fresh image flickered across his senses. At first it was hazy, no more than a blur of indistinct colours swirling together yet as it gained in definition, Koku realised with a jolt what it was he was seeing.

No, this was no errant vision or delusion. He was not seeing it... he was *remembering* it.

A young man was huddled on the ground before him, caked in blood. A wounded soldier reached out a hand, begging him for help to travel through the black hole to return home. A man barely older than Katsura, injured beyond saving, yet thinking only of his duty, not of his own life. A man who was a stranger promising him sanctuary and reaching out in trust.

Souja-dono.

Tears glittered against Koku's lashes at the memory, bitterness welling up in his heart as he remembered Souja's expression and heard his voice, speaking so calmly and rationally despite how close to death he had been.

You did everything to stay alive just those few moments more. You did it for what you believed in. You did everything for that cause, and that's why I brought you home. If you'd lived, things would've been different. I knew that before, and I know it now. But you dying doesn't mean I can stop fighting. And right now I need to fight — not just against Kurotsuchi, but for what I believe in.

He clenched his fists, new determination to live flooding through him as he punched his knuckles against the wall with as much force as he could muster, drawing on the sudden shock of pain to break the illusion of darkness and return him to awareness. Masaya was still speaking to him, he realised, loosing and tightening his hold at Koku's throat. He was apparently unaware of the ominously dark swell that had almost swallowed his victim whole, and Koku registered that only the briefest of split-seconds had passed, despite it feeling as though he had been under for an eternity. With every twitch of Masaya's deformed fingers, the amount of time he had to draw in air grew less and less, and it was clear that the assassin had no intention of a quick

kill, intending to savour his victory in revenge for the encounter in the Rukon that seemed like so long ago now. As his rationality began to return, Koku knew he had no choice but to take advantage of his opponent's desire to milk the moment.

He hasn't snapped my neck, so he thinks he can watch me suffocate, little by little, and I have to use that to my advantage. I have to live through this. Souja-dono died, but I can't. Not yet. It's not over yet.

Aware that the dark, angry swirls of colour were still circling at the peripheries of his vision, readying for a second assault, he focused instead on his hands, forcing each finger to stretch as far as it would go until it brushed against the other man's lean torso. He could not do anything about Masaya's stranglehold, but, as he felt the rough fabric of Masaya's clothing beneath his touch, he said an inward prayer of thanks. Releasing the floodgates that held back his spirit power, he allowed what little reserves he had left to pour forth through his body, pooling against his skin and out into the surrounding environment.

"What are you doing?" Masaya was taken off guard, loosening the hold at Koku's throat as for the first time he sensed the prickle of energy now glittering around the young man's hands, and Koku forced his trembling fingers to extend their reach across his enemy's clothing, pushing to make closer contact with Masaya's skin. It was all he could manage, for his spiritual energy was still shattered into disjointed pieces from his injury. Nausea flooded through him, as his abused body protested at the effort whilst he was still convalescent, but he ignored the twinges of pain that rippled through his injured gut, knowing that to pull back now would cost him his life. If Masaya perceived the threat too soon, he could counter, and Koku knew that he could not let that happen. Unlike Tenichi's half-hearted, panicked attempt, Masaya meant business.

I couldn't save Souja-dono. At the very least, I need to save myself.

"I can't die here," Somehow words formed on his lips, little more than a hoarse whisper as he redoubled his efforts to steady the buzz of *reiryoku* which was now pulsing through his body. It was uneven, flaring one minute and feeble the next, but the assassin let out an exclamation of dismay, trying to pull back as he sensed the danger he was in. It was too late, however, for Koku's blooded fingers gripped hard against Masaya's clothing, digging in to maintain contact as he pumped his spiritual energy across the gap between them. In his weakened state, body battered and bruised, it was all he could do to summon this amount of power, but the assassin fell back, eyes widening in fear and alarm as though something terrible had just flashed before his eyes.

It was the same look the assassin had given him in Rukongai, and as Koku met his assailant's gaze, sadness glittered deep within his own brown eyes.

"I don't kill," he said softly. "I told you in the Rukon that if you let Katsura get hurt, I would kill you, but I believe you when you say he returned safe. You kept your side of the deal, just as you said. I don't care that you attacked me... I understand why you did. I'm not a traitor — not how you think I am. But I can't die... not yet."

He let out a shaky breath of air, tightening his hold once last time as a final pulse of spiritual energy rippled across the divide between the two men, and as it washed over them, Koku was suddenly aware of a flickering in Masaya's aura. To Koku's dismay, something dark and cloying broke free from the assassin's body, filtering like black smoke from the man's ears and mouth into an ominous cloud of choking energy that fragmented and disappeared into the ether around them. The assassin let out a gasp, his eyes darting all over the place in confusion and disorientation, and he thudded back against the wall as though thrown with force, suddenly unable to hold himself upright as the malevolent energy poured forth like a damned soul leaving the body. The golden eyes rolled back into his head, devoid of all signs of life, and, like a puppet whose strings had been cut, Masaya slid down the wall, falling onto the blankets in a crumpled heap.

Koku stared in disbelief, pulling his hands back hurriedly as though they had been scalded. Had he done too much? Killed the man? He knew that Masaya's life had been saved by science once, but had he been closer to death than the young man had thought? His whole body began to shake in fear and alarm at what he might have achieved, nausea flooding through him as he stared at the still form.
But I can't have killed him... can I?

You should have. If you weren't such a wimp, it would've been quicker. I wouldn't have hesitated... you should've let me do it instead.

I don't intend on ever letting you do anything. Not ever

Koku's thoughts flared up in defiance, but still the assassin did not move, and he bit his lip, mind racing as he struggled to work out what to do. If the shinigami returned, if they saw this scene... what would happen? What would they say, what would they do?

Seconds passed that felt like hours, minutes that felt like days, and he was just summoning his courage to extend a tentative finger to poke Masaya's arm when there was a faint murmur from the fallen assassin, and, to Koku's relief, the man began to stir.

You didn't even get that right. Pathetic. You'd think I'd shown you enough death for you to kill with a hint of penache. No, just managing to kill him at all would've been progress. Instead you're gasping like a little girl because he's alive. You disgust me. You really do.

Good. Then go away.

Koku forced up his mental barriers, blocking out the voice with more force and determination than he had managed before, and instead turning his attention to the dazed assassin who was slowly but surely dragging himself into a sitting position. For a moment they met gazes, and Koku was struck by the blank expression in his companion's amber eyes. Masaya's lips pressed together in clear bewilderment, but there was no sign of recognition anywhere in his gaze or his demeanour. On the contrary, the clear killing instinct that had radiated from the man's lean body moment's earlier had completely dissipated, and Koku realised with growing disbelief that he could now sense the man's reiatsu on a more normal level. A level the shinigami too might pick up on, he realised in consternation. They would come here, and find them, and...

"Who... where... what?"

At length the assassin's words broke the silence, three disjointed questions which fell from his lips one by one. He raised a hand to his head, closing his eyes as a look of pain crossed his features, then opening them again, and this time Koku saw a flicker of animation deep in the golden gaze. It was the first time in the whole of their acquaintance that Masaya's expression had appeared alive, and Koku's heart clenched in his throat as he understood the significance of what had occurred.

So that was it. I should have realised sooner. Keitarou-san took everything from you when he saved your life... more than I ever realised he had. I was wrong, Kurotsuchi. I didn't know everything there was to know about you. I didn't... but now I do. Now I understand. I just have to work out... what to do with that information.

He inched his aching body forward, using his right hand to stabilise his shaking form against the wall and reaching to cup the other under his companion's chin, raising the man's head so that their gazes were on a level. This time, it was Koku's dark brown eyes which locked deep into the depths of Masaya's bewildered golden ones, and as Koku dragged himself closer, he took a deep, ragged breath into battered lungs, focusing all of his composure on summoning one last pulse of spiritual energy.

Leave.

As he felt the impulse pool out around his body, raw and far weaker than what he had used to dispel Sakaki, he saw the fear and alarm that glittered in Masaya's gaze, and the assassin pulled back, slapping Koku's arm away in terror and drawing hurriedly back away from his companion. Koku forced himself to keep eye contact, watching the plethora of different emotions that rippled through the golden eyes as tears formed on the man's lashes.

"A monster," Masaya murmured, then, "Some kind... of monster?"

With this incoherent observation, he was gone, dropping into a desperate flashstep which came more from instinct than from genuine technical skill, and Koku sighed, burying his head in his hands as the tension of the encounter rippled over his battered body.

A monster? No. The monster was within you all the time. And I...

He raised his head, turning his hands over and gazing at the blooded, raw skin of his battered knuckles.

I should've seen that one coming. I thought I knew all the pieces of this puzzle... but I guess I was wrong.

You didn't kill him, and then you let him go?

As his concentration began to lapse, the words battered against his thoughts, fainter now, but determined to make their opinion known, and Koku could just about make out the contempt in the muffled syllables.

If you think I'll sit back and let that go, you're mistaken.

The next moment Koku felt his mental barriers crack and shatter as an overwhelming surge of spiritual energy poured across his senses, colours and lights blurring into blood and chaos as he saw person after person ripped down and torn apart. He tossed back his blanket, stumbling off the bed towards the door of the chamber in an attempt to escape the oppressive waves of terror and despair now flooding his senses, but there was no way to flee from what was in his head, and tears began to trickle down his cheeks as he grabbed the doorframe, inwardly begging the dark waves of delusion to pull back.

Stop it. Please, stop it! I can't... I don't want to...

This is the future you're walking towards, my friend. You can't stop it, and I won't let you try. You waste time immersing yourself in the self-appreciating tales of Seireitei's Clansfolk, but this is the reality, and the only image you should pay attention to. One saved assassin won't change the inevitable. Of all people, you dare to doubt Kohaku's word, and fight against it most of all? You who, of

everyone, sees its truth and knows its full meaning?

There was a mocking chuckle, then,

Well, no matter. A fool you might be, and a coward, but you're a useful vessel and I won't let you die. It changes nothing, whatever you do. The world is going to sink into war... and unless you sacrifice life, you can't stop it. But there's a dichotomy, isn't it? You, who refuses to kill, standing back and letting others die. This one is a minnow, but there will be others. Just remember...

The image of a corpse flitted across Koku's senses, vivid and bloody and Koku swallowed the bile in his throat as he recognised the face of the fallen figure. It was a face he had seen before, from a scene that had played out a multitude of times in his nightmares, but somehow following the encounter with Masaya it seemed more vivid and real, and he knew that time was running out.

The Endou shinigami is dead, and there's nothing you can do about it. Whatever you choose, my friend... in the end you'll lose. The war is coming, so take my advice. Let go of these stupid ideas of yours and accept the reality of the situation. Join it. Embrace it. Kill for it. You can't prevent it from happening... so be a part of it. Do as Keitarou-dono told you — accept your destiny, and accept me.

"I won't," Koku gasped out the words, flinging back the door of the chamber and staggering into the hallway, his fingers groping desperately against the wood for support yet trembling too much to manage a stable grip and after just a few steps he pitched forward, falling against the wall as the tears streamed down his face.

"Stop it," he murmured, unaware that he was speaking out loud now, for his pleas were falling on deaf ears. "Please, make it stop."

"Koku?"

The sound of Mitsuki's voice did nothing to soothe his traumatised wits, for the sense of her reiatsu nearby was enough to trigger the memories of the Spiritless Zone and the battle with the Hollow that he had inadvertently picked up from Katsura's memories. As she hurried down beside him, putting an arm around his shoulders to prevent him from falling headlong, he twitched back as though burned by the contact, for a moment drowning in a sea of mingled spiritual energy from which he struggled to pull out and redefine his own. The nausea rocked over him, churning through his stomach, yet he only knew from Mitsuki's exclamation and the instructions she shouted to someone else to fetch help that he had actually been sick, dropping back against her body as he was unable to hold his own body up any longer.

“Help me get him back in his room,” he heard the healer say, though the words sounded very far away. “His bandages are coming loose, and he’s clearly agitated by something.”

“He’s all red around the throat,” another woman, this time one Koku did not know, cut into the conversation. “Was he bruised there before? I thought Taichou said he took a strike to the gut.”

“He did,” Koku was aware of being hoisted clumsily up between the two women as they hauled his limp, dangling body back into the small chamber and forced him to lie down on the bed that a moment before had seemed like a prison full of ill omens. “But no, he wasn’t bruised there before.”

A finger touched Koku’s neck, and he pulled back again. A whimper escaped his lips, and there was a sigh.

“Well, either he hurt himself really badly escaping his sickroom, or someone thought it would be nice to give him a necklace of bruises,” the second woman observed bluntly.

“Mm,” Mitsuki’s voice was troubled. “He’s very upset — I haven’t seen him this bad before, not even when Ryu and I found him in the garden, so something must’ve scared him. I’m going to sedate him, Naoko — hold him still for me while I make him drink it. It will calm him down, and then one of us can tell Juushirou. It looks like the Second Division’s escapee did make a pit stop in Thirteenth Division... but his target wasn’t me.”

Author’s Note:

Yeeps. Everyone is trying to kill Koku, lately o.O. If I were him, I’d start getting a complex about it...

Also! The legend. Well, I’ve said lots of times that for me the Kuchiki are the most classically Japanese of the Noble families as far as I’m concerned. I’m always using historic references for things relating to them. I’ve been influenced a lot this year by classical Japanese texts, and there are a few elements of Ise Monogatari (written in 9th/10th century Japan) that inspired the writing of this, especially in the beginning part. Almost all the passages in Ise begin with “long ago, there was a man,” so. In terms of the text, that’s just a random imagining of a Kuchiki origins legend.

I’ve always tied the Kuchiki to the sakura because of Senbonzakura, and therefore made the Kuchiki celebrate the sakura each spring with festivals. With that in mind, I thought that would be a nice story for Koku to be reading in the book. The name Kuchiki means “decayed wood”, and that’s always struck me as interesting. There are any number of reasons why

Kubo might have chosen it, but I thought I'd give one potential reason, since traditionally surnames in Japan were awarded or taken from places where people lived, and only people of status had them.

Kuchiki Shirotsugu is, therefore, the "founder" of the "modern Kuchiki" and the Great Sakura (or more likely one of its descendants) is in the grounds of Guren's manor, built in the location Shirotsugu made his home. The prosperity of the Kuchiki is therefore thanks to the blessing of the Great Sakura that made the village prosper. This is... so much like a Japanese kami legend that it just... had to happen. It also provided a nice innocent contrast for Kurotsuchi's entrance... so I hope you guys enjoyed it ;)

The characters used to write Shirotsugu are 白哉. Now where might we have seen those before, I wonder...? ;)

Reihahen

霊破片. This is Tenichi's zanpakutou. It's name means "Spirit shard" or 'Broken Piece of Soul/Spirit' if you prefer to be poetic. It's release is Kiba o Muke 牙をムケ "Bare your fangs". The inspiration for this came from a conversation with a friend in which I realised how Tenichi bore a striking resemblance to a canon character in his frustrating behaviour. For that reason, his sword's name and release come mostly from song lyrics belonging to this character from the Bleach Musical. I'm not going to say who or where, so I don't get hate mail, though cookies for anyone who knows ;)

The attack, Kobanashi 木端破矢 means "Wooden splinter, broken arrow". Actually, koba, pronounced koppa, has another meaning, but that's beside the point..*innocent*. Naginata was suggested to me by a friend for the form of Tenichi's weapon, and this appealed to me because of Musashibou Benkei, a key figure in the legends of the Genpei War (around which I have been lately writing my academic masters dissertation xD). Benkei was a monk who is remembered in Japanese war folklore as fighting to the death to protect the hopeless cause of the war hero Yoshitsune (around whose literary legend Kubo has based a lot of Byakuya's imagery). He fought with a naginata and was such a ferocious figure that he died standing up, weapon in hand and the enemy were too scared to approach him in case he came back to life and attacked once again. Not that I think Tenichi is really comparable to the figure of Benkei, but you know, I like things like that :).

Additional note: The Manga!

As some of you know, I'd more or less intended not to read the manga for a bit, since it was getting to a point where I was just ranting about it. But then one of my friends decided to tell me the whole story of this week's

chapter, and so I ended up reading it anyway. Sigh. It features more messed up continuity, but anyhow.

Kubo's SS doesn't parallel Meifu's in the distant past, but I don't really care about that, I never expected it to. **But** someone did point out to me that in the picture of Yama and the Captains, there are eight figures. Eight, huh...;)

Also, anyone who is a Shunsui fan and who isn't currently reading the manga, at least stop in and check the first page. You might not want to read the rest of the chapter, but the first page is really cute. ;)

42. Fox Hunt

Chapter Forty One: Fox Hunt

The mood was sombre as Tenichi was led into the small back office of the Seventh Division, a grim expression on his features as he followed his Fourth Seated officer between the desk to the furthest end of the room. Kai raised his hand, indicating for the Eighth Seated officer to be seated, and reluctantly Tenichi did so, adrenaline driven anger and indignation at Kai's attitude still pulsing through his veins. Only the impassive presence of Hajime had prevented him from answering back when the instruction had first been given, and now he sat and simmered, resentful and sullen about the sudden invasion.

"Kai-dono?" Once sure his companion was settled, Hajime cast Kai a quizzical glance, and Kai nodded his head, folding his arms across his chest and pacing across the room to stand just a metre or two away from where Tenichi sat.

"Kotetsu, the other day you came to identify a prisoner of mine," he said quietly, and Tenichi raised his gaze, meeting the Shihouin's golden eyes with his own. "During that meeting, you told us that you knew nothing of the man in our custody. Is that not correct?"

"Yes, sir," It was impossible for Tenichi to keep the edge out of his voice, and Kai's eyes narrowed thoughtfully.

"Tonight, however, that prisoner escaped," he continued evenly.

"I didn't have anything to do with that!" Now indignation flooded the young officer's senses, and he stared at Kai in dismay. "Do you think I'd break into the Second Division to rescue some creepy guy I know nothing about? Don't be ridiculous! I was at Seventh — I've been at Seventh the whole time and you can ask Hajime-dono or Nakata-san or even Kikyue-dono if you don't believe me!"

"Kotetsu, mind your lip," Hajime's gruff reproach prevented Kai from immediately responding, and Tenichi's lips thinned as he faced his superior officer. "Nobody has accused you of anything, and you're shaming yourself and your division speaking back to a superior officer in that tone of voice."

"It's all right, Hajime-dono. I'd like to hear Kotetsu's thoughts and feelings uncensored, even if they happen to be rough-edged," Kai held up his hand to indicate that he was not offended. "Nobody is

suggesting you let the man free, Kotetsu. We know you didn't. He was a trained agent of the Onmitsukidou, and it's likely he used knowledge of his prior involvement with us to effect his own escape."

"Oh." Tenichi bit his lip, looking chastened. "I'm sorry. I... it was just..."

"My interest in you is simply why your name came up so quickly in our attempts to trace our missing felon," Kai continued evenly, ignoring Tenichi's flustered attempts at an apology. "I call you to see this prisoner, and you say you don't know him — yet the prisoner seeks you out and attacks you? Instead of fleeing the premises completely, and getting far, far from the Gotei's auspices, he stops to launch an attack on you, Kotetsu Tenichi, Eighth Seated officer of the Seventh Division. Now why would he do that?"

"Maybe because he saw Kotetsu the other day," Hajime looked troubled. "I've heard this man is unbalanced — maybe he thought Kotetsu would recognise him and so tried to rid himself of the threat."

"By going out specifically to attack a man who almost certainly didn't know he'd escaped?" Kai was sceptical. "I know you want to help your officer, Hajime-dono, but that won't do. This man may be... a little odd, but he is not stupid. More, he was once a ranking officer under my command, and I know his abilities and his discretion as well or better than anybody else. He's not an individual who chooses to show himself unless there's a good reason for it. No, he attacked Kotetsu for a reason."

"If he did, sir, I don't know what it was," Tenichi's palms were sweating and he pressed his hands together absently, meeting Kai's gaze with as level expression as he could muster. "He just came at me out of the darkness. I thought he was going to hurt me so I fought back. A junior ran out, and so I acted on reflex to deflect his blast. Perhaps I acted rashly, releasing Reihahen, but when someone launches themselves at you like that..."

"Nothing else you could do," Hajime agreed.

"And if this man was the one who abducted you?" Kai pressed. "The one who pulled you into the *Senkaimon*?"

"I... I don't know about..."

"I thought Kotetsu had no memory of that event," Hajime objected. "Kai-dono, I know you want to track this person down, but there's no evidence that Kotetsu's done anything wrong. On the contrary, by fighting this evening he was defending his division and doing his duty

— can I ask why you insisted on dragging him in here and talking to him like he's a suspect in some greater conspiracy? This is Second's prisoner, and he broke Second's custody. Shouldn't you be interrogating your men, if you suspect something odd about the escape? Clearly Kotetsu had nothing to do with it, and your reasons for pulling him in here like this are oblique and insulting to Seventh's honour."

"I don't suspect him of plotting to release Suzuki," Kai said gravely, "but I do believe Kotetsu knows exactly who kidnapped him. More, I'm sure it was my prisoner, and that the risk of identification is what drove Suzuki to attack Kotetsu this evening. It wasn't a random attack, it was designed and specific."

"But Kotetsu already failed to identify your man when you called on him," Hajime pointed out, and Kai nodded, turning to the uneasy Tenichi.

"That's true," he agreed softly. "But I didn't entirely believe him. Rather, I felt Kotetsu was frightened by seeing my prisoner. You don't become frightened by someone you know nothing about, Hajime-dono, not when they're locked behind bars and doing nothing to excite anyone's reactions. Suzuki is a nondescript man with a nondescript demeanour, and he was in no way a violent or troublesome prisoner. On the contrary, he was reading a book quietly in the corner of his cell when Kotetsu came to see him. Yet Kotetsu seemed scared by him. So although he didn't identify the man... it was fairly certain to me that they had met before."

Tenichi tensed, staring up at Kai in horror, and Kai offered him a grim smile.

"I've been involved in the Onmitsukidou since before it formally began, and I know a lot of tricks of deception and misdirection," he explained. "You were frightened, and you lied to me. You knew the man in my cell, and he knew you. He came after you tonight because of that reason — either that or you went after him. I'm not quite sure yet which one is the true one — but I don't believe this encounter was at all coincidental."

Tenichi swallowed hard, and Hajime frowned, glancing at his officer and then back at Kai.

"You have evidence for this?" he asked quietly. "Kotetsu is a good officer and he's in our trust. He's done nothing in his time with us to suggest he'd be involved in anything untoward, and I won't believe it unless you can pull out something that ties him into this whole

conspiracy you're building up here. With all respect, Kai-dono, it sounds like you've jumped to conclusions based on your interpretation of Kotetsu's behaviour. The man has probably never been to the heart of Second before, certainly not near the dungeon you like to call a holding bay. No wonder he was intimidated. It takes a strong hearted man not to be scared when in the clutches of the Onmitsukidou."

Kai allowed a rueful smile to touch his lips, nodding in acknowledgement of Hajime's point.

"Perhaps," he agreed, "and I'm not accusing Kotetsu of anything untoward. My belief is simply that he knew our prisoner was the one who abducted him, and something about the man frightened him enough that he couldn't say so, not when that prisoner was present. The prisoner escaped, and there was a scuffle between them tonight... one trying to prevent the other from talking about something that happened. In light of the evidence we have, the obvious conclusion would be that Kotetsu could identify my prisoner as his abductor and that prisoner wanted to eliminate a witness."

"I see," Hajime rubbed his chin pensively. "Well, Kotetsu?"

"I don't remember anything about being abducted," Tenichi's mouth felt dry and full of cotton wool as he forced the lie over his lips once more, and tears of frustration glittered in his eyes. "I don't know what you want me to tell you."

"The truth, as you see it, please," Kai was unmoved by the other man's unsettled emotions, leaning back against the wall and eying the Eighth Seat thoughtfully. 'We have good evidence to indicate that you were taken and held in a remote part of Rukongai. We also have evidence of things occurring in that part of Rukongai which are undoubtedly in breach of Seireitei law. I'm not questioning your integrity,' as Tenichi flinched, dismay flooding his features, "and if you say you don't remember where you were held, until I have evidence to the contrary, all I can do is believe you. But when it comes to your kidnapper, things are different. You are right when you say you were with the Seventh tonight, and some of them saw your fight with the escaped man. One of them — the youngster you protected — also overheard snippets of the dialogue between you."

"Dialogue?" Hajime looked startled, and Kai nodded.

"When I arrived, one of your young officers told me he'd heard my prisoner threaten Kotetsu," he said blackly. "He was full of how Kotetsu saved him, and how the other guy had been making threats. When I heard it, the faint suspicions I'd had about Kotetsu's memory

became far more firm in my mind. Apparently my prisoner told Kotetsu that if he didn't keep his mouth shut, he'd come kill him. That isn't the kind of thing you say to someone you've never met... nor someone you believe doesn't remember you, even if you have encountered each other before."

Tenichi's features drained of all colour, and he drew a shaky breath into his lungs, wetting his lips as he reeled from the Onmitsukidou officer's revelation. At the clear look of dismay on his subordinate's features, Hajime bit his lip.

"Kai-dono, Seventh is a battered place at the moment," he said softly. "It's a shameful thing to ask from an Endou to a Shihouin, but I'll ask anyway. Please don't break one of the few remaining sane members I have left."

"I have an investigation to complete, and I need to complete it," Kai said frankly. "I don't mean any disrespect to the Endou or to Seventh, but a man is dead and I want to know why. More, I want to find the people responsible, and prevent any further calamities from befalling the Gotei or Seireitei as a whole."

"We all want to do that," Hajime responded, "but Kotetsu's been under enough strain. His abduction was bad enough, but it was that the Fukutaichou was investigating when he was struck down. Nakata reported to me that Kotetsu blamed himself — and he's not an Endou, he doesn't have the resilience we have to death nor the same quick ability to recover from it that we do. If Kotetsu did lie to you... and I don't know that he did, but if he did... I feel sure it's for that reason. It's because of Souja-dono."

"I didn't kill anyone," Tenichi whispered, and Kai sighed, softening his expression as he took in the other man's pallor.

"Nobody suspects you of being responsible for Souja-dono's death. We know our killer, we even know her name, and we know roughly what must've occurred," he said quietly. "All we need to know from you is the missing pieces of the puzzle that might stop your Vice Captain from finding justice. You were abducted into a disused *Senkaimon* outside the Twelfth Division, and you were taken to Rukongai. These things we can prove, whether you can tell us about them or not. What I need to know from you is about that abduction. The man who attacked you tonight... he threatened you, and you knew who he was. Didn't you?"

"Kotetsu, tell him," Hajime said brusquely. "Whatever it is you do remember, if Kai-dono is right or not... tell him."

Tenichi swallowed hard, unable to speak, and Kai reworded his question yet again.

“Was the man you fought tonight the man who abducted you from Seireitei?” he asked, and slowly, reluctantly, Tenichi lowered his head, all defiance and fight knocked out of him by the direct persistence of the Shihouin’s approach.

“And he threatened to hurt you if you told us?”

“Yes,” Tenichi barely managed to form the word, swallowing the panic that threatened to well up inside of him. He desperately tried to pull his composure back together, raising sorrowful eyes to his interrogator. “And Ketsui. He threatened... Ketsui.”

“I see.” Kai’s lips set into a grim line at this, and Hajime muttered a curse.

“A low blow,” he said, clearly displeased by this revelation. “I’m sorry, Kotetsu. We should’ve seen that possibility. Maybe Souja-dono did see it — but I had no idea you were wrestling with so much.”

Tenichi merely hung his head, the tears trickling silently down his cheeks, and Kai let out another sigh.

“The oldest trick in the book, and you fell for it,” he said disparagingly, causing Hajime to send him a startled glance. “Threaten a kinsman and use that to buy your silence. Your brother would probably be devastated if he knew you were concealing evidence on his behalf — not to mention insulted that you doubt his ability to protect himself — but at the very least, I suppose, your intentions were honourable and I can lay to rest any deeper suspicions on your part. To protect a kinsman is at least noble, if sometimes foolishly done... but it would’ve helped to know this much sooner. If you couldn’t tell me in front of Suzuki’s face, Kotetsu, you should’ve told one of your own officers.”

“Did you tell one of the Seventh?” Hajime asked sharply, as though something had just occurred to him. “Did you speak to Souja-dono, when he brought you back to barracks that night?”

Tenichi shook his head.

“I didn’t... my memories were... blurry,” he said uneasily. “Until I saw... in Kai-dono’s cells... I didn’t know what to say about anything.”

“Well, so now we’ve established that Suzuki was the man who kidnapped you, maybe we can tease some more truth from those reluctant memories of yours,” Kai said frankly. “Maybe there’s

something else you can tell us — perhaps Suzuki said something to you when he was taking you over the divide, or maybe you recall something from your time in captivity.”

“In fairness, Kai-dono, none of the abducted officers remember anything from being taken,” Hajime pointed out, and Kai nodded.

“True, but we’ve already discovered that Kotetsu’s memory is deeper than we thought it was,” he said unsympathetically. “I thought perhaps we could push it a little further, and see whether anything else comes to light.”

He cast Tenichi a benign smile, which the officer met with a wary look.

“Aizen Kohaku,” Kai’s words were brisk and to the point, and Tenichi flinched at the sound of them, alarm growing in his gaze once more as he realised the conversation was headed in another dangerous direction. “What about him? Did you see him as well, during those days you were held far from Seireitei?”

Tenichi shook his head wordlessly, and Kai frowned.

“But you don’t remember where you were held, so how can you be so sure?” he countered. Tenichi bit his lip, but did not speak, and Kai sighed.

“When I said his name in the Second’s dungeon, you acted as though it meant something to you,” he said quietly. “You overreacted to it, in fact... and just then, when I said it, something in your eyes changed. I’m not an idiot and you gain nothing by lying to me, Kotetsu. Right now you’re not under suspicion of anything, but if you continue to withhold what might be valuable evidence, that might change.”

“What is going on in here?” Before Tenichi could muster any kind of response, the door of the small chamber was flung back to reveal the Captain of the Seventh Division, white *haori* flapping around his shoulders and the glitter of indignation in the man’s pale eyes. “I’ve just been told that all hell has let loose on my doorstep once again — now I find that one of my officers has been pulled back by the Onmitsukidou and is being interrogated on my premises. Kai, explain to me — what in hell are you doing here?”

“Trying to discover what Kotetsu knows,” Kai turned to his friend with a grimace, bowing his head slightly in a gesture that acknowledged Hirata’s higher rank in the most casual of manners possible. “He’s already helped quite considerably with my enquiries —

tonight he fought the former Onmitsukidou that was in our cells, and it turns out he does remember that man abducting him. I wanted to know what else he remembered... since justice for your son might well rely on it.”

“For Souja?” Hirata looked momentarily stricken, then his eyes became grave. “I see. But Tenichi has already told me that he knows nothing of my son’s death. What you’re suggesting is that he lied before his Captain and concealed information about the death of his Vice Captain — both of which are considerable crimes indeed.”

“I’m not accusing him of doing either, exactly,” Kai shook his head. “We know Kotetsu was traumatised by the abduction, and his memories were unsettled as a result. But there has been discussion among senior officers that time and other events are, bit by bit, bringing them back. I’m not accusing your officer of treason, Hir... Endou-taichou, at least, not yet. I’m just trying to piece together any fragments of memory that might have returned to him in the time since he was returned here. It’s my belief he has some latent knowledge about Aizen Kohaku — a figure who your son claimed knowledge of also, before he died.”

“Tenichi?” Hirata turned his hawkish gaze on his subordinate officer, and Tenichi groaned, burying his head in his hands.

“I never saw him,” he murmured, his words muffled and laced with desperation. “I don’t know anything about him, I swear I don’t! I didn’t know anything before and I don’t now! When the man... when the person you had as a prisoner said the name Aizen Kohaku I was shocked. I hadn’t heard... I didn’t know anything about it, I promise. I never saw anyone by that name, and I don’t know who or what he or..or even *she* is. That’s the honest truth.”

“To be so sure implies you do remember something from your time in Rukongai,” Kai observed evenly, and Tenichi swallowed hard.

“Shadowy, fragmented images that don’t fit together,” he said at length, unable to meet either the Onmitsukidou’s gaze nor his Captain’s as he struggled to get himself out of his predicament. “They still don’t make sense — how could I know if they meant something or if they didn’t? They meant nothing to me.”

“Memories such as?”

“A hut... broken bird skulls... a water source... a grey flash of sky,” Tenichi took a shuddery breath into his lungs, knowing he was outright lying now but not sure how else to pull himself back from the sharp edge of Kai’s interrogation. Lying to the Onmitsukidou was one

thing, but in front of his Captain, he knew he was treading on much more dangerous ground — yet however he looked at it, he could not see a way to bring up his encounter with Keitarou without seeming complicit in the whole scheme. Again he remembered the massacre in the Spiritless Zone and that it had not been, as Keitarou had implied, the result of Hollow activity, and he knew that however innocent his intentions had been, he could not extract the good from the bad without putting himself, and possibly his brother too in serious trouble.

“I don’t know how to connect those things together,” he said finally, “And I don’t know how to link them to the man who took me hostage. That’s all I know, Kai-dono. Taichou.”

“And your reaction to the name Aizen Kohaku?”

“I know the name Aizen.” Tenichi paused for a long time, but the emotion was just beneath the surface and try as he might he could not hold back all of his fears. “That name frightened me more than anything else. Well, why wouldn’t it? My father was Aizen Keitarou’s cousin. They worked together... Father died for his cause. I didn’t want... people to think I was complicit because of the things Father did. When I heard the name Aizen, and Fukutaichou had died because he was investigating my abduction, I was afraid. For Ketsui and for myself... that people would think... but it’s not true! It’s not true and I didn’t want Fukutaichou to die! The place I was dumped after the abduction was right by Father’s grave, and when I realised that... I was scared of what it meant, that people would think I’d done it on purpose, that somehow it was what I wanted but it wasn’t! Fukutaichou came to get me, and he told me never to go there again, and not to talk about that, nor the people who had found me, because the Taichou would be cross and it would cause problems for everyone, even Ketsui if I did! I kept it a secret because he told me to, not because I wanted to lie to my Captain or anyone else about anything! I’m not working with any enemy, I’m not! I just didn’t want my brother to be hurt, so I didn’t tell you about the man who abducted me, but he came and threatened me, and then...”

“He threatened you before you saw him in my prison cells?” Kai demanded sharply. “You saw him after you were abducted, but before he was our captive?”

Tenichi nodded miserably.

“He came and threatened me the morning after Souja-dono disappeared,” he admitted bitterly. “He can appear and disappear, camouflage himself into the walls so you never know when he’s there,

watching or listening. He told me that if I told anyone... if anyone found out that I'd been abducted by him... and then Fukutaichou was dead, and I... but I... I didn't want that to happen! I didn't know where Souja-dono had gone and I didn't want Fukutaichou to die! I wasn't a part of that, I just... I..."

At this point words failed him, and he buried his head in his hands once more, his entire body shaking with the force of his sobs.

Hirata cast him a glance, mixed emotions in his pale eyes at Tenichi's admissions, then he sighed, turning to face Kai.

"You've reduced one of my officers to a gibbering wreck," he observed bluntly. "Is this your normal interrogation procedure? If it is, I'd prefer you take it away from my division... we've dealt with enough stress without you sending any of my other subordinates into mental collapse."

Kai frowned, then moved forward, resting a gentle hand on Tenichi's shoulders.

"Clearly there are more complicated reasons you felt the need to protect your brother," he said quietly. "I hadn't perceived them, and I'm sorry. However, I need to know one more thing from you. The hut you think you remember seeing — was there anyone inside it? Do you remember seeing anyone within that hut?"

"I never saw inside the hut." Tenichi's breath was coming in heavy, heaving gulps, but somehow he managed to raise his gaze, dashing away his tears as he answered the question. "I just saw the outside... I didn't go in. It's just an image of... of this hut... shrouded in... darkness. That's all. That's all I can tell you."

"Tenichi, you know nothing about my son's death, correct?" Hirata's question was direct, and Tenichi stared at him, before slowly shaking his head.

"I didn't want anything to happen to Fukutaichou," he said emphatically, his voice shaking slightly as his emotions threatened again. "I respected him. Admired him. He was good to me. I would never..."

"Then I think you're done here," Hirata turned a meaningful gaze on Kai, who sighed, but nodded his head in defeat.

"You outrank me, especially here, so I'm done," he agreed reluctantly. "Kotetsu, if you remember any more about what happened when you were abducted, we need to know. People's lives have been lost, and no matter how afraid you are, we need the truth."

Your life, your brother's life — none of the things you want to protect will be safe if you don't trust in the folk around you. We need everybody on board to solve this case and, at the very least, bring justice for that Vice Captain you say you respected."

With that he bowed his head towards Hajime, then towards Hirata, and left the chamber. There was a moment of silence, then Hirata let out a heavy sigh of his own.

"Hajime, take Kotetsu and give him to Nakata to shake sense into. Find them something to do that doesn't involve hysterical outpourings," he said wearily. "There's been enough instability here for ten divisions, lately. Make sure everyone's on guard in case this escaped felon returns — but otherwise, this business is closed. Tenichi?"

This last to the still shaking Eighth seat,

"Go clean up and pull yourself together. A grown man doesn't break down like that before superior officers, not if he wants to survive longterm in a division like the Seventh. I took you on here knowing your family's past, and the relationship between it and my ancestors' own, and it means nothing to me. It should mean nothing to you, either — you have a duty to do and I will be cross if you fail to complete it."

"Y... Yes, sir," Tenichi stammered out, before Hajime grabbed him by the arm, hauling him bodily from the room and out into the courtyard beyond. Once there, however, the Fourth Seat rounded on his companion, clapping his hands down on the other man's shoulders.

"If you remember anything more, you come to me and tell me before you tell that Onmitsukidou," he said grimly. "This is Seventh, and we'll handle Fukutaichou's vengeance our own way. I know how you feel and I realise it's been hard on you, but I don't like officers from other divisions coming and trampling over us when they think we're down. Taichou pulled us out of it today, but without a Vice Captain, there's only him who can really stand up to Kai-dono and I don't want to bother the Captain more than we have to about petty things like this. You have something you need to talk about, you come to me. Understand?"

"Yes, sir," Tenichi swallowed hard, then nodded his head. "I'm sorry, sir. I'll be more careful, and I'll remember what you said."

"Good," Hajime released his hold, nodding curtly. "Then let's get you cleaned up and back on duty. No blood was spilled, so there's nothing to get worked up over — lets go find you something more

productive to do.”

Well, that had been informative.

Kai stepped over the threshold of the Second Division, his fingers groping at his belt for the key that would let him into the most secure parts of the Maggots’ Nest complex. Down, down, down he went, deep in thought as he passed through checkpoint after checkpoint, making half-hearted acknowledgements of the salutes each of his guards gave on his way down. At length he reached his destination, resting his hand against the door frame of the cell and gazing through the bars to the bloody mess that lay beyond. The body had been removed, already carted off for further examination and eventual autopsy, but to Kai’s expert eye there was little sign of a struggle. Kounou’s wound had bled profusely, but he had not been aware of his attacker’s approach until it had been too late — no, it was quite possible the man had been killed in his sleep.

This section of the Maggots’ Nest had the highest level of security, and the most guards on duty, yet not a single one of his trained agents had seen or heard anything until the alarm had been raised as to Suzuki’s escape. There was no reiatsu at this scene, but Kai had been certain that this had been Suzuki’s handiwork all the same. It had been an Onmitsukidou kill, done deliberately to send a message, yet the cut had been an angry one, sunk deep enough through the vessels and muscles of Kounou’s throat to penetrate the gristle of his oesophagus and trachea. Kai’s fingers tightened around the metal frame as he tried to suppress his anger. Kounou had been an uncooperative prisoner, but Kai had kept him alive for a reason. In one sweeping coup d’etat, Suzuki had made a mockery of the entire secret ops organisation and gained his vengeance for a crime ten years old.

If I had been in any doubt as to whether it was Suzuki Naoto we had in our custody, this would’ve settled the matter unequivocally.

Kai sank back against the wall with a sigh, clenching and unclenching his fists. Onmitsukidou trained to overcome many trials and hardships, to rise to challenges and complete duties in the most efficient manner possible. Yet death was and always had been a barrier. Kai had always disliked killing as a solution to a problem, and even after twenty five years as head of the organisation, that disgust for bloodshed had not changed.

Kounou was a worm, but he was our worm and we had ownership of his life. Suzuki may have been aggrieved that we didn’t give him the justice he

felt he deserved — but now we will never prove it either way. Suzuki is still on the loose, and we might never find him. If what I suspect about his abilities is true — if Kotetsu's evidence is at all reliable, he's become a true chameleon, capable of blending in in plain sight. More, he's able to twist his body through bars and use his knowledge of us and of Seireitei to his advantage. He's probably well away by now.

“Kai-dono?”

Saku's voice echoed from the gloom, and Kai turned, casting his adjutant a harried, weary smile.

“Saku? What do you have for me? I presume you bring a report — please tell me it's a good one.”

“I don't know if it is or it isn't,” Saku admitted, tucking a wisp of dark hair behind her ear. “There's been a report that Suzuki's emerged at the Thirteenth Division. It's unsubstantiated, but I sent Karaki's patrol to find out.”

“At the Thirteenth?” Kai's brow furrowed. “Do we know why? Do we have a witness?”

“Hard to say, sir,” Saku chewed on her lip. “Thirteenth didn't make a report to us exactly, just that one of the night patrols picked up unusual energy and flurry in that area.”

“So Suzuki might still be on the premises?” Kai was already moving towards the door, and Saku shrugged her shoulders.

“I think it's unlikely,” she admitted. “Like I said, it's all unsubstantiated, but...”

“But?” Kai paused, fixing his companion with a quizzical gaze. “Spit it out, Saku. One of our prisoners is on the loose, another lies dead, and we're in very grave danger of being a laughing stock if we can't pull the threads together into a perfect puzzle before the dawn. I want Suzuki and I don't intend on going easy on him this time around, not now he's breached our security and slit Kounou's throat. What do you know about what happened at Thirteenth? What did the patrols tell you — was someone attacked there?”

“I think so, but I think the attack was unsuccessful,” Saku paused, then slid her hand into the sleeve of her *hakamashita*, pulling out a cloth wrapped object which she held out gingerly towards her companion. Kai glanced at it for a moment, then took it, unwrapping it carefully and letting out an exclamation as he recognised the short bladed dagger with the curved hilt, its blade crusted with drying blood.

“This weapon is...”

“As far as I can ascertain, it was stolen from one of the guards on duty at Suzuki’s cell,” Saku said quietly. “It was not used against either of them — both are dazed and dizzy but unharmed. The weapon was located somewhere in the vicinity of the *Senkaimon* where Kotetsu Tenichi was said to have been abducted. It was abandoned. I believe it was left as a message — either before or after the attack at Thirteenth.”

“To tell us he was the one who took Kotetsu or to lead us on a wild goose chase?” Kai wrapped the weapon once more, resisting the urge to toss it into Kounou’s bloodstained cell in his frustration. “I don’t like this, Saku. Everything is moving in undertones and it’s moving faster than I’d like.”

Saku’s keen eyes flitted from her commander to the blood-spattered cell floor, then she pressed her lips together.

“I heard you’d interrogated Kotetsu at last. Properly,” she murmured. Kai snorted, shaking his head.

“I was beginning to get there, but I had interference from the Seventh,” he said with a grimace. “Kitabata is one thing, but I can’t pull rank on Hirata and he knows it. Kotetsu broke down and told us some things he knew about Suzuki. He also told us some things I wasn’t so aware of — about his family and that family’s connection to Aizen.”

Saku’s eyes became contemplative slits.

“Do you suspect Kotetsu Tenichi of treason, sir?” she asked softly, and Kai shrugged.

“I suspect him of being an idiot, at present,” he said tiredly. “An idiot who lied for reasons best known to himself. He unburdened himself of a lot of information this evening, but I still felt it was piecemeal. His memory-loss becomes more and more convenient as time passes — he recalls now that Suzuki abducted him and claims Suzuki threatened him again, in Seireitei, before Souja was killed — but he claims not to recall more than brief flashes of his abduction. He says he never saw Aizen Kohaku, yet if his memory is so patchy, how would he know that? I think he’s still lying... and I don’t know, yet, if it’s because he’s a fool or because he’s a traitor. For Hirata’s sake, I’m hoping it’s just a case of complete idiocy, which can be dealt with through normal disciplinary procedures. But this blood connection to Keitarou interests me.”

“You want him watched, then?”

“We can’t do anything about him when he’s within Seventh’s grounds. Hirata’s made it very clear that he doesn’t want me pestering the lad, nor does he believe Kotetsu is guilty of anything sinister and, honestly, probably needs to believe that in order to pull the whole squad together,” Kai said with a sigh. “Outside the division, though... yes. I think it’s time we kept a closer eye on him. If he’s making contact with Keitarou — or, heaven forbid, a spy within the Gotei — we need to know about it and flush it out before little things become bigger.”

“You’re thinking of the report from the Third, aren’t you, sir?” Saku asked astutely, and Kai nodded.

“Although it was brief and not detailed, Nagesu-sama’s testimony is quite compelling evidence,” he agreed. “Keitarou is alive, is able to move and act on his own impulses, has others fighting for him and has been seen by a Captain and a Third Seat of good, sound mind in the Real World. We know where he was before, and we have a good idea of the region he’s operating in now, but it’s all too nice and neat for my liking. There’s got to be more strands to this thread and I want to find them. Kotetsu Tenichi might be a dead end, but he might not. I think, with Suzuki loose, it’s worth spending some manpower on finding out.”

“And the Thirteenth?”

“Let’s see what Karaki brings back,” Kai stretched his hands over his head, stifling a yawn. “If Ukitake has any sense, he’ll let my men take a look around and answer all the questions so we have a full picture. Hopefully he’ll be more rational to deal with than Hirata — whose Wind Hawk I don’t feel much like exciting at the moment.”

“Then I suppose we need to wait for Karaki,” Saku mused. “Sir, what of Kounou’s remains? What do you intend to happen to them after the official examination?”

“He’s a felon, whose stay of execution may well have been longer than was sensible,” Kai admitted. “Neesama took me to task about it, too — perhaps she was right. At least if we had dealt with it, there wouldn’t be the shame of having an escaped prisoner responsible. But a felon is a felon, and this is no different from any other criminal who dies in our custody. Make sure all useful evidence is gathered from his body and recorded meticulously... then burn it and dispose of the ashes in the usual way.”

“We won’t be returning them to his family, then?” Saku questioned,

and Kai shook his head.

“A man who dies with honour fighting for something worthwhile is a family member worth having returned,” he said briskly, though there was a troubled expression in his golden eyes. “The Shihouin pride themselves on honour and worth, and disdain disloyalty and shame. Kounou shamed his badge by acting in the way he did — whatever his involvement with Suzuki, he was a guilty man and he betrayed my trust. His family should have washed their hands of him a long time ago — and even if they haven’t, this is what justice means. He is a felon. See to it that he is disposed of as is fit.”

Saku was silent for a moment, her clever gaze absorbing every flicker of expression that reflected across her commander’s face in the dim light of the underground cell. Then she nodded her head, raising her hand in salute.

“Yes sir,” she acquiesced. “I’ll make arrangements at once.”

Darkness.

Keitarou watched the black rip in the atmosphere slowly shrink and disappear, he was aware of the heavy scent of dew-drenched grass all around him. The night was peaceful except for the hoot of an owl on the wing overhead, searching for a mate above the tall tops of the densely packed trees. Tiny scuffles of claws against soil told of small rodents taking cover from the killers on land and in the air, and in the shadows, a fox hunted, its russet paws greyed out by the dim glow of the moon. The creature almost appeared silver in the haze, and, for a moment, it turned to stare at Keitarou, eyes gleaming before disappearing with a twitch of its tail into the undergrowth.

A dark smile touched Keitarou’s lips. Well, he had come to hunt foxes, but not the four legged kind.

Moving carefully through the grass, ignoring the rheumatic twinge in his leg as it protested against the uneven ground, Keitarou made his way to Daisuke’s final resting place, pausing before awkwardly lowering himself down onto his knees before it. Brushing back the thick foliage to gaze down at the stone he had carved the word ‘tomo’ onto so many years before, he closed his eyes, saying a brief prayer for his cousin’s respite in the world beyond. He was not a spiritual man, nor had he ever believed in the folk deities and superstitions that he knew were still rife across rural Seireitei, but somehow, when it came to Daisuke, the rules were different. Even now he could draw to mind recollections of that day, and most of all, the innocent, tearful face of

Shikiki as she had spoken of a world beyond this one. Keitarou had not believed then, and did not now, but his fondness for Daisuke had made him hope that, in this instance, his science was wrong.

But it's been too many years since I even saw Shikiki. I shouldn't place my convictions in the hands of children who choose to grow up under enemy auspices. Not even if her words remain my only comfort for losing you, Dai-kun. Well, that and having seen your sons, grown and alive in this world.

Using a nearby stick to pull himself to his feet, Keitarou brushed the knees of his *hakama* free of leaf litter, aware of the chill in the night air now that the damp had touched his clothing. He would ache for his efforts later, he realised ruefully, but coming without paying respects to Daisuke he could not do.

Even dressed in death robes, your eldest son shows great promise. I can't speak for the other... well, I suppose wherever you are, you no longer care about any of those things. It's for me to take care of everything. I won't disturb your sleep with prattling about children you haven't seen in years. Just, you're the only one who ever fully understood, and maybe, now, I realise that all the more. You sent the children away, your wife too, so you could commit to our cause without hesitations, and die a martyr to it. You were faithful and decisive to the end — yet I've let cracks and chinks appear in my armour. I've made mistakes — mistakes you'd never be foolish enough to make, Dai-kun. I let my affection for Eiraki hamper me twenty five years ago and was almost killed by a Kuchiki for it. And now... now, my daughter has done something which... has had consequences. Yet... I can't take action against her as I should. Stupid as she's been, she fought out of loyalty and I... I have become weak at heart.

He raised his gaze to the sky.

Instead, I draw on monsters created by a man I killed, a man whose work I considered beneath me, and that of his greedy son. I use them as a shield and a distraction whilst I come here to lay to rest another ghost. What would you say to me, Daisuke, if you knew how much I put my family above my common sense? Should I have followed your example and sent Eiraki far away after Katsura was born? But...

He sighed, rubbing his temples.

Enough. It's only in the dark of the night like this, here in the depths of Seireitei, at your grave that I let these doubts spill out. You're the only one I can ever tell about them. Everyone else relies on me to be strong and to do what's right. They don't see how flawed my judgement has become... and if they did, it would be the end of me.

He rested a palm against the trunk of a nearby elm tree, gazing across the grass in the direction from which he had seen the silver-

haired, cloaked figures emerge the night he had left Tenichi in their care.

Once, I would have done this far sooner. I would've acted against the threat immediately and thought nothing about doing so. Why am I so uneasy? What is it about this night, Dai, that makes me feel that I'm about to cross lines that can't be crossed back?

A cloud passed across the moon, creating a glittering stream of light that flickered over the surface of Daisuke's makeshift grave, and, for a brief moment, Keitarou almost thought he could see the outline of his friend's fair-haired form, those pale Urahara eyes gazing at him impassively through the bleakness of the night. The illusion was gone as soon as it had come, but Keitarou chewed his lip, only half convinced that it had been his imagination that had summoned the spectre before him.

I really have become foolish, haven't I? But I have the strangest feeling that... I really will see you again soon.

He closed his eyes briefly, drawing on the broken fragments of images that lurked deep in his memories. Recollections that were not his, put there by a screaming child, kicking and clawing the air in their desperation to escape. A child with no words, yet whose thoughts and delusions had penetrated Keitarou's own consciousness and implanted ideas and pictures there.

I never saw the whole picture of anything, and it's frustrating. But from the bits I know... time is running out.

He opened his eyes, resolve glittering in their depths.

I have to take action here, and eradicate this threat, whatever the cost happens to be. I have to rescue Koku, and bring him back to Rukongai. I have to do those things, and then...

His eyes narrowed, as something inside of his body flickered then disappeared, like the snuffing out of a candle flame.

Kurotsuchi?

His brow furrowed.

Well, so the Shinigami finally got to you? My informant was right, you were in their custody. Well, so much to the good. A dead man can't talk, and a twice dead man even less. You were useful, but I can do without you. This is probably better... I can focus my attention fully on what's important, instead of worrying about where you are or who you might have stumbled across.

Pressing his body against the tree, he crept in the direction he had

seen the Kitsune go, feeling his way with his feet as he went. *The maps indicate old Sekkiseki mines in this part of Seireitei. Coincidentally, they've not been disturbed for years. What better place to hide your foxes, Hirata-dono? There's nowhere else in this vicinity they could be so well hidden, nor disappear and appear so easily at will. Though it seems quiet this evening. Either they've not detected me, or...*

His eyes became slits. *They're waiting for me. Well, that suits me too. I can play the stealth game as well as any silver-haired traitor.*

He closed his fingers around Chudokuga's hilt, stepping carefully between the twisted roots of two trees and using his sharp gaze to scan the surrounding landscape. Despite his physical stiffness, there was nothing wrong with his vision and, even in the dim light, he soon made out a slight imperfection in the rock, shadowed in the overhang of a clump of bushes and ferns.

Well, a veritable fox earth. How appropriate.

Keitarou drew Chudokuga from his obi. *Well, Chudokuga. This is a bit more old-school for us, isn't it? I wondered whether you might turn back. You seemed in two minds when we arrived.*

I know.

Keitarou sighed, shaking his head. *I have no feeling for these people, Chudokuga. Don't accuse me of going soft on their account. It's not that. It's... The threat they pose to your visionary, and your family. I know. I know, and I sanction their elimination. I just prefer it when you act and don't dither. We're here to do a job, and we should do it. You don't need to ascertain information. They are all fair game. Simply kill anything that moves. That way there are no foxes to threaten your boy, are there? You make it sound so simple.*

Keitarou's grip tightened, and he reached his free hand for the edge of the overhang, using it to swing his body down into the narrow hole that lay beneath. The tunnel twisted and turned, with barely enough room for Keitarou to move, and every few metres a new tunnel branched off from the main one, making it hard to discern which route was the one that truly led to the core of the Kitsune lair. *Paranoid souls protecting themselves with diversion tactics. How Urahara of them.*

Keitarou gritted his teeth, dragging his body through the widest

part of the tunnel until he reached a fork. Pausing, he spread out his senses, trying to pick up the flicker of life and energy from below. It was hard, the Sekkiseki foxing and confusing his attempts, but he had not spent time working in a Sekkiseki coated prison beneath the Endou manor for nothing, and after the first few wrong turns, he found he was able to pick out which passages had been most recently used. At this depth, the Sekkiseki was no more than the discarded scraps from the mine, rather than the core of the seam itself, and so, despite the faint buzzing at his senses, he was able to persevere, dropping into a round, smooth chamber with the minimum of noise and glancing around him as he got his bearings.

The room was empty, devoid of anything that could possibly identify it as part of an inhabited dwelling, and from it led off six separate tunnels. Quick assessment told Keitarou that it was likely only two of them really led anywhere important, but which two was harder to make out.

They really don't make people welcome, do they?

Well, you're not the kind of guest they'd want to invite.

Chudokuga's response was droll, but his voice was fainter than it had been at the surface, and Keitarou squinted in the blackness at his fingers, aware that they were coated in Sekkiseki dust.

A little Sekkiseki won't slow us down, but it's worth remembering that this was a mine. Further below the surface, we might have more trouble. I don't know whether this mine still has Sekkiseki or whether it was exhausted then abandoned. We'll have to play it by ear.

The faint sound of what seemed to be voices drifted from one of the tunnel openings at that point, and Keitarou turned in its direction, certain he had not imagined the presence of life at the end of the winding passageway. Reminding himself that all within this place were fair game, he ducked into the dark hole, almost misjudging his footing against the rock as it stepped and swung harshly down before straightening out and curving to the left.

Seriously, only an animal could find this kind of network convenient. How accurate the term Kitsune seems to have become... beasts in behaviour as well as in name.

“Who are you?”

At that moment he reached the end of the tunnel, stepping into a chamber lit with lights of a type Keitarou had not seen before, though he knew that they were not Kidou lamps. An elderly woman had spoken, sitting on what looked like an uncomfortable bed carved into the rock and dressed with moth-eaten blankets. Another man slept in a bed beside hers, and Keitarou's quick eyes saw that there were more

beyond, sunk into the darkness. The woman who had spoken reached unsteadily for a club stick that was propped against the wall, and Keitarou could see the deformity in her lower limbs that made it difficult for her to get to her feet. At second glance, he realised that she was not really so old, her face lined and her hair streaked with grey but her eyes still bright enough to suggest she was no more than middle age.

“Sekkiseki ages people prematurely, does it?” Keitarou remarked aloud, and the woman froze, staring at him in alarm.

“I said, who are you? Who are you, or I’ll raise the alarm!” she threatened, and Keitarou let out a chuckle, a sudden sense of calm settling over him as he realised what he had to do.

“Raise it,” he said softly. “It’s not you I want. It’s those who lead you — but you’ll do for a start. *Ore, Chudokuga.*”

This last to his sword, and barbs of metal shot out from the sword’s blade, thudding into the woman’s chest and throat and ripping through them. She gasped, stumbling back as blood bubbled at her lips, but Keitarou was already pulling the weapon back, firing it into the sleeping bodies of the two men alongside her. The woman’s body slid to the floor, her eyes still rolling and rasping sounds from her lips indicating that she still lived, and as Keitarou made his way forward into the room further, he bent at her side, drawing Chudokuga’s already blood-flecked blade across her throat to silence her permanently.

I’m afraid I don’t know which one of you it is that poses my son a threat, and so I have to kill all of you.

He shook the blood from the weapon, getting to his feet and stepping over the woman’s bowed legs as he gauged how many more patients there were in this room. Aside from the men he had already killed, there appeared to be three, with a fourth bed which lay empty, and Keitarou wasted no time in finishing these souls off in the same way he had tackled the others, reforming his blade and wiping it against his sleeve with an absent click of his tongue against his teeth.

Messy, and I don’t even know how many Kitsune live here.

“It will be a long night, Chudokuga,” he said aloud, tilting the weapon to examine it for residual stains in the light of the odd manual lamps that flickered and burned in the alcoves.

“I wouldn’t count on that.”

A voice from behind him made him turn, his eyes meeting the ice cold blue ones of a young man no older than his own oldest son. The

newcomer was pale as the moon. Silver hair straggled over his shoulders, glinting eerily in the lamplight, and making the stranger's eyes seem equally argent in hue. In his slipstream was another, older and taller but clearly subordinate, rusty red hair in a tail behind his head. Horror and dismay reflected in this man's gaze, but the silver apparition's eyes held only anger, and, from the young man's bearing, Keitarou understood that he had found what he was looking for.

"Well," he murmured. "And I suppose you must be the one who has authority over this miserable clutch of corpses."

"You had no cause to kill them. They could not have hurt you... killing the old and the sick is a coward's game!" the redhead exclaimed, but the other man held up his hand.

"This is Aizen Keitarou," he said quietly. "We should be surprised by nothing he does, Hiko."

"Ah. So you do know who I am. I'm honoured," Keitarou's eyes became slits. "In which case, you know why I've come."

"Yes. We've been waiting... I expected you far sooner," the silver-haired individual agreed coolly. "Your business is with me. And mine is with you. Business relating to a friend whose death is on your conscience."

"A friend?" Keitarou arched an eyebrow, then, "Endou Souja-dono? I see. Then you're here to avenge him? Well, that suits me. I've come to kill all of you — regardless of whether you run or you fight. If you fight, it will surely speed things up considerably."

He flicked out Chudokuga's blade in the silver-haired man's direction, the barbs shooting out once more with the intention of piercing vital structures, but the other man merely snorted, holding up his hand. There was a glitter of silverish light, and the barbs deflected against an invisible barrier. They fell back, the long threads of metal wire clattering uselessly against the floor of the chamber, and Keitarou cursed, taking a step back.

"Fight? You?" The Kitsune's eyes became glittering slits of malice. "You think your spider-web barbs can work on me? You're a fool, if you do. I'm not like them. I'm not weak and I'm not sickly."

His fingers brushed the ends of his silver hair.

"You're an Urahara. You understand that this signifies my blood descent from the Northern Clansfolk, and the reiatsu those people possess," he added softly. "If you think you can kill me, Keitarou, you're going to have to use your intelligence and your wits. And

you're going to have to assume you can escape from our lair alive, too. I am Ichimaru Joumei of the Kitsune, and I will avenge the lives you stole!"

"I don't need to know your name. I'm only interested in your corpse. Yours, and his," Keitarou's eyes glittered angrily. "Your people are steeped in blood and guilt, and even the Urahara want you dead. There's nobody to protect you — if the Urahara discovered the Endou were sheltering you, it could cause a war, so don't think your Hirata-sama will come to your aid. Your existence is unnecessary, and in this the justice of Seireitei is on my side."

He clasped his other hand over the right that held Chudokuga's hilt.

"If you won't die easily, then I'll have you die the hard way," he added coldly. "*Bankai. Chudokuga Konshi.*"

43. Joumei

Chapter Forty Two: Joumei

“...and I think that’s everything for the time being. I’ll deal with the fall out from last night myself, if the need arises, Enishi, so if anyone comes to speak to you regarding it, refer it directly to me, all right?”

Juushirou set aside his empty mug of green tea, rearranging the pile of messy documents on his desk and casting his adjutant a tired smile. “I have a feeling I might not have made myself too popular, so just in case...”

“You mean Shihouin, I suppose,” Enishi pressed his lips together, then nodded, hauling his substantial frame into an upright position. “Right. Well, orders are orders and if he asks me anything on or off the record, it’s not like I really know what the hell happened anyway. Shikibu and Edogawa started screeching about the assassin being here but nobody died and though that kid of yours was roughed up a bit, he seems more or less in one piece. This morning’s much the same as yesterday, and that rum lass Ketsui’s in charge of didn’t come in for any attention whatsoever. I’d call it a good night’s work, by all accounts.”

He grinned, looking rueful.

“If you want my honest opinion, Taichou, I’m glad you didn’t let the Onmitsukidou run riot around our barracks,” he admitted. “Don’t tell Shihouin, since he’ll be none too pleased and I have to sit through Vice Captain meetings with the guy — but it’s not the business of another division to mop up their mess in foreign turf. If the assassin was here — and I have no idea how Shikibu came to that conclusion, but I’m not going to argue with her, because I don’t want to start the day with earache — and he’d threatened us good and proper, we’d have dealt with it. We’re not lacking in the combat department, and I think a prison escapee would be a fool to come near here. Especially since he already got taken in by Thirteenth people — if he had brains, and from how Shihouin described him, he does, he’d go as far from here as possible and make his escape into the vast blue yonder.”

“That might well be what he’s done,” Juushirou admitted. “He’s not here, though, of that we can be fairly sure, I think. Just because none of us saw him, though, Enishi, I’m not refuting the possibility. Given the characteristics of the enemy, he might well have attacked Koku

and I mean to find out what I can from the boy today — if possible. It depends what kind of state he's in."

"Mm. He's having a rough time of it," Enishi's features softened. "All right. I'll go attend to normal morning duties and kick the backsides of the lazy so and sos who think that because there was an alert last night they can dither over breakfast. If you need me, Taichou, I'll most likely be in the drill yard whacking a few good hard bruises into dozy recruits."

He saluted, then left the office, his heavy, striding steps audible as he crossed the walkway towards the barracks proper, and Juushirou sighed, resting his chin in his hands. Though Enishi's matter-of-fact nature was always reassuring, somehow he could not subscribe to his adjutant's confident belief that if you could not see an enemy, it had probably never been there.

In this case, Enishi, I think Naoko is right. I think Kai knows it too. I hope it won't become an issue, though. Last night was hectic enough and I could do without another raid from the Onmitsukidou this evening.

"You look like the weight of the world is on your shoulders."

A voice from the rear window of the small cabin-like chamber made him look up, surprise turning to disbelief as he registered his pink *haoriclad* friend lounging over the sill.

"Shunsui?"

"Who else?" Shunsui acknowledged blithely. "I know, I know, it's early and you don't expect to see me before midday, but spare me the shocked and stunned routine. Do you think you can let me in? I heard Enishi-kun as I came up the back path, and I didn't like to interrupt, but the ground's damp and muddy round this way and I'm getting wet feet."

"Oh. Yes. Hang on," Juushirou got to his feet, hurrying to release the catch on the small side door which was really barely big enough for a whole person to get through. Shunsui, however, in spite of his height and the extra folds of the fancy patterned *haori* he always wore atop his uniform slid through it with surprising agility, pulling it shut behind him with a shiver.

"Brr. It's a bit too chilly this morning for wading through swamp."

"That's why there's a plank bridge."

"And only a tightrope walker could negotiate that."

"Most of my Division manage it," Juushirou observed offhandedly. "You probably can too, depending on how hungover you are."

“Cheek!” Shunsui pretended to look hurt. “Do you think I’d be up this early if I’d have been drinking last night? Not a chance. And you overestimate my skills. The plank bridge, as you call it, is little more than a piece of wood sunk deep in greenish blackish goop. And that greenish blackish goop is now setting up home between my toes. If you don’t believe me...”

He lifted his left leg, and Juushirou grimaced, giving his friend a little push away.

“It’s fine, I don’t need to see your feet,” he said firmly, and Shunsui yelped, almost overbalancing. He grabbed hold of the window ledge to steady himself, and Juushirou sighed, tut-tutting under his breath.

“You should wear *tabi* like everyone else, then you wouldn’t have such a problem,” he said unsympathetically. “Besides, enough insulting my division’s access routes. You chose to use them, so the problem’s on you. Why are you here, anyway? I assume there’s a reason.”

Shunsui grinned, regaining his normal nonchalant demeanour and shrugging his shoulders.

“I was hurt by your rebuttal of my request last night,” he said casually. “I couldn’t think why Kirio-chan would be grounded at such short notice, and thought I ought to make sure the special relationship Eighth and Thirteenth share hasn’t been somehow damaged without my knowing about it. If I did anything to offend you, Ukitake-taichou, you have my sincerest apologies — I’m sure it was probably my fault, but as our long acquaintance should bear witness, I really can’t help annoying folk.”

“Idiot,” Juushirou snorted, reaching across to swipe his friend playfully across the back of the head, and Shunsui ducked neatly out of his way, letting out a low chuckle. “You know and I know that I didn’t send Kirio to you because there’d been a skirmish around Seventh and since Suzuki knew Kirio by appearance, I didn’t want to put her in any danger. It was nothing to do with you and you know it.”

“Mm,” Shunsui’s expression became more serious and he nodded his head. “I do, and I know a little about what transpired with our neighbours, too. I trust Kai hasn’t been to see you at all?”

“Why would he have?” Juushirou asked, feigning ignorance, and Shunsui arched an eyebrow.

“I’m wrong, then, when I say that the escapee came here last night

after he left Seventh's perimeter?"

"You know about that too?" Juushirou looked taken aback, and Shunsui nodded.

"Began the morning with Kai," he said laconically. "I knew stuff had gone down at Seventh, because Hirata was with me last night and an emergency message came for him that something was in the offing — he refused my help, though, so I couldn't do anything but sit put and wait for news. I sent someone to see what was going on, from a safe distance, you understand — but by that time it had fizzled out. What my agent did see, though, was Kai marching Tenichi-kun inside as though he'd somehow done something he shouldn't — and he looked quite cross about it, too. Kai was the usual po-faced agent he is when on duty, so I thought I'd go and catch him off guard today, try and see what I can find out. I don't much like Second, as you know, but Saku-chan turned a blind eye to me calling without an appointment, so..."

"Using old friendships to discover information is a sneaky tactic," Juushirou said reproachfully.

"True, but sometimes it's the best way," Shunsui agreed blithely. "I'm still very fond of Saku-chan, even though our paths are in such different directions. It's reassuring that she seems to see things the same way, and besides, Seireitei are supposed to be working as a collective. Therefore any method is as good as any other, right?"

"Mm. Maybe," Juushirou leaned up against the door-frame of his office. "Well? You found something out and came here to tell me about it? Or you found something out and came to see what I knew?"

"Both," Shunsui responded simply. "I'll trade you what I learned from Kai — he's cross with you, by the way, since apparently you refused his people entry to investigate Thirteenth's grounds last night — and you tell me what happened with your stray."

"Ah. Kai's angry," Juushirou looked rueful, but he nodded, gesturing for his friend to step inside Ugendou. Shunsui did as he was bidden, pulling the door shut behind him and leaning up against it in his usual lounging fashion, whilst Juushirou settled himself on one of the wide cushions that the room sported. "How angry? Angry enough to launch a secret raid the next time I'm away from barracks?"

"Mm, well, you should count your lucky stars that he considers you a friend, lets put it that way," Shunsui ruminated pensively. "He's frustrated more than really cross. He knows you don't like the Onmitsukidou crawling all over your operation, scaring your recruits,

but this Suzuki person is his prisoner, and he wants to track him down. He feels that by preventing his people from infiltrating Thirteenth last night, you might've facilitated the guy's escape."

"We did our own sweep, and there was no sign he was anywhere on the premises," Juushirou said frankly. "My message to Kai said the same. By the time everything here had calmed down, it was well into the night. It just wasn't practical, and besides, I know where it would've led. They'd have wanted to interrogate Koku, and I didn't want that to happen. He's not physically up to that kind of an encounter."

"The escapee hurt him, then?" Shunsui asked curiously, and Juushirou shrugged.

"We'll come to that in a minute," he said cautiously. "First, about Tenichi? What happened at Seventh? Why was Kai involved in that?"

"Well, Tenichi crossed blades with Suzuki, and it seemed like a heated encounter. Tenichi was pretty much all out to kill the guy, and I guess Suzuki wasn't holding back any hatred either," Shunsui responded. "Apparently in the midst of this Suzuki said something that indicated he knew Tenichi, and Tenichi's response corroborated it. Someone from Seventh overheard, it got reported to Kai when he arrived at the scene. In any case, it transpires that Tenichi's been telling us a few fibs about his abduction."

"Fibs?" Juushirou's brows knitted together in consternation. "That's not like him."

"I knew you'd say that," Shunsui reflected. "Kai did too, which is why he wanted me to pass the information to you, rather than him coming and doing it officially. Kitabata defended Tenichi, and Hirata eventually sent Kai and his men away from Seventh, but I haven't tackled either of them, so don't know Seventh's official opinion on this at the moment. From what Kai told me, Tenichi recognised Suzuki when he was taken to Second to identify the man, but was too afraid to admit to it. Suzuki was his abductor, and he remembers fleeting bits from Rukongai, including a hut, but nothing tangible. At least, not at present — if we believe his testimony. Kai wasn't sure if he did or he didn't, but he did think the man was frightened. Very frightened. He broke down in tears, and even Kai was surprised by it."

"Frightened? Of what?" Juushirou looked nonplussed.

"It seems that it ties up with the boy's past — the origins of his father, and the fact that, with Keitarou's name so tied up in all of this, Tenichi and Ketsui's bloodline might also come to the fore," Shunsui

explained. “You probably know more of the details of that than I do, but Kai said that Tenichi seemed especially afraid when the name Aizen Kohaku was mentioned. Kai thinks this might mean he met Kohaku and knew things about him he was too afraid to reveal, but he’s willing to concede that maybe it’s the Aizen element that had him so terrified. What do you think?”

“Tenichi’s father Daisuke was an ally of Keitarou’s, it’s true,” Juushirou’s eyes became grave. “Keitarou told me himself they were like brothers, and Shikiki mentioned that Daisuke was killed by the Endou when she was in his custody. Keitarou reacted to that loss very badly... so I guess Daisuke was someone he trusted in a good deal. I never met him, of course, but I think you met his wife — Irie — when she was a refugee in District Eight. Tenichi told me the whole story when he recruited in Thirteenth, because he knew that you’d been kind to his mother and he felt that it was better he was honest with me from the start about his origins, in case it came out later.”

“Irie-san,” Shunsui’s eyes became near slits. ‘You now, now you mention it, I do recall... there were two scraps of boys playing in the dust when I went to the refugee camp — and I remember a woman telling me about her husband who had likely died and his close ties to Keitarou. You mean Tenichi and Ketsui are those brats? Yeesh, I am getting old,’ as Juushirou nodded. “I hadn’t made the connection at all — Ketsui was such a tiny, scrawny little thing, and Tenichi was the kind of whelp who balled his fists and fought all comers if they dared make fun of his little brother. But I do remember, now you mention it, how much like an Urahara the young’un looked... and Ketsui is very Urahara in his appearance, even now.”

“He looks a lot like his father. Both he and Tenichi have said so,” Juushirou sighed. “To me, this is all irrelevant, of course. They were refugees, they lost their father and they rebuilt their lives in your District without causing any civil unrest. Your forgetting about them is proof of that. But I suppose we never completely move away from our pasts. Tenichi and Ketsui are not allies of Keitarou, but I can see how... if that name came up again... Tenichi would feel under threat. More, that it was him who was abducted...”

“For that reason?” Shunsui asked. Juushirou spread his hands.

“Who knows?” he asked helplessly. “I like Tenichi, and I believe in his integrity. I didn’t see him the night Souja died, but Enishi and Kirio both told me how wrecked he was. It’s no part his fault, but he took it on as though it was, because he’d been kidnapped and it had set in motion other events. With that depth of emotion...”

He bit his lip, then,

“Don’t say this to Kai,” he added uneasily. “But it wouldn’t surprise me if Keitarou himself put that to Tenichi. If he abducted him, and made him feel as though if he said anything, he and his brother... would both suffer in the worst way. I believe Keitarou took Tenichi so that he could find out where the Kitsune were, and who knows if he succeeded, but it would be hard to completely suppress the memories of a competent agent like Tenichi through Kidou. All the things you’ve just told me... and his attitude towards Suzuki especially... lead me to wonder if Suzuki took him to Rukongai, where he encountered Keitarou, and once that happened... he was trapped. The moment Keitarou’s name comes from his lips, the past comes rolling out, and he must remember how horribly Ketsui was bullied as a young boy for his Urahara connections. It sounds from what you said that Kai wants to press into that connection now, so that fear would be justified. They’ve worked hard to break away from that... and I wouldn’t put it past Keitarou to try and reel them back in again by drawing on Daisuke’s memory and the ties of blood. If Kai goes down that path, he might be playing into Keitarou’s hands.”

Shunsui was silent for a few moments. Then he nodded.

“It makes sense,” he agreed pensively. “Tenichi isn’t someone I’ve had a lot to do with, but I trust your judgement of him, and I know his brother well. He’s a good kid, and he and Shizu-chan are close friends. Sometimes, though, if someone has a particularly strong sense of duty, they throw themselves open to weakness in a lot of other ways. Especially psychological manipulation of the kind Keitarou excels in. You’re sure that, if you’re right, Tenichi wouldn’t ally with Keitarou?”

“I’m sure. He’s a shinigami, and this is his world,” Juushirou said firmly. “He was distraught at losing Souja-dono, and Hirata’s said how good an officer he’s proven. I know it myself, too — how much it meant to him to establish his name and position here without worrying about his roots.”

“Then I shall say nothing to Kai,” Shunsui promised. “Possibly you should, though, as circumspcctly as you can, regarding his past, now that Tenichi himself has brought it up. It might put you back in Kai’s good books, and help to put his mind at rest over the boy’s guilt. Hopefully Tenichi will pull himself together, after ritually humiliating himself in front of his Captain and the head of the Onmitsukidou, and that will be that. Maybe he’ll find an opening to speak to you or Ketsui and all will resolve itself, but in the meantime, lets return to the subject of your stray.”

“I had a feeling that was coming,” Juushirou sighed. “All right. I suppose that’s fair. Koku was attacked last night, it’s true.”

“By Suzuki?”

“We believe so,” Juushirou nodded. “At least, he’s acquired a ring of bruises at his throat which we can’t explain through any other means. It makes me cross, because he was only unattended for a short while and I was the one who summoned Kirio away from his side. I feel I put him at risk by not seeing he was in danger, but honestly, it took us completely by surprise. We’d factored in the possibility of Mitsuki being attacked, so Naoko was going to help her with Koku’s dressings, but they got caught up collecting the supplies and in that brief interlude... bam.”

He shrugged his shoulders.

“Nobody saw anyone enter or leave,” he added. “I know that Suzuki has high skills of concealment, because we encountered them once before, but even so... this was quite an exceptional feat. Thirteenth were on alert, and yet he managed to get in and out without us knowing. More, he managed to choose a moment nobody was guarding Koku, and that bothers me.”

“You think it pre-planned that way?”

“How could he know I would call Kirio away?” Juushirou shook his head. “He had no way to judge my thoughts, because I didn’t know myself till I received Kai’s Hell Butterfly. Plans not yet made can’t be leaked.”

“They can, if Keitarou can see the future,” Shunsui pointed out.

“Maybe,” Juushirou conceded, “but you haven’t totally proven that theory yet, and besides, Suzuki was in the Onmitsukidou cells. I doubt, given his history, Kai would’ve let anyone who might have been sympathetic to his cause guard him, and besides, the Onmitsukidou as a whole aren’t particularly sympathetic people.”

“You’d break Kai’s heart, speaking like that,” Shunsui observed drolly, and Juushirou snorted impatiently.

“Kai is different,” he acknowledged, “and maybe Saku-dono, too — but I also think both of them are beyond suspicion as leaks. Don’t you?”

“I do,” Shunsui agreed. “So it would’ve been hard to get a message to Suzuki, I grant you. Perhaps that is my grasping at straws to prove my theory. What do you think the answer is?”

“Suzuki’s ability to take us off guard?” Juushirou pursed his lips, then, “I think it’s to do with his skills of concealment and camouflage. He can twist and distort his body, and I think he can do more than that. I think he was probably within Thirteenth’s barracks before I called Kirio away — and he saw her leave the room. I think he took his chance then. Nobody would have detected him. He’s very hard to detect. I think he waited for his opportunity, and then he struck. It chills me to consider it, but I think that’s how it was done. He waited till Koku was alone, which means...”

“Koku was his target, and nobody else,” Shunsui rubbed his chin pensively. “Now you mention it, Kai said that Tenichi’d mentioned something about this Onmitsukidou being able to conceal himself, like a... how did he put it? A chameleon. Probably you’re right on the mark. Koku survived this attack, though?”

“He did.” Juushirou agreed. “I think Suzuki must have sensed Mitsuki and Naoko approaching and taken off before he was caught. There was a flurry of reiatsu from Koku’s room, and Mitsuki reported him stumbling around the corridors in a hysterical daze. She sedated him, hence why there’s been no witness statement so far... and that’s all we know. He’s not been left alone for a moment since. Mitsuki’s still with him now, and I was going to go speak to him myself when you arrived.”

“I timed it well, then,” Shunsui observed comfortably. “If you don’t mind, I’ll come with you.”

“Shunsui...”

“Being an overprotective parent-type isn’t cute,” Shunsui scolded. “Besides, we’ve moved beyond the point where simply molly-coddling him as a Rukon stray in a strange world will suffice. He was attacked by a man who kidnapped Tenichi and who is probably working for Keitarou in some regard. Koku’s told you he didn’t see the attack on Souja, but I think this proves he did. He saw something he hasn’t told us, and the assassin came specifically to make sure he never did tell us. The fact he failed means we need to know what Koku knows, because it’s undoubtedly important.”

“You’re still of the opinion he was a prisoner of Keitarou’s, maybe a test subject in waiting?” Juushirou asked, and Shunsui shrugged.

“Maybe. Maybe not. It’s hard to theorise about a kid I haven’t met,” he said honestly. “That’s another reason I want to come. And besides, it helps to have a neutral present during interrogations. Even if you are more gentle in your approach than most, I think it best I come

with you and act as your second.”

“You’re not going to change your mind, are you?” Juushirou eyed his friend doubtfully, and Shunsui shook his head.

“I’m not,” he agreed blandly. “So you should save time by not fighting me and instead taking me to see your enigmatic young houseguest.”

Juushirou pressed his lips together, a look of reluctance entering his hazel eyes, but at length he sighed, holding up his hands.

“Fine,” he conceded, “but it won’t be a long conversation. He might not even be awake — I don’t know how deeply Mitsuki sedated him or if he’s stirred yet. If I take you with me, you’re not to harass him or scare him or make any of your usual silly remarks.”

“You really do sound like an overprotective mother hen,” Shunsui reflected lazily. ‘It’s all right,’ as Juushirou sent him a glare, “I won’t ruffle the down on your newly hatched chick — though I’m sure I warned you already about becoming too attached to a kid we know nothing about. Things are still too tenuous to make decisions about trusting strangers.”

“If Keitarou’s ally wanted him dead, then that’s a pretty good indication he’s not on their side.” Juushirou retorted, and Shunsui shrugged.

“Perhaps,” he agreed cautiously, “but he’s not entirely the innocent bystander and I think he needs persuading that it’s time to drop that pretence. We need to know what’s what — so you need to make sure you get him to tell you everything he hasn’t said already. Including his relationship with the disappearing dead man.”

As they reached the chamber, the door slid back to reveal Mitsuki, a tired expression marring her pretty features. She cast Juushirou a faint smile, glancing at Shunsui for a moment then standing back to allow them past her.

“He’s awake,” she said, in low tones so that the patient himself would not hear her. “Juushirou, be gentle with him. Both of you. I don’t know what happened to him yesterday — he won’t talk about it to me. I hope he will to you — but I wouldn’t hold out any hope.”

“His injuries?” Juushirou paused, looking concerned, and Mitsuki shook her head.

“They’ve done no real damage. Bruises — nasty ones, but that’s all. In places they’re almost finger-shaped, in others more like rope — but

given the suspect involved and what you said about his unusual abilities...”

“Mm,” Juushirou nodded grimly. “So long as Koku is not badly hurt, that is the important thing. As far as I know the suspect is still on the loose — so for the time being, we need to be aware of everything. I won’t have him left alone again under any circumstances — please tell Kirio to be ready to come back on duty at a moment’s notice. This is now a protected witness, rather than just an injured boy.”

“I will,” Mitsuki promised. She rested a hand on the sleeve of his *haori*, meeting his gaze gravely.

“I don’t think he’s very well,” she admitted. ‘It’s not relating to yesterday — I don’t think,’ as Juushirou’s eyes widened in consternation. “It’s also not his injury — that’s healing fairly nicely, as far as I can see. It’s something else, something unsettled in his aura. His vital signs were all quite stable after the attack, even despite the trauma involved, but since he’s been here...”

She shook her head.

“I don’t know how to account for it,” she admitted, frustration in her grey eyes, “but he’s not recovering in the way I expected him to. There’s nothing wrong that I can see, exactly, but his spirit is more uneven, and it’s like something is sapping the strength out of him. He is very thin and it might simply be a case of anaemia or a side effect of so much healing when he’s clearly underweight, but he has been at least picking at food, up until today. Last night he was unwell following the incident, and this morning he’s refused all food completely. I’m worried about him, Juushirou. He seems so sad and frail — please, if you can, convince him to eat something. He doesn’t listen when it’s me — for some reason he’s wary of me and doesn’t want me anywhere near him.”

Juushirou and Shunsui exchanged glances, and Shunsui tut-tutted under his breath.

“So rude to a pretty girl,” he observed. “It’s all right, Mitsuki. I think Juu’s already got it into his head to fly to the rescue — I’m sure the waif will be just fine. Leave him to us and go take a break. You’ve not slept yet, have you?”

Mitsuki shook her head.

“I stayed with him overnight, and Naoko did too, till she went to run drill first thing,” she said with a sigh, running her fingers through her dark hair and pulling it absently back into a loose tail before

letting the waves fall once more over her shoulders. “I am tired, and I know, I’m meant to be resting too — but I really think Koku is a bigger concern than I am at the moment. I’ll go take a break, though, don’t worry. Eat my own breakfast and hope that you have luck talking to him where I’ve failed.”

With that she was gone, and Shunsui gazed after her thoughtfully, then clapped his hand down on his friend’s shoulder.

“Torn between your love and your rescue case. It’s a hard life,” he reflected, and Juushirou snorted.

“Don’t,” he warned. “It’s not the time or place. This is a serious business — and I’m concerned if what Mitsuki says is true.”

“Does Mitsuki-chan know where this boy came from, originally?” Shunsui asked, and Juushirou shook his head.

“No, and you mustn’t reveal you know, either. It’s a matter of trust between the boy and I, and that’s fragile enough.” he replied. “He’ll think I told you, when you worked it out for yourself.”

“Maybe the atmosphere here is what’s upsetting him, then,” Shunsui suggested. “I was going to voice it, but I’m glad I didn’t, if Mitsuki’s in the dark. Though it’s not a good idea to keep secrets in a relationship, Juu — that’s where communication breaks down.”

“It’s not a relationship. I don’t know what it is, after so many years apart,” Juushirou admitted. “Sometimes there are flickers and sometimes I’m not sure. There are things... sometimes I think she hasn’t told me about the Rukon, and I don’t know if it’s just too big to talk about, or whether it matters. And this... is part of my job as a Captain. Some secrets are professional ones — and we’re wasting time here. Come on — if you’re coming — and close the door behind you.”

Shunsui looked rueful, but he did not argue, and Juushirou led the way into the chamber proper, leaving his friend to bring up the rear as he approached the bed. Koku was hunched against his pillows, a book on the covers beside him, and with a jolt Juushirou realised that it was the volume from the library that Kirio had convinced him to allow out. The book was open, but only on the contents page, and as Juushirou watched Koku’s finger trace over the rose stems for a second and then a third time, he wondered whether the young man in their custody was capable of making sense of the calligraphy at all.

“Koku?” he spoke softly, not wanting to alarm the boy, but Koku raised his head immediately, weariness rather than surprise in his expression. He opened his lips as if to speak, then his gaze rested on

Shunsui, and he froze, consternation and dismay glittering in the dark brown depths.

“It’s all right, this is a friend of mine. He’s not here to do anything but listen,” Juushirou hastened to reassure him, but Koku acted as though he had not even heard, his eyes watching Shunsui warily as the other man crossed the chamber, lounging up against the window frame and folding his arms loosely across his chest.

“Pleased to meet you, Koku,” he said lightly. “My name’s Kyouraku Shunsui. It’s as J... Ukitake says, I’m here simply out of formality. We have questions to ask you, and it’s quite important this time that someone else is present to witness the answers.”

Koku swallowed hard, then lowered his gaze, and Juushirou frowned, coming to sit on the stool beside the bed. Koku’s body was rigid with tension that had not been there a moment before, his eyes fixed once more on the patterns in the book. He made no attempt to speak, and at this distance the Captain could see clearly the angry ring of reddening bruises about his charge’s pale throat, proof positive that something untoward had occurred in his chamber the night before. Guilt twitched at his heart.

“I’m sorry,” he said at length. “I promised you safety here, and last night, that promise got broken, didn’t it?”

Koku did not answer, and Juushirou reached out to rest a hand on the edge of the book.

“Kirio gave you that, didn’t she?” he asked softly. Koku bit his lip, but did not protest as the Captain took the volume carefully from the young man’s grip, turning it over to read the title properly for himself.

“Legends of Seireitei, huh,” he murmured. “It certainly doesn’t seem particularly legendary at the moment, with all the things going on.”

“Will you take the book away?” Now Koku spoke, raising apprehensive eyes to his white haired companion, and Juushirou eyed him keenly.

“No, not if you want me to leave it,” he said frankly, setting it down on the unit beside the bed. “Kirio borrowed it so that you weren’t so bored, and if you’re interested by it, then it can stay here. Just, we need to talk to you and it can’t wait. Even if you’re feeling unwell, I’m afraid this is one of those times I have to ride roughshod over your feelings and press ahead. We need to know what happened last night — in your words, what you remember.”

Koku wet his lips, his gaze darting towards Shunsui doubtfully for a moment, then back to Juushirou.

“Why is he really here?” he asked softly. “You talked to me before on your own. You’re a... a Captain, aren’t you? Kirio-san talks about you like you are. Why is someone else here now, if you’re really a Captain? What’s happening — what’s going to happen to me if I answer you?”

“I’ve not come to do anything to you,” Shunsui was startled by the sudden turn of the conversation. “I’m a visitor to Thirteenth, but Ukitake and I are old friends, and we’re both involved in this investigation. I’m a Captain too — though in this *haori*, I’m sure you can’t believe it — and sharing information often makes the solving of crimes quicker. That’s the reason I’ve come today.”

Koku’s brows creased in consternation.

“You don’t... like to kill people, do you?” he asked softly, and Shunsui’s eyes opened wide with dismay.

“Do I look like I came here to kill you?” he demanded, his usual casual demeanour shaken aside by this unexpected remark. “I didn’t even bring my swords with me — of course not!”

“Shunsui, maybe it’s not a good idea, you being here,” Juushirou suggested, a troubled look on his face. “Koku doesn’t know you — and this isn’t the best time for a first meeting. He was attacked last night and he’s probably scared... now you’ve appeared, and there’s only so much one person can take.”

“It’s all right,” Koku sighed, shaking his head. “I... said something bad. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to.”

“Well, not everyone who comes here wanting to talk to you is meaning you harm,” Shunsui cast the young man a wry grin. “I’m also a bit too conspicuous to make much of a shadow-assassin — so you can rest assured. Besides, with Juu... I mean, with Ukitake here, I wouldn’t be able to do anything to you even if I wanted to. He’s dead keen on looking out for your interests, and well, I’m not good at arguing with him when he gives me a certain look.”

Koku looked momentarily bewildered, and Juushirou sighed, rubbing his brow pensively.

“Shunsui, shut up. Don’t confuse the boy — he’s been through enough,” he said flatly. “Koku-kun, if you can talk to us, we want to listen. That’s all. We’re looking for the person who hurt you — the more we know about him, the easier we can put him back behind

bars. We know he's dangerous, and we know quite a bit about him — but we don't know why he would come here and why he would attack you."

"Really we want confirmation that he did," Shunsui reflected. "Someone put that ugly red necklace around your throat, so somebody attacked you — but we need to put the pieces together. One person has already died, and..."

"In a dark place, covered in blood," Koku agreed absently, and Juushirou cast him a quizzical look.

"Koku?"

"Nothing," Koku shook his head as if trying to clear it of an unpleasant image, shooting Juushirou a troubled gaze. "I don't know what to tell you. He came at me. He put his hand around here..." He lifted his hand to his throat, touching the abused skin tentatively, then lowering the pale, delicate fingers back to the covers. "He said he would kill me, and he had blood all over his clothing. He was dressed in black, and it was dark, so I didn't... see very much. Only he was there... and then he was gone."

"Do you remember being in the hallway?" Juushirou asked, and a stricken look crossed Koku's face.

"I was trying to get away," he murmured, genuine fear flickering in the depths of his clouded brown eyes. "I didn't know where to go, but I had to... to leave. And then... Edogawa-san..."

"Yes, Mitsuki found you," Juushirou agreed. "You were in no danger after that, but she said you were very upset, so she gave you some herbs to make you sleep. I know it's not pleasant to remember, but we need to know what we can about the attacker. If you saw how he came into your room, and how he got out again. We searched the entire grounds, but had no luck."

Koku shook his head.

"He came out of the wall," he said seriously. 'One minute I was alone, reading the book Kirio-san gave me,' he indicated, "and then..."

He touched his throat, shivering, and Shunsui sighed.

"I think, then, we can say for sure that we're dealing with Kai's pet," he said heavily. "That kind of *modus operandi* fits with only one suspect, and confirms what we were talking about before. If you can camouflage yourself, plain sight is actually one big hidey-hole. He could be anywhere."

“True enough,” Juushirou agreed. “Koku, had you met this person before? Perhaps...”

He faltered, glancing at Shunsui a moment, then,

“Maybe before you found Souja-dono, perhaps you saw this person somewhere around there?”

“With Souja-dono?” Koku looked stunned, then shook his head. “He wasn’t there, Ukitake-dono. I would have seen him. He wasn’t there.”

“Not necessarily, judging by how he acts, but I guess you can’t be expected to bear witness to the invisible man,” Shunsui groaned. Juushirou nodded.

“But he did choose to come here,” he pointed out. “And we still don’t know why.”

“To hurt Koku,” Shunsui said categorically, and Koku flinched back from the older man’s glance. “Oh, please, kid, I’m not going to do anything to you. I’m not as nice or cuddly and sympathetic as Juu is, maybe, but I’m not here to cause you harm. I want to keep you alive as much as he does, believe me. There have been enough corpses, and there don’t need to be any more. Killing you or anyone else is not on my agenda for the day — besides, my sister would have my hide if I got blood on this *haori*, so you can take it as read. She’s far more scary than either of us are when she’s angry, believe me — I’m not going to risk it.”

Koku looked startled, then, to Juushirou’s surprise, a sad look entered the young man’s eyes.

“I’m sorry,” he murmured, and for a moment Juushirou had the impression that the apology was not for doubting Shunsui’s motives.

“Well, we’ll forget it and we’ll move on,” Shunsui shifted his position slightly, reaching for one of the cushions and tossing it onto the floor before dropping down onto it. “There, that’s a more casual demeanour, isn’t it? I’m not standing over you glaring at you any more — so perhaps you’ll stop staring at me as though I’m a cat about to eat the mouse.”

“We need to know why someone would target you,” Juushirou explained to Koku gently. “It’s not a nice thing to think of, but we need you to think it all the same. You’re still a stranger here, and there might be things — dangers — that we don’t know about, things that we can’t protect you from if we don’t have the full picture.”

Koku pursed his lips, then he sighed.

"I helped Souja-dono," he murmured. "To some people, that would be... betrayal. To help a shinigami... to some people... that's not a good thing to do."

"To what kind of people?" Shunsui's eyes narrowed, and Koku shook his head.

"People," he said vaguely, "there are some who don't like shinigami. I don't trust shinigami either, but I didn't want to see one die. I helped Souja-dono because I couldn't just leave him — that would've been as good as helping to kill him and I... I don't like death either. So I helped him, but... there are people who would think that... was a bad thing to do. And so they'd want to come here... and hurt me."

"Do these people have names?" Shunsui asked softly, and Koku's lips thinned slightly. He shook his head.

"I can't answer that."

"Can't, or won't?"

"Can't," Koku's expression became defiant. "If there are people like that in Seireitei, I don't know their names. You know Seireitei, I don't. You know what kind of people there are here who might come and attack me, whereas I don't know anything about them. You should be able to tell me who attacked me — rather than asking me to tell you."

"I see. So you're not from Seireitei," Shunsui observed neatly. "Well, if not from there, where else could you be from? I wonder... maybe... Rukongai?"

Koku's eyes widened in alarm.

"I..."

"Shunsui, shut up," Juushirou took a hand. "Where Koku came from isn't important. Discussing this incident is."

"Unless they're connected," Shunsui pointed out, then he relented, reaching out to tap Koku on the arm. Koku flinched back, gazing at him fearfully, and Shunsui grinned.

"Look, kid, believe it or not, I don't care two hoots about it, if that's where you really came from," he said matter-of-factly. "I happen to believe that the border between that place and this is far too rigid, and the rules far too harsh. I also think, having been to the Rukon recently, that there are a lot of people there that we just don't know about — and that's our bad, not yours. You're not the first person from the Rukon I've ever met in Seireitei. Unlike some Clan Gotei, I

have no problem with pretending I never met them, and forgetting, conveniently, where they might be. In fact, if it puts Clan Seireitei's noses out of joint, so much to the good. If you came here to help Souja, then you came to help the son of my friend, and I've no reason to get you into trouble. If that's what you're afraid of, you should stop. This isn't good-cop bad-cop, and I'm really not that bad a cop. Honestly, you can come from the Real World, if you like. It doesn't bother me. What does, however, is that there are assassins on the loose. I don't think you're one of them — but last night, you were almost the victim of one, and that's a problem. So you help us with what you know, and we'll do our best to prevent a repeat. Sound fair enough to you?"

Koku's expression had become more and more troubled with every passing moment, and as Shunsui finished speaking, he let out a heavy sigh, reaching up to massage his temples.

"Don't," he begged. "Don't say things like that."

"Like what?" Shunsui was foxed, and Koku raised his gaze.

"Kind... things," he said haltingly. "I don't like it. Please... stop."

"You don't want people to be nice to you?" Juushirou was equally thrown by this, and Koku shook his head.

"It makes everything so much harder to bear," he whispered. "I don't want to think about it, so please... don't speak like that any more. You don't have to care about Rukongai people — you're a shinigami, you shouldn't. Either of you. I'm not important enough to bother about, and yet you do, and it's a problem for me. I don't know what to do about it... when important people are saying such things, and then..."

"Nonsense," Shunsui cut across him with a derisive snort. "That kind of attitude might suit some of the more traditional Clan shinigami, but it won't wash with me. You and your life are as important as me and mine and Ukitake and his. That being settled, we want to catch the person who attacked you. There's also Souja's life in this too, and I value that as well. If you start adding weight to one life over another, your judgement becomes skewed. I won't have it, so you might as well forget that line of thought right now."

Koku gaped, rendered speechless, and Juushirou reached out a warning hand to brush his friend's arm.

"Let's not," he begged. "Koku's unfamiliar with us and how we work. There are enough negative rumours, enough reasons that people

in different places feel inferior or superior. He can't be blamed if he doesn't know that's not how the majority of us think or act. Besides, we're moving away from the point. We came here to find out about Suzuki, and... Koku?"

For the young boy had suddenly gone very pale, his hands trembling and his eyes widening so that Juushirou could almost see the whites.

"Stop it," he whispered, but he didn't seem to be talking to either of the two shinigami, and the next moment he let out a yell, pushing the blankets away as though they were somehow trying to smother him. He scrambled towards the edge of the bed, clearly trying to get away, and Juushirou darted forward, grabbing the young man by the shoulders and giving him a gentle shake.

"Koku, what is it? Why are you upset, what's happened?" he asked softly.

"Is Suzuki here?" Shunsui was on his feet, eyes scanning the scenery as if expecting a shadow-stalker to emerge from the wall or window at any given moment. Koku struggled to free himself from Juushirou's grasp, his lips moving but nothing coherent coming out. Juushirou tightened his grasp, really afraid the boy had once more gone hysterical and would hurt himself if he was allowed to flail around as he had done the night before, but as he did so, Koku raised his gaze to the Captain's and Juushirou gasped, almost letting go completely as he read the blank, glazed look in the young stray's eyes. Tears glittered on Koku's lashes, but they seemed somehow disconnected, as though Koku's soul had disappeared behind pupils that, despite the bright daylight streaming into the room, had suddenly dilated into miniature black holes. Koku's skin was a greyish colour in hue, and Juushirou could feel the fingers clawing against his arm, frantic and feverish yet disjointed in their actions, as though Koku could not coordinate his body enough to manage to free himself.

"Shunsui, something's wrong with him," At length, Juushirou found his voice. "Mitsuki said he wasn't well, and I think she's right. If I stay with him, maybe you could get her. I don't think that Suzuki's here — I think it's just that..."

"Stop it. Stop it, please," Koku's vocal chords finally managed to make the sounds in the right order, and Juushirou was struck by the plaintive, childlike note in the young man's voice. The tears began to roll silently down ashen cheeks, falling unchecked onto Juushirou's *haori*, and Shunsui halted his search of the room, casting them a glance.

“Stop what?” he asked, and Juushirou shrugged.

“I don’t know, but I can’t let him go, not like this. He’ll hurt himself, and I don’t think he’s in his wits. I don’t know if we drove him over — and if we did, Mitsuki is going to have us both for it — but in the circumstances I don’t like leaving him this way.”

“I don’t like leaving you with him this way,” Shunsui admitted. “You might need help, and besides, there’s something unnatural about his eyes. You see it too, right? Its not like he’s just gone hysterical. There’s something else wrong with him, and without knowing what that is, I’m not going to trot off and disappear.”

“You think he’s going to hurt me?” Juushirou was indignant, and Shunsui shrugged.

“Maybe not on purpose,” he said, and Juushirou was struck by the grim look that had entered his friend’s eye. “I just don’t like it. So I’m staying. And when he’s calmed down, we’ll get help.”

“If he does,” Juushirou glanced at the young boy once more. As his gaze met that blank brown one, he felt suddenly disorientated, as though something was trying to pull him deep into the dark abyss of the boy’s pupils and beyond to a troubled mind beneath. Broken fragments of what might have been pictures flashed through his mind, but they were there and gone so quickly that all he could make out was the briefest of impressions — fear, darkness, and then, Koku’s voice broke the quiet once more.

“It’s so dark,” he murmured. “Tunnels... so deep. Hiding in tunnels... but now... so much blood. Running... hiding... can’t get away. Hunting them... spider’s web... can’t escape. Dark... dark... down... down... poison in the earth that might save them. Pieces of souls broken and scattered... blood on his sword... in the spider’s eyes.”

“What the...” Shunsui stared at Koku, aghast, and Juushirou forcibly shook himself from his reverie, blinking and regaining his composure as for a moment he had thought he too was sinking deep into tunnels, far, far beneath the earth. He raised his gaze to his friend, and Shunsui’s lips thinned.

“Stop it,” Koku’s words were no more than a feeble whisper, like a breath on the wind by this point, and as the tension flooded out of his young, undernourished body, he sank against Juushirou’s shoulder, burying his head in the fabric folds of the *haorias* bitter, heavy sobs engulfed him. Like a terrified child rising from a nightmare, the clawing hands now clung to Juushirou’s sleeves looking for

reassurance and, despite how unnerved the white haired Captain still felt, he hugged the young boy tightly, stroking his hair as though it was one of his young siblings who he was comforting during a storm.

“Shunsui, get Mitsuki,” he said softly. “We’re not going to interrogate him any further today.”

“But...”

“It’s quite all right,” Juushirou shook his head. “I’m not in danger. Just go. Please.”

Shunsui looked reluctant, but he did not argue, disappearing into the hall to do his friend’s bidding, and Juushirou glanced down at the pathetic figure still huddled up against him as though looking for someone to protect him.

But from what? What... was that? All of a sudden, out of the blue, to say such things.

His eyes narrowed.

Spiders. Tunnels. Blood. A nightmare? But when he was quite awake? And what was that I felt, when I met his gaze? It seemed as though I was about to be swallowed up by... something. Is this that assassin’s doing, or something else?

At length Koku’s sobs abated, and he raised his tearstained, grey cheeks, gazing at Juushirou first in confusion then alarm. He pulled back, almost tumbling off the bed completely in his haste to put space between himself and the Thirteenth Division Captain, and Juushirou let out an exclamation, grabbing the fragile body and steadying it against the pillows.

“Are you all right now?” he asked gently, and Koku shook his head, his eyes still distressed.

“You can’t be here. You need to go... there,” he whispered, and Juushirou was not certain whether his companion was fully returned to his senses or not.

“There?” he echoed, and Koku nodded.

“There,” he repeated, “where the foxes are. In the dark place. You saw it too, didn’t you? Where they are. Though it’s probably... probably already...”

He gulped, his breath catching after the violence of his sobs, and a cold chill touched Juushirou’s soul at his words.

“The foxes?” he murmured, and Koku nodded again.

“...Silverfoxes?”

Koku's head jerked forward again, and Juushirou drew breath sharply, as, briefly, the blurred images that had flashed before him before came into sharp focus.

It was only a split-second, but...

"Joumei," he was on his feet, only just remembering that he was waiting for Shunsui to return with Mitsuki and help for the frightened young boy. "Something's happened to Joumei. Joumei and the Kitsune."

Koku stared, frightened by the sudden movement, and Juushirou forced himself to calm down, resting his hands on the young boy's shoulders.

"I don't understand," he admitted, "and right now I don't think you can tell me, even if I knew how to ask. But yes, I saw it too. Whatever it was, I... felt it. I saw the Kitsune. And I don't know why, but I believe you. I believe they're in trouble."

"Please, don't let anyone else be killed," Koku begged, grasping for the sleeve of the white *haori* once more, and Juushirou had the impression the youngster had no idea who he was talking to, his reservations and defences struck down by whatever had assailed him. The eyes were no longer blank and glazed, but pools of emotion, and Juushirou suddenly remembered Shunsui's words about the note Souja had brought back from the Rukon.

It means that someone knew what was going to happen to Souja before it happened, and Souja found and pocketed a description of his own death — probably without even realising what he'd found.

His eyes widened, and he stared at Koku as if seeing him for the first time.

It's insane. It's completely crazy, but Shunsui's hunches often pay off. And if that's the case, then...

He swallowed hard.

Did the assassin come here to silence the prophet who foretold Souja's death, because he tried to prevent it from happening? In which case... Joumei and the Kitsune are really in trouble. And I have nobody I can tell about it, and no idea where to go except to Hirata. What I'll even tell him I don't know, but even if it sounds crazy, I know what I saw. In that moment, I saw Joumei in the darkness, and if the Kitsune are in danger...

"Juushirou?" Mitsuki's voice at the door startled him from his reverie, and he turned, almost stumbling over his own feet in his relief

to see her.

“Mitsuki! Oh good. You’ve come. Did Shunsui tell you?”

“That he got upset again? Yes,” Mitsuki looked concerned. “Are you all right? You look as though you saw a ghost.”

“I hope not,” Juushirou’s expression became grim. “I have to go somewhere — can I leave him to you?”

“Juu, hold it,” He made to leave, but Shunsui grabbed him by the arm. “Go? Right now? What of your stray?”

“I can’t ignore it, even if it’s crazy,” Juushirou shook himself free. “I have to go see Hirata — and I have to do it now.”

“Hirata?” Shunsui’s eyes became thoughtful, and Juushirou nodded.

“Come with me,” he suggested. “I’ll explain what I can on the way, and you can see what you think — but we can’t stand around here. I think it’s important... and I don’t know how much time we have.”

They were getting deeper beneath the surface of the earth.

Joumei paused for a split second to glance behind him, focusing not only his eyes but his ears on the tunnels beyond as he tried to make out the sound of pursuit. In the darkness, the heavy sound of his companion’s breathing was a distraction rather than a comfort, but the next moment he felt a push against his arm, and heard Hiko’s voice, breathless but firm in his ear.

“We can’t stop here, Joumei-dono. He’s still here. We can’t take the risk he isn’t, and there’s nowhere else to go but down.”

“Then we’ll take him down as deep as we can manage,” Joumei said grimly, grabbing out for Hiko’s wrist so that they did not lose one another in the blackness. “You listen, too. He’s a spider, scuttling in shadows. We don’t know where we might encounter him, so be on your guard.”

“Mm.” Joumei grunted his acquiescence, and Joumei set off once again at speed, gritting his teeth as the effort of using shunpo in such a spiritually polluted area began to take its toll on his thin frame. Though he had spent the entirety of his life surrounded by the deceptively pretty sheen of the Sekkiseki stone, and had learned to acclimatise to it, using bursts of spirit power in such close proximity to the unmined seams was still a painful and difficult feat, and, despite the cold stone that surrounded them, sweat beaded across his

brow from the effort.

Yet it was all they could do. All they could do was run.

As they dropped out of the flashstep near to the chamber where Tenichi had been held, Joumei put a hand out against the wall, taking a deep breath into his lungs.

“Any further will have to be on foot,” he said wearily. “I can’t push my *reiryoku* any further — it’s too intense down here to focus after having used so much.”

“Do you think he can come this far down?” Hiko dropped back against the wall beside him, taking his own deep gulp of the cool, slightly musty air. The faint scent of funerary herbs penetrated the darkness, a pungent reminder of the chamber’s other use, and Joumei’s mind flitted back to the desecrated invalids whose corpses lay several levels up. Instinctively he put his hands together, murmuring an apology. They had known the risks, and had accepted that, by staying, an attack was likely — but his own reaction had come too late. As the Kitsune’s leader, he had no time to dwell or mourn such losses, but as a man, he knew that he would regret them for as long as he lived.

Which might not be so very long, considering.

He sighed, putting his hand to his chest. It burned, but not just with the exertion of shunpoing so deep inside the seams of rock. He remembered clearly Keitarou’s sword shooting out its silvery, barbed threads, and his own shield which had caused them to deflect harmlessly away from his body. Keitarou had become angry, he remembered, perhaps unsettled by the proximity of the Sekkiseki, but after that...

He shook his head, trying to clear the fog.

Keitarou had definitely uttered the words Bankai, and for a full minute following, there was nothing but a sea of white noise impeding his recollections. Then everything had shattered, and he had no longer been able to tell which senses were transmitting what. As though his *tantou* had carved up time into bitesize pieces and scattered it as confetti over the heads of the two Kitsune, Keitarou had taken control of their entire worlds and then, the next, had seemed to pull back, leaving them reeling but still on their feet.

Before he had been able to strike again, Joumei had reacted. Survival instinct had pumped adrenaline through unwilling limbs and he had grabbed Hiko roughly by the flaps of his shirt, dropping into a desperate and clumsy flashstep which had taken them some hundred

metres deeper into the Sekkiseki mine. Where Keitarou now was or what he was thinking, neither of them knew. All either of them were focused on was survival... and somehow, escape.

“I don’t know,” at length he answered Hiko’s question, hating how ineffectual his answer was in light of such danger. “In the stone, there’s no way to properly sense his reiatsu. We only have our other senses... but then, with luck, so does he. We’re more used to the atmosphere and we know these tunnels blindfolded. It’s the only advantage we have.”

Hiko shivered involuntarily.

“What did he do with his sword?” he wondered. “One minute you were deflecting... the next... I don’t remember.”

“He said Bankai,” Joumei said grimly, rubbing his chest again. “Just because we’re both walking and in one piece, given such close confines, I don’t think we can assume that he missed. I’ve heard from Misashi-sama, and from Hirata-sama about the nature of Keitarou’s *zanpakutou*. It has the power of possessive manipulation... in one individual, over whom he can take complete control.”

“Over... one individual?” Hiko repeated apprehensively, and Joumei nodded.

“Irrespective, it seems of their spiritual ability,” he agreed. “I don’t know which of us he bewitched with it, Hiko, but it seems for sure one of us is touched. I hoped that coming this deep might break its effects, though — with the Sekkiseki all around us, damping our spirit power and his, he won’t find it so easy to locate us, let alone try and exploit his sword’s abilities.”

“I see,” Hiko glanced at his hands pensively for a moment, then, in the gloom, Joumei saw him reach for the dagger that hung at his waist, pulling it free and tossing it to the ground. He kicked at it, pushing it into a crevasse between split rock seams, and Joumei cast him a quizzical glance.

“If it’s me, I won’t attack you,” Hiko said simply. “Your father took care of me and I promised when he died that I’d always be there to help you in whatever way I could. Even if an enemy’s lurking inside me, I won’t hurt you. If I’m unarmed, you can defeat me. If I should turn on you, please don’t hesitate to kill me.”

“Hiko...” Joumei started for a moment, then he grimaced, resting his hands on his companion’s shoulders.

“You’ve borne this family’s curse for long enough,” he observed

sadly. “Now you want to die for it, too? You who of everyone in this place could’ve escaped without sanctions, standing here unarmed waiting for someone to kill you?”

“I may not be a Kitsune by blood, Joumei-dono, but I am a Kitsune by spirit,” Hiko replied matter-of-factly. “Without the Kitsune, I’d have died a long time ago. If I die now, so be it. In the meantime, how long can we lurk here? If he’s going to put us under siege, or try to starve us out, can we resist him?”

“Mm. We can,” Joumei nodded his head. “There’s enough food down here for two or three days at least, maybe more if we’re careful. I’ve never spent such a long time together at such depth in the mine before, but I can’t imagine Keitarou will be able to stand Sekkiseki exposure for as long as we should be able to manage it. We must, though. I want to report to Hirata-sama. I’ve already delayed for far too long, and now, when I have firm evidence of Keitarou’s activity within his land... it’s my duty to go.”

“Probably that’s what he wants to prevent,” Hiko observed blackly. “That and to eradicate the Kitsune once and for all. He lives on old grievances... this is just another one for his list.”

“Then it’s a relief to know that he’ll never succeed in that aim,” Joumei shifted his body against the uneven surface of the stone wall. “Most of our people are far from here and safe. Some are even trying to integrate into normal communities, and having some success.”

“And Izumi-himeis in the protection of the Gotei,” Hiko agreed, though Joumei could hear the doubt in his friend’s voice, and he sighed.

“I trust them, Hiko. You shouldn’t fear them so much as you do. They aren’t always enemies... and not enemies of ours, not in this case.”

“I know,” Hiko pursed his lips. “I have no reason to hate them, not really. Just... the things Neechan used to say about them, I guess...”

He shook his head.

“It doesn’t matter. It was a long time ago, and Junko-nee isn’t here any more,” he said pragmatically. “I’m a Kitsune, now, and have been since I was six. That’s what matters most — I’m sorry, Joumei-dono. I think perhaps I’ve become afraid... and it’s shaking my usual concentration.”

“If so, you’re not the only one,” Joumei admitted darkly. “This enemy we’ve known about for so long is now so real and more, within

our heartland. Death is such a reality for our people that I've barely given it any thought, but seeing Souja-dono killed made me look at it all anew. I don't want to leave this life without having seen justice for him, first. His family may have orphaned you and your sister, but they've protected me and mine."

"Souja-dono didn't kill anyone, nor did Hirata-sama," Hiko shrugged. "Really, I didn't mean to dwell on the past. Shunmei-sama used to tell me off for it. Stop wondering, he'd say. Stop thinking of things you can't change. Life is here and now and as you make it from this point on. It doesn't matter any more. What's more important is finding a way to get you out of here, so you can go report to Hirata-sama and bring this to an end."

"If you think I'm sacrificing you to that end, it's not going to happen," Joumei said pragmatically, then he stiffened, ears pricking as he heard a shuffling, scuttling sound from the tunnel beyond.

"Did you hear that?" he murmured, and Hiko gritted his teeth.

"Something's... here," he whispered. "Something..."

He faltered, grabbing hold of Joumei's sleeve, and pointing towards the yawning gape of the tunnel opening ahead. Joumei turned, his own eyes widening with dismay as he made out the glittering, ghostly red eyes glowing out of the darkness, the faintest impression of a spectral spider hazing around it just enough to give itself form against the black.

You think you've escaped from me. How sweet.

The words ricocheted around the walls of the tunnel, resounding off the Sekkiseki as though mocking its sealing properties, and the eyes seemed to glow brighter for a moment before fading to a dull, blood red colour.

How utterly naive.

"Where are you?" Hiko exclaimed, glancing around him in fear. "Stop hiding behind your spider, Keitarou! Come out and show yourself! Show yourself!"

I really don't think that's either wise or necessary.

The voice echoed again, and Joumei clapped his hands over his ears.

"Don't listen to him!" he exclaimed. "Don't let him bait you — he's just trying to spook us, so we let our guards down and move to higher ground!"

Do you think that covering your ears will save you? You are ignorant. I'm not that easy to ignore.

Joumei's eyes widened, for the voice had not been dampened at all by his hasty action. Horror gripped hold of his heart as he understood that, far from being projected from the spectral spider before them, the voice was, in fact, nowhere but the inside of his own skull, and, from the identical look in Hiko's eyes, he knew that his companion had realised the same. He tried to take a step back, but the tunnel wall dug into his spine, and his lips mouthed a curse, his vocal chords suddenly unable to remember how to transmit sound.

The voice, the spider... it was all an illusion. It was all in their heads, put there by the man who...

Joumei's gaze flitted to Hiko, taking in his companion's ashen features, and the dread began to grow inside his own chest.

The man who released his Bankai... not on one of us, but on both of us. And who, despite the power of the Sekkiseki... has now found us. Both of us. Trapped.

Well, so now you understand that I don't need to be near you to kill you.

Keitarou sounded amused, the predatorial note in his tones laced with derisive humour.

The Sekkiseki makes it hard for me to physically touch you, but spiritually, that's another matter. I'm already inside you. Inside both of you. And since your spirit power acts as a cushion between me and the rocks around you... I can still reach you, just like this. I simply wanted you to get to a place where escape would be highly unlikely and interference almost impossible. I want to kill the both of you, and thanks to your escape reflexes, I don't have to do it manually. I can have the two of you kill each other, instead.

Almost before Keitarou's words had finished, Joumei felt something lurch inside of his body, and he gasped, putting his hands to his chest as the burning sensation suddenly began to stifle his entire respiratory system. Alongside him, Hiko had crumpled to the floor, his knees giving out as he lost all individual control over his limbs. Despite his spiritual strength, Joumei felt the world around him drawing further and further away, his vision becoming telescopic as something dark and cloying began to sweep through his body and up over his heart, pumping itself into his bloodstream with every beat of his pulse. Valiantly he fought against it, but the lure was too much for him, and in dismay he watched his own fingers begin to move to his waist in

search of his dagger, his head swivelling to bring the still collapsed Hiko into his sights.

Kill him.

The words were soft, soothing and hypnotic, entirely different from the mocking tones he had heard just a moment before, and though Joumei's consciousness screamed for help, he felt his arm turn and lift, fingers curling around his own dagger whilst his left hand grasped for Hiko's reddish crop of hair. Before he could grasp it, though, Hiko sprang up from the crouched position, launching himself at his leader with so much force that it threw Joumei back against the wall, knife clattering from his own hands as Hiko's broad fist came down across his upper left cheek. Pain resonated through him, but though he felt it, Joumei was unable to react to it, his hands going up for Hiko's throat despite all his attempts to pull them down. Hiko's teeth came down against his arm, the terror in the other man's eyes a stark contrast to the savagery with which he had begun his attack, and Joumei tried desperately to regather the scattered threads of his composure.

Stop it!

He begged his fingers, and they twitched briefly in hesitation, before lunging once more for Hiko's throat. The redhead rolled over, away from Joumei's reach, and for a while the two grappled on the ground, Hiko's physical strength giving him the advantage, yet Joumei fighting tooth and nail against the control over his nervous system.

Well, this is entertaining.

Keitarou's mocking tones acted like salt against the bloody scrapes and scratches the struggle had left against Joumei's body, jagged stone tearing through the sleeves and legs of his clothing, and as Hiko shoved him down against the ground, his head hit the rock, causing stars to dance before his eyes. Momentarily stunned, his focus on fighting Keitarou's control waned for a moment, and in that instant Chudokuga's power took full advantage. Before Joumei knew what had happened, his left hand had thrust up against Hiko's chest, a glow of repellant silver magic sending the heavier man flying back against the wall of the tunnel with a heavy thud.

You see how futile it is to battle against me?

Keitarou scolded.

You used too much power escaping to your current location. Using Shunpo against Sekkiseki was a poor decision from a scientist. Perhaps you're the weak link in your family's chain — not really an Urahara so much as vermin scuttling around in channels beneath the earth. Your presence taints this land. It will be a loss to noone if you

die.

Let Hiko go.

Joumei focused every last nerve on transmitting this thought back in the direction from where the message had come.

Let him go. He's not a Kitsune. He's not one of us. He's not an Urahara, even. He's not even Clan. He's just someone who happened to be here. Let him go.

How touching. But this isn't a negotiation. He's here, therefore that's culpability enough. He can die alongside you. He can kill you, then himself. I can't be appealed to. I have no mercy for foxes.

Something tight and dark wrapped itself like a wraith of energy around Joumei's neck and, even though he knew it was all in his imagination, he coughed, desperately trying to bring air into his lungs. As he did so, however, he caught sight of something, indistinct but glittering in the recesses of his mind.

A sword? What sword? I never saw that before. I don't have a sword like that, so why...

Stop it! Know your place!

The image was gone in a moment, as though something had roughly slammed the door on it, but there had been a note of alarm in the formerly serene tones, and for a moment, Keitarou's hold over Joumei's limbs waned. Pushing Hiko back with as much force as he could muster in his deadened arms, he struggled to pull himself away from his companion, who, eyes still gleaming with fear, seemed to be readying a new attack.

You said your power was inside of me, cushioned by mine. You said that the Sekkiseki outside me couldn't do anything, but if that's the case...

Without stopping to think about what he was doing, Joumei's fingers scrabbled desperately at the ground, pulling together fragments and splinters of Sekkiseki rock.

This might kill me, but even if it does, better that than dying at your hand.

He pushed the fragments into his mouth, ignoring the burning sensation as they made contact with his tongue. Resolutely he swallowed them, coughing and spluttering as they seared their way down his gullet and into his stomach, causing him to double up in pain and nausea. Hiko's shadow loomed over him, but he somehow managed to jerk his body to the side, dropping down against the cold stone floor and taking laboured breaths into his lungs. Close as he had been to Sekkiseki his whole life, ingesting it was still a highly dangerous venture, yet as the cloaking darkness of Keitarou's power began to fragment and push back to the edge of his senses, he closed

his eyes, relief filling his body as little by little it returned to his control.

When he opened them, he realised that the glowing red eyes no longer stared at him from down the dark twist of the tunnel ahead, and he could no longer hear Keitarou's mocking voice echoing against his senses.

He dragged himself around to glance at Hiko, who was poised to attack once more, yet clearly fighting tooth and nail against the scientist's control. Dragging himself up, Joumei tried to reach out a hand to his friend, but at his gesture Hiko pulled back, clumsy fingers faltering for the knife that lay tucked away in the crevasse of the wall.

"Hiko, no!" Joumei's vocal chords suddenly erupted back into life, his words hoarse and raw, but his words fell on deaf ears, and the red haired man drew himself up to his full height, weapon clutched in his right hand.

For a moment, nothing moved between them. Then, very deliberately and as though he were fighting the weight of the world's forces to do it, Hiko reversed the sword, plunging the blade deep into his own gut. Joumei's eyes widened with dismay as his closest ally staggered back, falling into the funeral chamber proper with a sickening thud. Joumei forced strength into his limbs, crawling towards the opening to reach his friend, but before he could manage it, Hiko had thrust his hand up towards the ceiling, determination in his green eyes.

"Hadou no Sanjuu San. Shakkahou!" He gasped out, pain clear in every syllable, and with a rumble and a clatter, the ceiling of the chamber split apart. Huge chunks of rubble broke loose, falling with a cloud of dust and debris to the ground below, and Joumei, rocked back by the force of the explosion could only stare, the tears running down his cheeks as much from genuine emotion as the fallout from the blast. The door had been entirely blocked in, making any kind of rescue attempt impossible, but despite this he clawed at the rubble anyway, trying desperately to shift the boulders that now formed a barrier between him and his companion.

The chances of surviving an explosion like that without an injury was slim, but with a blade wound to his gut as well...

"Hiko!" Joumei yelled out his friend's name, but there was no response, the only movement in the hall around him the clouds of settling dust that coated both him and the tunnels, making the air thick and difficult to breathe.

“Hiko...”

At length he realised his attempts were futile, and he fell back on his haunches, feeling sick and not just from the Sekkiseki he had put into his system.

Hiko saw me use the Sekkiseki to break Keitarou's hold. He saw, and he took the weapon and did the same. That sword was covered in Sekkiseki dust. Getting it into his bloodstream allowed him to regain control. He said he wasn't going to kill me, so instead...

He closed his eyes, anger replacing grief in his heart.

All the sacrifices you made for me and for my people, and I never did get a chance to repay them. All those sacrifices... but now isn't the time. I have to focus. I have to breathe. I have to find a way to get out of here whilst Keitarou's hold over me is broken. I have a duty to do and I must do it. For Hiko as well as for Souja-dono, now... I have to go.

“Well, so here we are,” Shunsui gazed up at the Endou Clan logo, still hanging at a slightly precarious angle, letting out a low whistle as he registered the damage to the barrier fence. “And from what Kai said, your former recruit that did that — I hope Hirata had him sweeping up the mess.”

“Tenichi's sword,” Juushirou's eyes clouded and he nodded his head, but he did not slow down, grabbing his friend by the sleeve of the pink *haori* and giving him an impatient tug. “Come on. I said we don't have time to hang around. I need to see Hirata as soon as possible... it might already be too late, but it's the only option I can think of.”

“And you promised me an explanation, of which I've had none, yet,” Shunsui objected, nonetheless speeding up his naturally lounging pace as they crossed the courtyard towards the Seventh Division's main barracks. “I realise shunpo isn't the best time to talk about anything — and you could've warned me you were going to flash step, by the way, since I almost tripped over my feet trying to catch up with you outside Thirteenth — but I want to know what it is that has you on edge. That boy said something that bothered you, didn't he?”

“It doesn't take a genius to work that out,” Juushirou said wearily, as a group of Seventh Division officers, led by the austere Ohara hurried across the courtyard to greet their arrival. “Look, trust me. I'm trusting your hunch here, and acting on it, so trust me that I've made the right call. It's hard to explain and I'm not sure how to... or if it's wise to do it in front of anyone but Hirata.”

"I see. Brought here under false pretences," Shunsui pouted, but his expression was grave. "You've piqued my curiosity, though, so I'll humour you for now."

"Kyouraku-taichou! Ukitake-taichou!" Ohara reached them at that point, bowing respectfully towards Shunsui, and then, after a moment of hesitation, repeating the gesture towards Juushirou, and despite himself faint amusement glittered in Shunsui's eyes at the reluctant deference this proud Clan peacock was forced to pay to an officer he knew had grown up in the Districts.

"We've come to see your Captain," Juushirou took charge. "It's a matter of urgency, so I trust he's here."

"Indeed he is, sir," Ohara bristled slightly at the brisk nature of Juushirou's words, but nodded his head nonetheless, "but he's in his office dealing with paperwork. Can I ask what it's about?"

"Apparently not even I have full clearance to know that right at the moment," Shunsui interjected lazily, before Juushirou could respond. "Apparently it's important, though, so if you don't mind..."

"I see," Ohara's brows knitted slightly, but he nodded. 'In that case, I shall alert him of your presence. You,' he turned to a recruit, "run to the Captain and report that Kyouraku-taichou and Ukitake-taichou are here and want to see him at once. Tell him it's apparently urgent, and that I shall bring them forthwith."

"Yes sir!" The recruit saluted sharply, before scuttling off to carry out the order, and Ohara cast the Captains a lukewarm, patently false smile.

"If you'd like to come with me, I'll take you to his office," he said politely, his words directed more towards Shunsui than Juushirou, but the white-haired Captain did not notice. He nodded, and Shunsui sighed, tucking a stray wisp of wild brown hair behind his ear in resignation.

"Lead the way, please, Ohara-kun," he said pleasantly. "I'm sorry we've interrupted your duties — I'm sure Seventh are pretty busy at the moment, and I heard you had a run-in with a dangerous felon last night."

"That idiot Kotetsu let him get away," now there was no hiding Ohara's disdain for District blood, and he wrinkled up his nose in derision. "Kikyue-dono and I have worked hard to improve his ruthless edge, but it seems he still has a long way to go before he can be truly effective against that kind of prisoner. However, we were

fortunate not to take any major damage as a result.”

“The prisoner is still at large, I believe,” Shunsui commented, and Ohara shrugged.

“With all respect, sir, that is a matter for the Second to resolve,” he said matter-of-factly, and it was clear from his attitude that he considered it beneath his notice. “Kotetsu at least managed to keep the felon from progressing deeper into our barracks, and for that the ingrate should count himself fortunate. Had he come within range of a higher level of sword...”

He made a beheading moment, and Shunsui looked amused.

“Fortunate indeed,” he agreed benignly, as they stepped into the hallway that led to the Captain’s office. “In Souja-dono’s absence, it must be a great comfort to H... Endou-taichou and Kikyue-hime to have strong officers like yourself and Kitabata to help hold the fort.”

“Mm, well, Kitabata does the best he can,” there was a level of condescension in Ohara’s voice, “and of course, I am as ever at my Captain’s command. Seventh Division has taken a severe loss, but we are strong enough at our core to overcome it — I am quite sure that we will hunt down our Vice Captain’s murderer and lay his spirit to rest in the not too distant future.”

“I’m sure Hirata doesn’t want anyone else to die needlessly,” Juushirou, who had been lost in a troubled reverie spoke up at this point, and Shunsui saw Ohara visibly flinch at the white-haired man’s sudden intrusion into what he clearly considered a conversation between Clansfolk. He had no occasion to respond, however, for at their brisk pace they had quickly reached Hirata’s inner office, and the man himself pushed back the door, casting both his fellow Captains a quizzical glance.

“Well?” he demanded, his own tones harried, and Shunsui offered him a grin.

“It’s Juu’s idea,” he said off-handedly. “I’m as in the dark as you, but apparently it’s something important.”

“And confidential,” Juushirou added, and Hirata’s expression became thoughtful.

“All right. Come in,” he agreed, casting Ohara a glance. “Ohara, you’re dismissed. Return to your scheduled duties, please.”

“Yes, sir,” Ohara saluted, though clearly insulted by Juushirou’s snub, and as Hirata ushered his friends into the office, Shunsui let out

a low chuckle of appreciation, shutting the door behind him.

“That one’s so full of his own opinion,” he reflected, “and he can’t stand being out of the loop. Especially since it was you who put him there, Juu. I guess it’s tough when you’re born with delusions of grandeur to accept that rank no longer depends on birth.”

“He can say what he likes. I don’t have time to fuss about Clan idiots,” Juushirou responded, and Hirata’s eyes widened behind his glasses at the uncharacteristic curtness in his friend’s tones.

“What’s going on, Juushirou?” he asked softly. “Why are you here — what’s happened?”

“I want to know where the Kitsune are.”

“I beg your pardon?” Hirata’s jaw dropped, and Shunsui cast Juushirou a startled glance.

“The Kitsune?”

“Yes. Joumei-kun and his associates. I want to know where they are, or at the very least, to know that there’s someone you can send there to check on them, because I’m pretty sure they’re in danger.”

Hirata’s gaze flitted to Shunsui, who shrugged helplessly.

“Don’t look at me, I’m missing the pages of this volume too,” he said, mystified. “The last update I had, we were in Thirteenth and talking to the young lad who brought back Souja. The next thing I knew, Juu was talking about coming here and acting, well, like this.”

He gestured, and Hirata’s brows drew together in consternation.

“Juushirou doesn’t generally get worked up over nothing,” he said pensively. “The only people living, though, who know where the Kitsune are are myself and my father. I haven’t spoken to Joumei face to face for some time, certainly not since Souja died. If even I haven’t had contact from his people, I can’t imagine why...”

“I have. I’ve spoken to him, recently,” Juushirou interrupted, grasping Hirata by the wrists, and Shunsui saw the urgency in his friend’s hazel eyes. “He came to see me, after Souja was cremated. He wanted to help find justice for your son, and he spoke as a friend.”

“Joumei... came to Thirteenth?” Hirata’s face drained of colour, and Juushirou nodded.

“And you didn’t tell me?”

“You were observing official mourning,” Juushirou responded. “I

was going to, when you returned, but this is...”

He faltered, shaking his head, and Shunsui was startled by the depth of anxiety in his friend’s gaze.

“I don’t even understand what happened today, so it’s hard to put into words that will convince you I’m not crazy,” Juushirou said quietly. “Joumei, when he spoke to me, said that he felt certain Tenichi’s abduction was designed to locate their lair, and that Keitarou had succeeded in doing so by dropping Tenichi in a place that he would be found by the Kitsune.”

“Souja did collect Tenichi from them,” Hirata agreed gravely, his pale eyes sad. “Tenichi’s been sworn to secret on the subject, though, and I’m fairly sure he doesn’t know much about where they held him. Izumi-hime has quite a powerful hypnotic ability which they used to sedate him before taking him below ground, so if you think that...”

“Izumi can do *what*?” Juushirou’s eyes almost fell out of his head, and Shunsui glanced from one friend to the other, holding up his hands in defeat.

“I am completely lost,” he said frankly. “Who is Izumi, why does that matter, and what did we come to bother Hirata about, anyway?”

“Right,” Juushirou got a grip on himself, shooting Shunsui a sheepish look. “You’re right, that can wait. It’s the boy that came back with Souja. Koku. You know he’s been in my custody since that incident.”

“Yes, and apparently you’re guarding him obsessively,” Hirata said astutely. Juushirou looked rueful.

“Kai’s been complaining to you too, clearly,” he observed. “Oh well. I’ll deal with that later. There isn’t time now. Hirata, you were the one who gave Shunsui that weird note, too, weren’t you? The one that was in Souja’s clothing?”

“Kikyue found it,” Hirata nodded, looking bewildered. “Did you want to see it? Is that why...”

“Later, maybe, but right now, no,” Juushirou shook his head, tightening his grasp on the younger man’s wrists. “Hirata, Shunsui believes that’s a prophesy. It was written by someone who knew your son would die, and how, before it happened. It sounds insane, and it’s hard to rationalise, but I believe him. And most of all I believe him because of what Koku said. I think *he*’s the one who made the prophesy and that’s why he came to help Souja when nobody else did or could. I think he saw it and tried to prevent it, but wasn’t able to do

so.”

“That’s a huge leap, even considering it’s based around my own,” Shunsui objected.

“I know, but listen,” Juushirou spoke in low, excited tones, releasing his hold on Hirata as he turned to his older friend instead. “Earlier, when he lost his wits, he was trying to tell us something. All those words he said, they didn’t make sense at the time, but when he was grabbing hold of me, I... I felt it. Something. I can’t even explain what, just that it was as though I was plunging down tunnels, too. It was the briefest fragments of something that didn’t make sense, but when you went to get Mitsuki, he spoke to me about foxes. Silver foxes. He asked me to go to them, and begged me not to let anyone else be killed. He didn’t know what he was saying, or, I think, who he was talking to — but he was insistent and I believed him. Whatever he saw, I saw a flash of it too. And in the midst of it, I saw Joumei.”

“You’re serious,” Shunsui’s expression became grave, and Juushirou nodded.

“If there’s a prophet, Koku is it,” he said softly. “That’s why Keitarou’s assassin came to attack him, out of everyone else. That’s why he knew where to find Souja, and why he tried to help him. And now I believe he’s seen something else, and I don’t think we can risk not acting on it.”

“Or it’s a trap,” Shunsui pointed out, and Juushirou flinched, staring at his friend in dismay.

“Shunsui?”

“Well, I know you want to believe in this kid,” Shunsui said with a sigh, “and I admit, he doesn’t seem like a calculating killer. But this could just as easily be intended to lure Hirata, or you, or anyone to a place of exposed danger. Hirata’s a Clan leader. Mounting an assault on him within a short time of his son’s death is not unheard of. Not considering the enemy — we can’t overlook the possibility that this is a planned ambush.”

“You didn’t see Koku’s eyes,” Juushirou shook his head. “You didn’t feel how it felt when whatever it was flashed through me. I believed him, because I saw Joumei too.”

“I saw them, but you can’t base...”

“Shunsui,” Juushirou cut across his friend, a frustrated look in his eyes. “Look, you asked me to back you up on your hunch at the Captain’s meeting, and I did. You had no evidence for it, but I did.

Now I've added to your evidence, you're acting like it's not even possible."

"I know you when there's a vulnerable stray about, and more, so does Keitarou," Shunsui said darkly. "Remember Shikiki? Keitarou's not a fool, that's all I'm saying. We don't know enough about Koku, but we do know that his answers are evasive and his behaviour highly defensive. There are secrets in that boy's head, and we don't know what they are. There's more to this, and more to him. The way he looked at me, it was as though he'd seen a potential problem or obstacle in his path. What if he's been sent to dupe you, and win your trust? We both know that you have a soft heart when it comes to people in trouble. What if this is Keitarou's master plan?"

"Will you *stop* acting like I need protecting all the while?" Juushirou exploded, the sudden raising of his voice making both Shunsui and Hirata jump. "I'm a Captain of the Gotei, just as you are, and more, Koku is in my custody. I have my subordinates with him twenty-four-seven and they report to me, too, about his behaviour and his actions, things he says, things he does."

He jabbed a bony finger accusingly against Shunsui's chest, making the stunned Eighth Captain take a step back.

"*You*, on the other hand, live several divisions away and, until today, hadn't even met the lad face to face. Moreover, I would've thought that you'd be pleased that there's some evidence to support your theory. Instead, though, you've turned it into an issue of my safety — which, incidentally, in a Gotei where people have already been killed, is a pretty stupid concern."

"Woah there," Shunsui raised his hands in mock surrender. "Someone didn't get enough sleep last night, clearly. I'm just asking you to look at all the options, that's all."

"And *I'm* asking *you* to trust my judgement," Juushirou snapped back. "In the meantime, while we're arguing here, the Kitsune might be in danger. They might be hurt, or worse. We have no guarantees they're under threat, but no indication that they're not. And I didn't come here to ask you or Hirata to go investigate. I came to ask where they were, so that I could go. I am perfectly capable of taking care of myself, and handling Keitarou if that need should arise."

"And if you can't?" Shunsui asked softly, and Juushirou's eyes clouded.

"People have already been killed," he said sadly. "Too many people. Koku begged me not to let anyone else die. You don't have to

believe me, or him, if you don't want to, but I *know* that plea came from the heart. His eyes were desperate, and frightened, and he really meant it. He believed they were going to be killed and it was hurting him. If I go, and it's dangerous, well, that's why I trained to hold a sword. If I don't go, and people die because of it, then how can I hold up my head as a Captain who protects the people in the Districts? If I was killed, Enishi would take hold and Thirteenth would be fine — but I've no intention of letting that happen. I'll go and I'll do what I can. That's all."

"The Kitsune are mine to protect, not yours," Hirata interjected quietly, and Juushirou shook his head.

"I promised Joumei something too," he said simply, "and it was me Koku asked to go. It's my obligation. I'll go. Just tell me where, and I'll go."

"But it's my duty to. If you go, I'll have to go too, because you won't be able to find it without my help," Hirata reached for his *haori*, slipping it over his shoulders and taking a step towards the door.

"You... believe me?" Juushirou looked startled, and Hirata sighed.

"I don't know what I think about the whole idea. Like you said, it's insane, and it also suggests someone knew my son would die — that's hard to stomach," he said quietly. "I'd also rather you two didn't have a domestic in my office — you sound like an old married couple and my head is already aching enough from dealing with Souja's paperwork and upstart subordinates who don't know their place. But..."

"But?" Shunsui asked.

"I believe in *both* of you and the crazy ideas you have," Hirata said simply. "Besides, Juushirou is right. Too many people have died, as I know to my personal cost. We can't risk not believing it. It doesn't matter if it's a trap, since a summons to the Kitsune lair would mean they were in danger in some way regardless of the real reason for that summons. I know Joumei was evacuating most of his people, but he's still there, with a couple of his associates and his sister. Their family have led the Kitsune since they came to District Seven, and..."

"His sister isn't there," Juushirou shook his head. "That was Joumei's reason for coming to me. He wanted to make a deal — his sister's safety for her scientific help in our investigation. Izumi is currently at Thirteenth."

"*What?*" Hirata's eyes almost fell out of his head, and Juushirou

looked apologetic.

“You weren’t in a position to discuss it with,” he explained, and Shunsui’s eyes widened in wonder.

“Your new recruit,” he murmured, and Juushirou nodded.

“I had her particularly protected last night, but since the assassin came after Koku and paid her not the slightest bit of attention, I think she’s still beyond Keitarou’s radar,” he said wearily. “I had no idea she had any... whatever it was you called them, Hirata — hypnotic abilities? Joumei failed to mention that to me when he offered me her services.”

“The Kitsune have a lot of secrets,” Hirata admitted.

“They don’t seem to be the only ones,” Shunsui grimaced at Juushirou. “Fine. If I’m outnumbered, then I guess you can count me in on this jaunt as well. Better three Captains than two.”

“Then we should go, at once, to the Kitsune lair.” Hirata suggested.

“There’s no need for that, Hirata-sama.”

A voice from the window made the three Captains turn, Hirata letting out an exclamation of disbelief as a ragged figure pulled his body awkwardly over the sill, dropping down onto the tatami mat floor with a painful thud. He winced, closing his eyes briefly as if steadying himself, and at the sight of him, Shunsui’s heart skipped a beat. Though he had never met the newcomer before, somehow he knew exactly who this stranger was.

“Kitsune,” he murmured, and Juushirou bit his lip, clearly as shaken as his companion by this obvious confirmation of Koku’s claim. Joumei’s clothing was torn and stained with blood, deep scratches running down his arms beneath shredded sleeves, and dark bruising beginning to shadow the pale skin around his left eye. He was breathing heavily, his palms pressed against the floor as he struggled to stabilise his body. At length he managed it, shuffling himself around so that he faced Hirata and lowering his head in a bow of deference.

“For infiltrating your premises uninvited, and with so little regard for your status, Hirata-sama, I apologise profusely,” he murmured.

“Joumei,” Hirata’s expression became troubled, and he moved to help the young man to his feet. As he stood, Shunsui saw that the man’s legs too were similarly savaged, as though he had been involved in a hard, physical fight, yet despite the damage, he managed to pull

himself into an upright position, allowing the Endou Captain to guide him to a seat and usher him down into it. There was a moment of silence, then Hirata turned to Juushirou.

“Apparently your theory was correct,” he said, though there was no sense of congratulation in his tones, and Shunsui saw Juushirou slowly shake his head.

“We were too late,” he murmured. “We procrastinated too much, I wasted too much time. Joumei-kun, I’m sorry. We should have acted quicker to come help you.”

“Help us?” Joumei stared at the District Captain as if he had lost his mind, and Hirata nodded.

“It seems that Juushirou received some warning of an attack on you, not so long ago,” he said gently, though Shunsui was aware of the tension rippling through his friend’s slender body. “We were heading out to investigate — but your presence here tells me that there’s nothing more we can do. You wouldn’t have left your home if there was something still there to protect, would you? You’ve come to pass on a warning, and to tell us that Keitarou has struck again.”

Joumei drew a heavy, shaking breath into tired lungs, lowering his head in a reluctant nod.

“He came to attack us,” he said softly. “I had tried to prepare for the worst, and most of my people have long since left our home for pastures new, but the sick and the frail remained behind. We had not managed to put in process a plan to move them, and with only Hiko and I to protect them, there was little we could do. Keitarou killed all of them without hesitation, and then tried to corner the two of us. Since his barbed attack didn’t work... he resorted to other methods.”

He took another shaking breath, burying his head in his hands.

“I don’t know how long I can function here without putting anyone in danger,” he admitted. “I came because I felt I should report, but Hirata-sama, I want you to discard me. Me and all connection to my people. It may have cost you your son’s life, and now, perhaps, it might cause even greater wounds to your Clan and your name. I do not want any more deaths on our account. We have sinned enough in past generations — I would rather prevent those sins from spreading to this.”

“What are you talking about?” Hirata demanded sharply, and Juushirou’s countenance paled.

“Keitarou’s Bankai,” he whispered. “That’s what you mean, isn’t it,

Joumei-kun? Keitarou used his Bankai on you, and because of that...”

“I don’t know what might happen next,” Joumei nodded confirmation of the other man’s words. “He unleashed it on Hiko and I, and made us fight against one another. It was a fight to the death, against ourselves and against his power. We were deep inside the mine, and I used the Sekkiseki to break his immediate control of me. Hiko... Hiko tried to do the same, but then exploded the ceiling of a chamber on top of himself so that he couldn’t attack me any more. I tried but I couldn’t rescue him, and so I came here.”

“Used the Sekkiseki?” Shunsui looked blank, and Hirata turned grave features on his friend.

“The Kitsune’s home is a former Sekkiseki mine. They live among it and it protects them, or so it should,” he said quietly.

“Poison in the earth that might save them.”

Koku’s words, shaking and disjointed suddenly echoed through Shunsui’s thoughts, and his brows knitted together in consternation. He glanced at Juushirou, meeting an identical expression of concern in the other man’s hazel eyes, and knew the white haired Captain was thinking along similar lines.

“Keitarou’s attack was anticipated,” Joumei said grimly, bringing both Captains’ attentions back to the matter at hand. “We knew it was coming, just not when. We could have taken greater losses, and those he killed were not likely to live much longer anyway. All but Hiko — whose loss I find harder to put behind me.”

“That’s a clinical way of looking at people who you consider family,” Shunsui objected, and Joumei raised his gaze to the Kyouraku Captain, taking in his appearance for the first time.

“We haven’t met, I don’t believe.”

“Kyouraku Shunsui. Hirata and I are old friends,” Shunsui said frankly. “And you’re one of the mysterious fox people I keep hearing about.”

“It’s all right, Joumei. You haven’t met him, but I trust Shunsui as I trust Juushirou, and both are people you can put faith in too,” Hirata assured the young man, looking troubled. “That is, if you can put faith in me after today’s events. It seems that my promises of protection run very hollow these days. Since Souja died, I haven’t been as alert as I ought to have been. I knew you were in danger, but I did nothing to protect your people, and now...”

“We took what precautions we could, but we just ran out of time,” Joumei shook his head. “It’s not your duty to shield us, Hirata-sama, not when I might have brought Souja-dono into the danger that cost him his life. I didn’t come here to question your motives or ask for reparation. I came to inform you of what I knew — while I could.”

“You’re so much like your father when you speak like that,” Hirata rubbed his temples, and Joumei managed a wan smile.

“You give me too much credit,” he said matter-of-factly. “Father would doubtless have done better.”

He glanced at Shunsui.

“You said I was clinical, but the reality is that we all live on borrowed time,” he added. “Living alongside Sekkiseki, life is brief and death is common. We learn to appreciate the time we have, but accept it when that time ends. Those Keitarou killed were all in the final stages of the malady that claims most all of us eventually. It is lingering, debilitating and, ultimately, a sentence of death while still alive. At most, they would have lived a few months, and moving them might have killed them outright. Perhaps it is callous, to consider such people expendable, but so they also viewed themselves. They too agreed that the young and strong should be evacuated first — they were prepared for death before today. It is the way we will all go, sooner or later.”

His eyes narrowed, faint flickers of anger in the argent depths.

“Hiko was different,” he added. “He wasn’t born to be subjected to the curse that hangs over the Kitsune, and you will not find me so calm over his loss.”

“But you have been treating with Juushirou during my absence in office?” Hirata cast Joumei a questioning look, and Joumei nodded, once more apologetic.

“I have overreached myself, and I’m sorry,” he admitted, “but I wanted to help avenge Souja-dono’s death. He was my friend first and foremost and I felt Izumi and I could be of some material use. I trust this has been the case?” this last to Juushirou, who nodded.

“We found Keitarou’s original hideout,” he agreed, “or Shunsui and some others did, based on Izumi’s coordinates. He’d left the scene, though — and now we’re working on narrowing down his current choice of home.”

“Almost certainly in the last place you would consider viable,” Joumei muttered, and Shunsui nodded.

“He’s been sighted in the Real World,” he said frankly. “The witnesses are reliable, placing him there.”

“Then that is probably where he is not,” Joumei said frankly. He winced, closing his eyes briefly, and Shunsui frowned, noting the sudden pallor that crossed the young man’s features.

“Joumei-kun?” Hirata asked softly, and Joumei shook his head vigorously, opening his eyes and meeting the Endou Lord’s gaze with a frustrated one of his own.

“He is still inside of me,” he murmured. “I felt it then, just fleetingly. Clearly even swallowing Sekkiseki isn’t enough to break it permanently, not now I’m out of the tunnels. My being here could be his will or it could be my own — I truly don’t know for sure whether he let me come to you or whether I escaped on my own. I thought it suspicious he was nowhere around when I hit the surface — but perhaps that was just another part of his plan.”

“In that case, it’s a good idea we don’t talk about anything else relating to the Kitsune or the Gotei’s progress for the time being,” Juushirou looked troubled, but he nodded his head. “I’ve experienced Keitarou’s Bankai — Shunsui and I both have knowledge of it, and that it can’t be broken so easily. It’s not impossible that Keitarou let you escape so he can try and learn something from us. That being the case, I think we’d do better discussing only Keitarou himself, rather than anything else.”

“Juushirou-dono is right,” Joumei acknowledged. “I came to report on the things I can — please, let me do that while I’m in sound mind enough to do it.”

“Keitarou’s method of control seems to have changed since that day in District Seven,” Hirata reflected. “Although, Juushirou, when you were possessed by his blade, to begin with there was no way to tell. You didn’t act against Shunsui until after I had gone to pursue Seimaru... so perhaps it isn’t so very different.”

“No. No, you’re right,” Juushirou pulled a face. “It has changed. In the past, he was only able to use this power on one individual at a time, and told me so — if you remember, the last time he and I met face to face, it was because he wanted to reclaim the shreds of spirit power left inside of me because without them he couldn’t activate his Bankai on anyone else.”

“But he did succeed in doing that,” Shunsui said grimly. “That means he has a fully functional sword this time around.”

“Ah, but I see what Juushirou means. By Joumei’s testimony, it was used against both him and Hiko *simultaneously*.” Hirata pointed out. “Hiko couldn’t overcome it, so wound up killing himself. Joumei is still under the influence, but rational and clear headed. That suggests Keitarou’s refined his skill to the point where he can control another individual without being easily detected. More, he can control more than one person at once. Who knows what the limit is on that?”

“The Kitsune in the lair were all killed by his Shikai, save for Hiko and I, on whom he turned his Bankai.” Joumei agreed grimly. “The information I had was that he could do it on one, but he clearly had control of us both, and maintained it even when we were deep within the mine. I don’t know whether he is capable of doing more than turning two individuals on each other, but it’s a terrifying power to have. Hiko was my most loyal associate, and yet we were induced to attack one another. The strength of the persuasion is overwhelming. Though we know that our bodies are acting amiss, there’s no way to stop it. And... no way to know how to break the control, either.”

“In my case, Shunsui put a sword through my heart,” Juushirou put a hand absently to his chest. “I don’t remember, but I’ve been told. I was healed at once by a girl with exceptional reconstructive talent, so I am alive to tell the tale. Keitarou told me himself I was the first to ever survive his Bankai. But... with this new development...”

“Keitarou’s power was rejected by Juushirou’s body, and it began to break down in attacking it,” Hirata remembered.

“I don’t feel any ill effects from it at all, however,” Joumei sighed. “At least, having consumed Sekkiseki, I can explain my physical weakness through other means. But there is a sense of something cold inside of me which threatens to overflow my senses if I let my guard down. Well. I don’t know what damage it might do, or might induce me to do later, so I won’t outstay my welcome. There is one more important thing I want to tell you. While I think it possible Chudokuga has evolved, I don’t know whether that evolution is perfect.”

“Meaning?”

“In controlling us, he opened himself up to us,” Joumei explained. “Bits and pieces. Fragments. Nothing particularly substantial. But every time he compels me to act, it gets a little more vivid, and when he realised I had access to these images, he pulled back his control of me. I’m willing to sacrifice myself to try and use this to Seireitei’s better advantage — for the sake of my family, and for Souja-dono, I’m not looking for a cure if it can lead me to Keitarou’s base. Just, I don’t know if anything I tell you can be trusted, or if these are even my

thoughts or actions right now. That being the case... I intend to act alone. I want to find out what I can — but I won't risk other lives in case this is a trap."

"I'm sure you can't be spared, you know," Juushirou began, but Joumei offered him a faint smile.

"My people are gone," he said matter-of-factly. "I have nothing left to protect, except my honour and my obligation to the Endou. Please don't try and change my mind. This is all I can do, so I will try. I have no idea whether Keitarou is capable of reading pieces of my thoughts in the way I was picking up bits of his — so I don't want to dwell on that any more than I have to."

"Then what can we do to help?"

"Research all you can relating to Keitarou, all the evidence, everything," Joumei got to his feet. "It's all I can say. Whatever the solution, it's much more complicated than it seems to be. And... and one more thing."

He paused, casting Juushirou a glance.

"About your stray. Did he tell you anything about Souja-dono's death?"

"No," Juushirou shook his head. "He claims he didn't witness it. Last night he was attacked, though, by an agent believed to be in Keitarou's pay."

He faltered, then,

"Joumei, in all your research and reading, have you ever come across anyone with the power to predict the future?" he asked softly, and Joumei's eyes widened in surprise.

"To do what?"

"This morning, we had someone tell us, albeit in broken words, that someone had attacked and killed silver foxes," Juushirou explained. "We came here to get Hirata's advice and help, and then..."

"I turned up?" Joumei's eyes narrowed. "How interesting."

"I thought it a prediction, but now I think that he saw it happen at the same time it did," Juushirou said slowly. "I can't explain it any other way. I don't really understand, but... there's so much in this case that doesn't make sense. I feel important things are missing, and if we could only grasp hold of those, we'd have the full picture. But... they're still slipping away. How could someone predict something that

hadn't happened, or see something that occurred miles away? It's beyond my understanding of spirit science. Admittedly, that's not very broad — which is why I thought I'd ask you."

Joumei pursed his lips for a moment, then,

"Is there a sword?" he asked at length, and Juushirou stared.

"A sword? Here? What do you mean?"

"In Rukongai. Did you find a sword?"

"No..." Juushirou shook his head. "But Souja did report there was one. One with Aizen Kohaku carved on the hilt. Why?"

"But you didn't bring that sword back here?"

"No."

"Then it's not the sword, but the soul." Joumei bit his lip, frustration glittering in his silvery eyes. "I'm sorry. I'm being incoherent. Just, when you asked me about that, for some reason, I saw an image of a sword. I saw it so very clearly... an odd, ugly sword with a hilt coated in Sekkiseki. A sword surrounded by a sinister aura... but if it's not here, then it's not what I thought it might be. Maybe it doesn't even exist. I don't know. I'm not being particularly useful."

"But you've heard of a sword that could tell the future before?" Hirata asked softly, and Joumei shook his head.

"No. I've never heard of any such thing," he admitted. "It was an image that first came to me during my fight with Keitarou, which may make it irrelevant, or important. I don't know."

"I am going to go with important," Shunsui's eyes glittered with alarm. "Souja spoke of a sword, before he died, and we found the place in Rukongai where it would've been, but it had gone. Now you mention it too, in conjunction to what Juu just said — I don't think we can claim all of that is a coincidence. If that wasn't your memory, Joumei-kun, it must've been one of the fragments you picked up from Keitarou when he invaded your senses. And if that's the case..."

"We should look into it," Juushirou said frankly. "We should look into everything, and try and make sense of whatever we can."

"And I should go," Joumei got stiffly to his feet. "Please don't send anyone after me, Hirata-sama. I mean what I say and I'll find out what I can. If it's safe for me to return here to report, I'll try to do so — but I'd rather not know how your investigation goes. It's possible Keitarou

will learn things from me the way I seem to be learning them from him — and I don't want to make this a two-way process. Doubtless when I outlive my usefulness to him, he'll try to destroy me the way he did Hiko — and I'd rather not hurt anyone here in the process."

"But where will you go?" Juushirou was anxious, and Joumei offered him a faint smile.

"Foxes are good at finding places to hide," he said simply. "I'll leave the mine and roam further abroad. It doesn't trouble me... the Kitsune have lived for a long time knowing that things can change at a moment's notice, and we adapt. I will do whatever I can — but right now, the best thing I can do is leave."

He bowed his head to Hirata, who rested a hand briefly on his shoulder.

"We will do what we can too," he said gravely. "I lost Souja, but I don't blame you or your people for that loss. I took a vow to protect you, and so far I've failed, but I don't intend on failing again. Whether you wish to risk the safety of my men is irrelevant. We are a military operation and we can fight if we need to. If you have news you think needs sharing, or you have nowhere else to go, you can consider Seventh Division your home."

His eyes narrowed, and Shunsui saw a flicker of the hawk surface in his friend's eyes.

"And if Keitarou's listening, then he can know that I'd relish that fight most of all," he murmured. "So don't forget what I've said, all right?"

"Yes, sir," Joumei looked solemn, nodding his head. Then he was gone, in a swish of silverish shunpo, and Hirata sighed, sinking back down into his seat and burying his head in his hands. For a long moment there was silence, then he glanced up.

"Juushirou, the person who told you all of this was the young lad who brought back my son?"

"Yes," Juushirou nodded, and Shunsui inclined his head in confirmation.

"And you still insist on not letting me speak to him myself?"

"More than before, I think that would be a bad idea," Juushirou looked troubled. "Hirata, whatever happened earlier, I can't explain. But Mitsuki said that she thought Koku was unwell, and having seen his episode earlier, I'm tempted to agree with her. More, it's

something I don't know how to handle. I don't know whether this morning was coincidence or triggered by the fear of seeing a stranger — Shunsui came with me, and Koku was clearly on edge about it from the start. Right now, I know you have lots of questions. So do we. But for now..."

"I had a feeling you would say that," Hirata grimaced. "Fine. Then, since I can't invade Thirteenth Division and forcibly overturn your decision, I suppose I should put my mind instead to what Joumei said. It's time that I came out of mourning and did my part in this investigation. You can expect me back at Council and Captains' Meetings from this point on — for Souja's sake, it's time I helped bring to justice this man who seems determined to demolish my family and all that it holds dear."

44. Ketsui and the Kitsune

Chapter Forty Three: Ketsui and the Kitsune

“I’m sorry I shouted at you earlier, Shunsui.”

It was evening and, following the hasty visit to the Seventh Division’s barracks, both Juushirou and Shunsui had withdrawn to their own quarters, Juushirou to check up on Koku’s progress and Shunsui to go over once again the notes and theories relating to the prophesy Souja had brought back from Rukongai. It had been sundown before Juushirou had emerged at Eighth, greeting Sora with a weary smile and a request to see her Captain, and a short time later, as the sun disappeared into darkness over Seireitei’s horizon, the two men had withdrawn to Shunsui’s private study. Shunsui had quickly produced sake, which he had insisted on pouring into smoky grey *sakazuki*, and Juushirou had not objected, sinking down into his seat with a heavy sigh. Shunsui had soon picked up on the tension in his friend’s frame, but had left it to Juushirou to break the silence, and, at length the apology had come, a look of genuine contrition in the hazel eyes.

At his words, Shunsui snorted, raising his sake dish in a mock toast.

“I’ll drink to that,” he said blithely. “I don’t know where it came from — it was out of the blue and not like you at all. Though... maybe I wastoo quick to jump to conclusions about the young’un’s words. Or more likely, didn’t want to come to that conclusion, if that makes sense. Still, though, I didn’t mean to make you snap.”

“Mm,” Juushirou rested his chin on his hands, his expression becoming pensive. “I can’t even explain it myself. It was like a charge of adrenaline, running through me. I knew I had to go to Hirata, I had to find the Kitsune. I had to act.”

“Have you spoken to the boy about it?” Shunsui asked, and Juushirou shook his head.

“I don’t even know what to ask,” he admitted. “Mitsuki said that he didn’t fight her, and he took whatever she gave him to drink as innocently as a small child. I don’t like that she’s sedated him twice in a short period, but I’m concerned about the implications of what happened earlier. I believe he saw the Kitsune and from Joumei’s testimony, he *must* have seen it when it happened, but he was with us

and so that's logically impossible. If he did have some kind of a gift, though, whereby he could predict — or at the very least, witness events that aren't happening around him, that would make him a target for Keitarou. It would explain him being kept in the cage you found, and support your theory about him being one of Keitarou's experiments. I just don't want to ask him those questions. I don't really understand why I'm hesitating, but what happened earlier unnerved me. I can't stop seeing his eyes, so detached and empty and like... like pools you could fall into."

Shunsui was silent for a moment, considering this. Slowly he drained his *sakazuki*, setting it down on the unit between them.

"Do you think that whatever he saw affected you?" he asked quietly, and Juushirou cast him a startled glance.

"Affected?"

"You said it was like a rush of adrenaline, and you certainly weren't ready to brook any opposition," Shunsui explained. "Normally, if you're cross with me, you just give me that look and nag me a little. You've built up a high tolerance to my annoying character traits, so it's not common for you to full out yell at me. Today, though, you were all guns blazing. The way you left the sickroom, too, was abrupt and out of character, not to mention how you snubbed that Ohara *bocchan* when he was being full of himself. You're usually the one who's nice to idiots like that, even when they're being insufferable. Do you think that you picked something up from Koku's aura when he was hallucinating that made you act more impulsively than usual?"

"Something that affected my mood?" Juushirou's brows knitted in consternation. "I definitely felt strange. And I did see Joumei. The images were so fleeting and faint to begin with, but when Koku said foxes, they seemed to come together. Maybe you're right. Maybe something like that did happen — his urgency transferred itself somehow to me."

"Leaky *reiryoku*," Shunsui said matter-of-factly.

"Is seeing the future a normal product of *reiryoku*?" Juushirou looked doubtful. "I don't know what to do about it. I should ask him to write down something for me, so that we can compare whether he wrote the note you saw or not, but I don't even know whether he can write. Or read, for that matter, though he seemed attached to the book Kirio brought him. Do they have the facilities to learn in the Rukon? Surely not in the stretch we believe Koku came from. Do people remember their previous lives and skills when they cross over? I don't

know and I don't remember us learning much about Plus Souls other than how to perform *konsou* when we were training."

"Koku isn't what Seireitei would call a Plus Soul, though," Shunsui pointed out, and Juushirou frowned.

"Meaning?"

"He has *reiryoku*. Keep up, Juu. If he didn't have that, it couldn't be leaking all over you and making you hyperactive," Shunsui pulled a graphic face. "The official definition of a Plus Soul is an entity lacking in spiritual presence or awareness — right?"

"Except that definition has to be challenged by the evidence of people like Koku who undoubtedly do come from the Rukon valley, and yet have *reiryoku*," Juushirou rubbed his temples. "I wish my head was clearer. Everything is buzzing and I can't focus as clearly as I usually do."

"Well, I don't really care for officialdom, especially when it comes to people segregation," Shunsui relented, tapping his fingers absently against the wood of the table. "I do think, however, that Koku's *reiryoku* is not like that of other people I've met who've slipped the divide and come illegally to Seireitei."

"You weren't making that up?" Juushirou eyed him sharply. "You have met people who've done that before?"

"A long time ago, in my misspent youth, I crossed paths with one or two young women looking for a way to survive after breaking the barrier, yes," Shunsui reflected ruefully, and Juushirou groaned, rolling his eyes.

"Shunsui, you're not serious? You mean to say that they... that you..."

"I had a very eclectic taste and an entirely open policy on people's origins," Shunsui said blithely. "I know, it's shameful, so save your lectures. I'm a much better behaved boy now than I was then, believe me. But yes, I met them. And they had *reiryoku*, but my memories are rather sake-soaked and not clear enough to be trusted. All I think is that I'm not totally convinced that Koku fits the profile of a Rukon escapee."

"And the sword?"

"I can't explain the sword, so I'm not going to try," Shunsui said calmly, "but Koku's *reiryoku*, when it fluctuated and flared, I felt it. It had an odd taint to it, but it wasn't that of a polluted or enhanced Plus

Soul. It's unstable, untrained, raw and clumsy — but you can still tell, and I'm sure, if you focused for a moment, you'd pick it up too. It was like he'd been born here, like you or I. And more — or maybe *because of* that fact — I think he has quite a lot of it. So it wouldn't surprise me if he did disorientate you."

"Gah," Juushirou groaned, flopping his head down on his arms, and Shunsui eyed him keenly, amusement in his eyes.

"Going back to the earlier topic, too, the person who wrote the note was definitely educated," he added. "The writing wasn't neat, exactly, but it was properly formed and legible except for the blood. All the characters were correct, and it looked like whoever wrote it had learned them thoroughly. I haven't seen Keitarou's writing, so I can't compare, but it was within the kind of script I'd expect from a mad exiled genius like that. Or, if I'm right about Koku, he could've written it himself."

"What you're suggesting is that Koku came from Rukongai, but at some time before that he went *from* Seireitei *to* Rukongai," Juushirou raised his head reluctantly, running his palm along his brow as he tried to smooth out the crease lines that had formed there. "He said he'd never been to Seireitei, though, and I believe him. I don't think he has. If you're suggesting he was here, was educated here, ended up there somehow and then back here — it just doesn't tally with how little he knows about this world. That's not just my bias, but based on reports Kirio and Tsunemori have both made, not to mention Mitsuki and Ryuu's judgement on his behaviour when he tried to go walking around the barracks when he first woke up."

"Well, if you say so, but the more Keitarou's name comes into any equation, the twistier the logic becomes and the more complex the theories needed to crack it," Shunsui replied. "Someone wrote that note. Someone with calligraphic skill. And as you said, the Rukon doesn't seem the right place for someone to learn to do that."

"But today, what Koku saw, he told us," Juushirou pointed out. "He could've done the same to Keitarou, who might've written it down. We don't know Keitarou's hand writing. I may have seen it once, a long time ago, but I wouldn't recognise it if I saw it now, and I haven't seen this note of yours. Neither you nor Hirata would recognise it as Keitarou's, either... and it's still with Hirata at present. There's no reason to suppose it isn't his writing."

"You accept Koku's involvement with Keitarou as pretty likely, then?"

“I don’t know,” Juushirou admitted reluctantly. “I don’t want to believe that, but I can’t entirely rule it out. Just... I can’t see it as being in the way you think. He didn’t know who he was predicting to, earlier. He couldn’t see me, and the words just came. I’m sure about that. I don’t think he can control when it happens, or to whom. Keitarou could easily have taken advantage of him when he was in that vulnerable state. If he predicted Souja’s death, and doing so put Keitarou’s cause in jeopardy, why would he have worked to get Souja back here if he was Keitarou’s man? It doesn’t make sense.”

“True,” Shunsui conceded. “So you’re saying this proves that Souja’s death was premeditated?”

“No, because it doesn’t make sense,” Juushirou groaned, clutching at his lank white hair in his frustration. “If you’re planning to kill someone, then you don’t wait for someone else to forecast it happening before you take action. Either Keitarou ordered Souja’s death and Koku predicted it, so tried to prevent it — but then Keitarou didn’t write that note, or Koku predicted it and Keitarou wrote it down, but it wasn’t premeditated. Yet Keitarou didn’t stop it, either, and Koku tried to, which means...”

“It means you need to drink your sake,” Shunsui nudged the untouched *sakazuki* in his friend’s direction. “I concede you’re right that Koku genuinely saw the attack on the Kitsune and it probably wasn’t a trap. But I still think there are things that are not right about that boy, and more, I don’t like how he looked at me... or spoke to me. He might well be one of Keitarou’s victims, but... he might not.”

“Mmm,” Juushirou obediently lifted the *sakazuki*, downing the contents in one gulp before setting it aside with a sigh. “All the sake in the world couldn’t clear my head at present. It’s whirling up a dervish with all we’ve learned today. Maybe you’re right about Koku’s aura somehow conflicting with my own. I feel as though all the energy rushed out of me somewhere and now nothing will properly add up. Probably I need to go sleep on it, and hope for better in the morning — but it concerns me that Suzuki is still on the loose and, now Keitarou’s attacked the Kitsune directly, he might make Izumi a target too.”

He closed his eyes briefly, then opened them, casting Shunsui a helpless look.

“I don’t know what to do,” he confessed. “If I report to the Council about Koku, he’ll be taken into proper custody and interrogated and I don’t think he’s mentally or physically up to the kind of rigorous investigation techniques the Onmitsukidou prefer. If I keep it a secret,

can I protect him? And who or what am I protecting, anyway? My gut still tells me that he's not an enemy, but..."

He faltered, and Shunsui patted him reassuringly on the shoulder.

"For now, do nothing," he advised wisely. "Joumei-kun seems like he intends to take responsibility for his own battle, and there's nothing you can do there. The girl — Izumi? — she's here and safe, and if the assassin ignored her then probably that won't change — but you've taken all the precautions you can without arousing suspicions, so there's no more you can do there, either. Koku is under twenty-four hour surveillance and Kirio and Tsunemori are both capable of handling an assassin who seems to have run from Tenichi-kun's splinter sword. Mitsuki's come under no more threat and despite what Naoko-chan detected, there's been no repeat here, so probably she's no longer a person of interest. You, on the other hand, look more tired than I've seen you in a while. Whether it's the stress of all of this or Koku's *reiryokuleak*, I don't know — but you need to get some rest. And, if I have to, I'll get you drunk and drag you off to Ugendou myself to make sure you get it. I advise you go on your own steam, though — since your head will probably be less clear in the morning if you follow my method."

Juushirou eyed his friend for a moment, then he laughed despite himself.

"Sometimes your annoying characteristics are reassuring ones," he observed. "Thank you, Shunsui. I appreciate the pep-talk, even if it is as unique as ever coming from you. You're right — there's nothing more I can do tonight but sleep. Tomorrow, I'll consider things again. Our priority is still finding Keitarou, and that hasn't changed — worrying about Koku can come second to that for the time being, while I figure out the best course of action to take."

"There, you see? Already better," Shunsui grinned widely, reaching across to refill his friend's *sakazuki*, then his own. "One more for the road?"

"I guess so," Juushirou nodded agreement. "Then I'll head back to base. Before I go to bed, I'll dig out the notes Sekime-taichou gave me about the Gate in the Rukon that leads to the Real World."

"That sounds like pretty heavy bedtime reading to me," Shunsui looked doubtful, and Juushirou grinned ruefully, shaking his head.

"No," he responded, "I didn't mean like that. Tomorrow, I'm going to give it to Izumi to look at. I should've done it already, but I got bogged down in other things. Now her people have been put in

danger, I need her skills all the more. Keitarou is supposed to be in the Real World, Shunsui, but he appeared in Seireitei and killed Kitsune there. That means he's not static in the Real World, and Joumei might be right when he says the man might well not be there at all. It's possible he appeared there for the sake of making us think he was — and we know how he likes to distract."

"And you say sake doesn't aid the thinking process?" Shunsui looked amused, and Juushirou snorted, nonetheless picking up his *sakazuki* and taking a sip.

"No, but talking to you does," he admitted. "Maybe Keitarou's base is in the Real World now, but it doesn't hurt to have Izumi take an independent look at all the data and see what she thinks. Her coordinates led us to his base in the Rukon, so even without taking her out of the safety of Thirteenth, I'm interested to see what she comes up with."

"Me too," Shunsui admitted. "Now I'm properly in on this whole Kitsune secret, you will tell me what you find out, won't you?"

"Promise," Juushirou nodded, draining his cup and setting it down. "Thank you for the sake, and the advice. I'll go retire now — from tomorrow, operation Find Keitarou re-begins."

Her brother's reiatsu was in the air.

Izumi stepped neatly over the cracks between the bamboo slats of the walkway, fingers looping absently around the white fabric of her *obi* as she made her way towards Ugendou. It was still early, and most of the division were in the Mess Hall but, as she had left her dormitory, Naoko had grasped her by the arm, pulling her to one side.

"The Captain wants you," she had said. "Go now. I'll make sure you don't starve. Hurry! Whatever it is, I think it's important, as he sent me here to find you myself."

Izumi's silverish eyes clouded as she remembered. Was it to do with Joumei? Though her head told her that her brother would not risk her safety by showing himself so near to her hiding place, her heart and her senses told a different story. For a moment she paused, raising her hand so that the breeze could blow against the delicate pale skin, and her frown deepened. Yes, Joumei had been here. What his errand had been, she did not know, but now it was her turn, and she straightened her back, marching with renewed determination towards the little cabin that was Juushirou's personal dwelling. The pride of the Kitsune was on her shoulders — whatever had happened, she would deal with

it as a *himeshould*.

“Izumi,” Juushirou was waiting for her as she reached the entrance, a smile on his face, but Izumi’s sharp gaze quickly picked up on the preoccupation in the other’s eyes and her lips thinned. She bowed her head properly before him, her Kitsune pride hating the gesture but knowing that her life depended upon it. Unlike Joumei, whose pragmatic attitude towards their status allowed him to adopt humility and authority according to the situation, Izumi had always found it difficult to shed her pride in her roots and, though she knew the man before her was a trusted friend of her family’s benefactor, the Endou Lord, to her he was still just a shinigami dressed up in *haori* and *shihakushou*.

But, she admitted to herself as slowly she raised her gaze to meet his, he had been kind to her and accommodating of Joumei’s whim. For this reason and this alone she had quelled her feelings and accepted the indignity of being yelled at by his well-meaning but — in her eyes — poorly trained inferiors.

At the sight of her, Juushirou sighed, shaking his head slightly.

“This must seem peremptory,” he reflected. ‘I know you came here because Joumei asked you to, and we’ve done our best to keep you safe. But I can see it in your eyes. You resent being called so familiarly, and ordered about so easily, don’t you? Yes,’ as Izumi’s eyes widened in surprise and dismay, “I thought so. Your family might have been exiles for a long time, but you are a *hime* and I’m sorry that our simple arrangement here is as it is. We are a District division, and we have no provision for those of noble birth, not even temporary guests. Still, it is for the best that you’re here, rather than somewhere like Seventh with Hirata. You understand that, don’t you?”

Izumi pursed her lips, then she sighed, lowering her head briefly in acquiescence.

“And you do realise that we are your allies? Yours, and Joumei’s, too?”

Another nod, but now Izumi’s eyes were narrowing once more, picking up on the evasive notes in her companion’s tones. Juushirou tilted his head, eying her for a moment, then he shrugged his shoulders, stepping back to allow her to pass him into Ugendou proper. Once inside, he shut the door, bidding her to take a seat.

“You probably know why I’ve sent for you — at least in part,” he began, and Izumi settled herself on the least worn of the several cushions that decorated the tatami mat floor, smoothing her

hakama and adopting what she hoped was a look of attentive subservience. Juushirou gazed at her, then a rueful smile spread across his features.

“You know, when you look at me that way, I’m put on my guard,” he admitted. “Maybe that’s because I learned yesterday that those eyes of yours have a particular potency. Is it true that you are capable of hypnotism?”

Izumi’s expression became one of consternation, and Juushirou held up his hands.

“I don’t want a demonstration,” he assured her quickly. “Hirata was the one who told me, and I wanted to ascertain its truth. If so, it makes a difference, you see... in how capable you are of defending yourself in the face of danger.”

Izumi looked reluctant, but she sighed again, nodding her head. Juushirou’s lips pressed together pensively.

“Then perhaps I should be relieved,” he said softly. “Izumi, Joumei was here yesterday. I’m sure you’d already realised that, but I’ll confirm it for you. He came to report to Hirata, and I was present when he did. He had encountered Keitarou, and thought we should know of it.”

Izumi started, genuine alarm replacing the facade of innocence in her eyes, and Juushirou grimaced.

“I won’t keep secrets from you,” he assured her. “You’re not here to be protected by us, so much as to help us in tracking that man down, and in order to do so, I think you should be made aware of everything we know. Including what your brother told us yesterday... perhaps that most of all.”

He paused, then, slowly, outlined the events of the previous day, and at the mention of Hiko’s fate, Izumi flinched again, distress then rage flaring through her young body. She clenched her fists, silverish sparks darting from the knuckles as she fought to suppress the urge to lash out, and Juushirou reached out a reassuring hand to pat her on the shoulder.

“He wanted to protect your brother,” he said sympathetically, “but I realise that it’s a great loss to both of you. Hiko was the young man who brought you to us, wasn’t he? Joumei said he was different from the rest of you, and that he shouldn’t have had to bear your family’s curse. I got the impression when I met him that he didn’t look like you — perhaps he wasn’t a Kitsune by birth?”

Izumi's head jerked mutely in a nod.

"But you were still close," Juushirou observed. "Joumei has left you in my care and I will do my best to make sure his faith is justified. More, though, we need your help. Not just for Souja-dono, but for Hiko and even for Joumei himself. I don't know how to break Keitarou's spell over him, and nor does he. Not even swallowing the Sekkiseki seemed to work. We need to find Keitarou, and to that end, I want your expertise, please."

He dug his fingers into his *obi*, pulling out a tattered wad of notes, which he pushed across towards her.

"These were given to me by the Captain of the Twelfth Division. The Urahara have been working on them," he explained, as Izumi took the tattered paper gingerly in her elegant fingers. 'The data you calculated proved accurate in finding Keitarou's Rukon hideout, but he's moved on. Don't worry, the Urahara don't know about you,' as Izumi tensed. "Sekime-taichou just asked me to consult the source that provided that information, to see whether you could add anything to the investigation. I don't understand a lot of the stuff written in here, but I'm pretty certain you will, and more, that with your knowledge of Keitarou, you'll be able to draw some conclusions from it. I know you sensed him in Seventh District the day Tenichi was dumped outside your home."

Izumi's fingers tightened around the paper, and she turned her gaze to the uppermost sheet of notes, scanning her gaze down the columns of complex characters that had been scribbled alongside intricate scientific diagrams.

Kotetsu Tenichi...

Her lips thinned further, and she raised her silver eyes back to the Captain's hazel ones. Slowly and carefully she slid the wad into the folds of her *shihakushou*. Though using the quick sign language she had always relied on to communicate with her brother was pointless here, she knew that Juushirou would understand her gesture as one of acceptance and, as she had expected, a glitter of relief surfaced in his tired eyes.

"Thank you," he said quietly. "Whatever you find, come and report to me directly, all right? I'll try and understand, even though science isn't my area of ability. If it's to find Keitarou, I'll do whatever I can — and I hope you will too."

Anger flashed in Izumi's eyes at the sound of Keitarou's name, and she nodded her head resolutely, wrapping her arms protectively

around the *shihakushou* as though shielding the documents from outside gazes. Juushirou grinned.

“Yes. On this we agree, clearly,” he reflected. “Sometimes people from different worlds can work together, if the enemy is a common one. I want to get justice for Souja, and prevent other people being hurt. I want to help your brother, too... and I know that you do as well. Keitarou has evaded justice too many times. This time we have to stop him.”

Izumi’s eyes darkened, and she got to her feet, turning to bow solemnly in the direction of the Thirteenth Division Captain. He gestured towards the door, indicating that she was dismissed, and she pushed back the sliding divide, stepping out onto the walkway. Though the air was fresh and clear that day, and there was a certain pleasure in walking in the open air, far from the taint of the Sekkiseki mine, Izumi did not even notice the colour of the sky nor the rippling water beneath the slatted planks over which she walked. Her thoughts were fixed on one thing and one alone — the man who had hurt her brother, and how to make him pay.

So deep in thought was she that she did not hear the footsteps of another heading in her direction, and as she rounded the corner, she collided headfirst with someone, causing them to let out an exclamation of dismay as she tumbled to the floor. The precious documents slipped out from beneath the folds of her uniform, the top pages scattering in the wind, and she opened her eyes wide in alarm, reaching to grab them back up before whoever it was could see them and realise her errand. Inwardly she berated her carelessness — she was not at home now, with Joumei and Hiko watching out for her, but an exiled stray in a land of potential enemies, and the slightest mistake could cost her — and now, she knew, her entire dynasty — existence.

“I’m sorry, Ichimaru-san,” The voice was contrite, and, as she turned to make sure she had recovered all of Juushirou’s tell tale data, she was aware of a hand held out to her, an apologetic look on Ketsui’s features. “I wasn’t looking... are you all right?”

Izumi blinked, momentarily taken off guard by this gesture, then she recovered herself, holding the documents protectively to her chest and accepting his hand primly, allowing him to pull her to her feet. He did so, eying her keenly as though looking for any sign of blood or scrapes, and despite herself she pinkened as his gaze ran casually across the back of her hand, his hold slightly longer than necessary as he ensured she had suffered no damage.

"I'm sorry," he repeated again. "Shikibu-san sent me to bring you breakfast rations, since you're due to be training with me again this morning. She said you were with the Captain, but I thought you'd still be in Ugendou. I didn't expect..." he trailed off, scratching his head awkwardly, and an uncomfortable silence stretched out between them. Izumi gazed at him for a moment, taking in the troubled pale eyes and the wisps of fair hair that framed the young man's face, and she frowned, her own silver eyes narrowing.

Kotetsu Ketsui, brother of Kotetsu Tenichi. Yet they couldn't be more different. Tenichi doesn't even look like an Urahara... but this one...

"Ichimaru-san?" Ketsui's confused voice brought her from her reverie, and she bit her lip, realising that this time it had been she who had been staring. Inwardly she berated herself. What was wrong with her? She was not normally so open or so discomposd... had Juushirou's news about Hiko and Joumei upset her so greatly? But as much as she tried to pretend otherwise, she knew that it had. Since her father's death, Joumei had been both father and brother, protector and guide in all things, and it was only now, having heard of Keitarou's direct attack that she had understood exactly how much danger they were all in. For the Kitsune, life itself was danger, but in that moment, the reality of death had hit Izumi like a ton of bricks.

To her dismay, a tear began to trickle unbidden down her cheek, and she dashed it away, but more fell in its place. The whole of the Kitsune might rest on her shoulders, she told herself furiously, and yet the idea of going forward without Joumei or Hiko around her was terrifying for her young mind to contemplate. They had nurtured her talents but shielded her from the worst of the Kitsune's doomed fate, and now she was miles from a home that had been desecrated, with no idea when — or if — she might ever see her family again.

"Ichimaru... san?" Ketsui looked stricken at the sight of her tears, but Izumi pushed past him, unwilling to let him see her humiliation. She had a job to do, and much as she knew Ketsui meant well, those Urahara eyes had suddenly begun to haunt her, reminding her that Keitarou was only one of many enemies looking to take Kitsune heads.

"Ichimaru-san, please, wait!" Ketsui had acted impulsively, reaching out to grab her by the arm, and as she tried to yank herself free, the top sheet of the data she had received from Juushirou worked itself loose from its fellows once more. It caught the breeze, wafting dangerously towards the edge of the walkway and the koi pond that flowed underneath, and Izumi lunged forward to grab it, but her tiny reach was not enough and it drifted agonisingly past her fingers, descending in almost unbearably slow motion towards the

water's surface.

"Gotit!" Even as Izumi had missed, however, another hand had extended above hers, long and capable fingers closing around the edge of the sheet and pulling it back in.

"Whoops. I creased it. Sorry... let me..." Ketsui trailed off, attempting to smooth out the crumples his hasty grab had left in the sheet of paper, and panicked, Izumi reached to snatch it from his grasp. Before she could, however, Ketsui's brows knitted together, and he raised the sheet, casting Izumi a quizzical look.

"Does Taichou know you have data like this?" he asked softly, holding it just out of her reach, and Izumi, tears forgotten in her sudden burst of indignation, glared at him defiantly.

"Does he?" Ketsui repeated the question. His tones were calm, but something in his eyes told her that he expected an answer and, annoyed by her own reaction, Izumi found herself nodding her head. Ketsui's gaze became thoughtful, and he glanced at the paper once more, before holding it out to her to take. Surprised at his sudden change in demeanour, Izumi accepted the paper warily, putting it back with the others, not taking her eyes off her companion for a moment.

"Did he ask you to look at those?" Ketsui spoke again, and Izumi's lips pressed together, uncertain of how she should respond. At her hesitation, Ketsui sighed, running his fingers through the messy blond hair that reminded the girl so much of her family's Urahara enemies. With that gesture, the aura of calm authority was gone, but Izumi had seen it once, and now understood the a reason why Juushirou had trusted this man with her safety. Her impression of Tenichi had been of an impulsive hothead, guided by his emotions and quick with his sword, but she now saw his brother was another matter.

I thought him indecisive and disorganised, but fairly harmless. Maybe not. Maybe Ketsui is a better name for him than I thought... and I need to be more careful what I do around him.

"I guess you can't answer that," At length, Ketsui broke the silence, unaware that he was now the subject of her observations. "I guess it would be in breach of security if you did, and even if you could, I don't know how to understand your explanation. If Taichou knows about it, I guess that's good enough for me. It's not my business... I shouldn't pry into something that's not to do with me."

Izumi stared at him impassively, waiting for him to step aside and allow her to pass him, but instead he reached into his *obi*, pulling out a

cloth-wrapped parcel and holding it out.

“Your breakfast. Shikibu-san’s orders,” he said matter-of-factly. “If you’re going over science data, your brain will probably need the fuel.”

Izumi took the burden carefully, glancing at him as she slid it into her own *obi*, and Ketsui let out his breath in a rush.

“It’s not my business,” he began slowly, “but in other ways, maybe it is. You came here and Taichou asked me to look after your needs. He didn’t tell me where you came from, or why, but now he’s giving you scientific material, so I guess he knows something that he hasn’t told me. It’s fine... I guess I don’t need to know that much. But what’s written on that paper, I sort of understand bits of what it’s about. I know it has to do with... with Aizen Keitarou, doesn’t it?”

He lowered his voice, speaking the syllables of the exile’s name with trepidation, and Izumi’s eyes darkened in consternation. At her expression, he nodded.

“I thought so,” he said, then, “I want to help you.”

Izumi’s head jerked up, shock and disbelief in her gaze, and Ketsui shot her a rueful glance.

“You probably think I’m just another useless shinigami, who pads around in black and white and who spends too much time playing with swords and not enough time on other things,” he said self-effacingly. “I don’t know what your particular talents are, but clearly Taichou thought having you here would be a good thing and I guess I know that isn’t because of your sword skills. He said you couldn’t go anywhere else, not home and not the Academy, so I suppose Keitarou is a threat to you as well as to everyone else. And, well, I’ve met Keitarou. I’ve met him a lot of times, in fact. He’s my father’s cousin... and because of that, I want to stop him before he causes harm to anyone else.”

Izumi’s head tilted on one side, gauging the young man’s demeanour carefully and analytically. She already knew his family background, but why had he told her? There had been no hesitation, no shame in his voice, just matter-of-fact acceptance, as if those events were as separate as they could be from his current life as a shinigami. They had found Tenichi at Daisuke’s grave, and he had stumbled over answering Joumei’s questions, leaving Izumi unsatisfied with his responses. Yet again, Ketsui was different. Those Urahara eyes, pale and flecked with the faintest shade of green gazed back at her, apparently sincere yet sparking every one of her self-protective

instincts. Was he telling the truth, or was this a trap? Was Ketsui's Urahara blood only skin deep, or...

Oniisama wasn't sure that we could trust Tenichi-dono, and I think it probable that we can't. The likelihood is that Tenichi-dono is guilty of some kind of treachery, even if Seireitei doesn't want to acknowledge it. All the scientific evidence points to collusion between him and Keitarou, and just because it's an unpopular conclusion doesn't make it any less probable. But this one...

She frowned, her earlier grief and panic forgotten as she weighed up her companion.

This one really is different from Tenichi. He looks like an Urahara... but maybe... he's not. Not in all ways.

She glanced down at the bundle in her arms.

And he's seen these, now. I might get into trouble if anyone else knew how careless I was. It's better to keep people close, if you're wary of their motives. Besides, it will be more productive than wasting more time swinging a sword. He has Urahara blood, so who knows? Maybe he'll prove to be smart, and even if not, I'm sure he can lift and carry books from shelves I can't reach.

"Well?" Ketsui eyed her keenly. "Will you let me help you? I don't pretend I've had any kind of scientific training — Father died when I was just a kid and Mother never raised my brother and I with any of that background. I've had no special education, aside from the Academy. Still, they say things are genetic, and maybe I can help. If Taichou wants you to do this, and wants me to keep watch over you, then I'm sure he wouldn't mind if I helped you. In a way we're both in the same position."

He shrugged.

"I don't know why you're in danger from Keitarou, and I won't ask anyone, not even Taichou," he added. "It's your business and I don't need to know. But it seems to me that, if he's behind all these bad things — and people are saying that he is — then he might have had my brother kidnapped as well as having so many people killed. Maybe I'm wrong... maybe I'm overthinking it, but I don't want Ten-nii to get hurt again — he's the only blood kin I have, now."

He frowned, pursing his lips.

"I don't want Keitarou to decide to come after me, either," he admitted. "I've never wanted anything to do with him, or that, or anything subversive. Mother always taught us to think for ourselves and choose our own lives. Well, I chose to be a shinigami, and this is

what I believe in. All the people I care about are here in Seireitei, and Keitarou is a traitor and a murderer. Even if he is my blood kin, that doesn't make what he's done forgivable."

His eyes clouded slightly, just for a brief moment but long enough for Izumi to see the shift in expression.

"Because of him, Father died," he said frankly. "I don't know exactly how, and I don't need to — I just know it was Keitarou's fault. Ten-nii and I had to grow up without him. I'm not angry at him exactly, but I think... I think that he's the kind of person who takes people from those they love. People like Father, and Souja-dono, and I'm sure there have been lots of others. He should be stopped before anyone else can be harmed... so if there's something I can do to help, I'd like to try."

He smiled, and this time Izumi knew that his words were sincere. A tiny smile touched her lips, and she slowly nodded her head. She beckoned with her free hand, raising it to gesture towards the main barracks building, where the small Thirteenth Division library was located, and Ketsui's eyes lit up.

"Thank you," he said sincerely. "I'll follow your lead, Ichimaru-san. Whoever you really are and wherever you're here, if Taichou trusts you, so do I."

Hajime's words were still weighing heavily on his mind.

Tenichi lounged against the outer fence of the Twelfth Division, shielding his eyes from the glare of the sun as he gazed up into the bright blue of the sky above. Though nobody had mentioned the matter to him again, he still cringed inwardly when he thought of how he had shamed himself and his Division in front of the piercing, unforgiving gaze of the Onmitsukidou's Captain, and more, though Hajime had shown him solidarity, the threat of a repeat performance was ever present on the horizon. In the absence of an adjutant, Tenichi knew that only his very busy Captain stood between him and a second interrogation. An interrogation he was quite sure he would not manage to survive intact.

He took a deep breath into his lungs, pulling his gourd from his belt and taking a swig of the cool spring water. That morning, Kikyue had taken the dawn drill and, though her blue eyes were still clouded and subdued, the sight of her on the training ground had boosted the morale of her patrol. Ohara's non-too-subtle attentions to his squad captain had provoked Nakata to make joking remarks about the

courting male bird chasing the female, and, in the company of the other officers, Tenichi had felt his spirits lift. Yet now, after they had been dispersed to their own errands, he had felt the uncertainty inching in on his composure once more.

It was not nice, carrying a secret that could bring his whole world crashing down.

Stifled by the barracks, he had sought Kikyue's permission to leave the division ground and go see his brother and Kikyue had readily given him consent, offering him a weary, out-of-character smile as she had dismissed him.

"You've done enough, I know, to help recently," she had said. "Kitabata and Nakata have both said so, and you've taken on extra duties without being asked. It'll be a problem if you collapse from overwork, so I guess a short break won't hurt. Come back quickly, though. I'm going to send you with Ohara on the afternoon sweep of the rear perimeter, and I want to hear your report before I take mine to Father this evening."

"Yes, ma'am," Tenichi had saluted quickly, somehow discomfited by her praise, and so now, here he was, just across the cobbles from the entrance of his former division. Thirteenth was bathed in bright sunlight, and as he gazed at it, Tenichi wondered what his real reasons had been for coming. Since his encounter with Koku, he had stayed away from Thirteenth, and, though he had told himself that it was due to his heavy workload, he knew that he had avoided it. Absently he put a hand to his chest, pressing his lips together as he tried to understand why he was hesitating. He would be as welcome here as ever, he knew, yet still he faltered. Thirteenth hadn't changed, but, little by little, he knew he had.

Everything has, since Souja-dono died. Even if Kai-dono lets me alone now, I feel as though I've taken a wrong turning and I can't go back.

He sighed, moving towards the gateway over which hung the snowdrop emblem, resting his hand against the thick bamboo support and letting his gaze rove across the nostalgically familiar grounds. The edge of the chamber where he knew Koku was convalescing caught his eye and he frowned, remembering Masaya's comments about the young boy.

Who do I believe? The one I know I can't trust, or the one I thought I could? Kurotsuchi is someone I wanted to kill on sight, and if I saw him now, I'd try again. I know that without a shadow of a doubt. He threatened Ketsui, and threatened me, and I'm not willing to stand for that

any more. But he is right about one thing. He hasn't lied about anything he's told me. Should I believe him about Koku, too?

His lips thinned as he remembered the young boy's discomfort at the mention of the word 'allies'.

"I wish you hadn't ever called us that, but since it's true, I have to honour it as well."

What did that mean? Why not?

Tenichi rubbed his brow pensively.

But Koku did tell me there was another spy, and Kurotsuchi confirmed it, so I suppose I have to believe that's true. And so far, he hasn't created any trouble for me. I don't want to kill him. It's not the same as Kurotsuchi — that was a fight, and I could've won it properly. But I don't want to... killing an injured boy who can't fight back, that's not honourable. And no matter how desperate I've become or how low I've sunk, I've not reached that level yet. So I guess for now... all I can do is trust him, at least as far as keeping his mouth shut about me.

"Tenichi?"

Kirio's voice made him physically jump, and he swung around, seeing his former classmate crossing the cobbles towards him from one of the far side buildings. Her arms were full with *bokken*, and at his surprise, she chuckled, swinging up the weapon she held in her right hand and bopping him playfully on the head.

"What are you doing, spacing out in our entranceway?" she asked playfully. "Did you come visit, and forget your way around?"

"I guess I did," Tenichi forced a smile, pushing the *bokken* away. "I was just thinking how nice the weather was today, that's all. Kikyue-dono gave me a break to come see you people, and since getting that kind of permission is almost once in a lifetime when she's on duty, I didn't wait to ask twice. I realise I have hardly been here at all lately — I thought you might've forgotten my face."

"Not a chance," Kirio snorted. "An ugly mug like that? Who could?"

"You're as warm and friendly as ever," Tenichi bantered back. "In case you care, I've been working to the bone with this duty or that, not to mention fighting invading convicts from the Second who thought they'd come make a mess of Seventh."

"I heard about that," Kirio admitted, shifting the *bokken* into a more manageable hold and nodding her head. "Apparently you destroyed a good six foot or so of Endou-taichou's barrier fence in the attempt — was he cross?"

“No...” Tenichi pursed his lips, “though I think he’d have been happier if the guy hadn’t got away. He’s slippery, though... hard to get a hold of.”

“I know. We dealt with him once,” Kirio sighed, and Tenichi was aware of the lines of weariness on his friend’s brow. “Anyhow, come on in. We’re quite busy here too, so you might get put to work — but it’ll be worth it, to see old friends, right?”

“Hey, I’m not your unpaid labour!” Tenichi protested good-naturedly, and Kirio laughed.

“I suppose not, but I can try,” she teased. “I do outrank you, Kotetsu-hasseki — in case you’d forgotten.”

“Considering how big your head seems to have got, I’m surprised you still fit through doorways,” Tenichi returned neatly. “But in seriousness, Kirio, you look tired. Taichou’s not working you too hard?”

“Mm, no,” Kirio shook her head. “Just I have to fit my normal duties and patrols around watching over Koku. You know, our waif and stray? His wounds are a lot better, but we’re not supposed to leave him alone.”

“Why not?” Tenichi was on his guard, and Kirio grimaced.

“Apparently Second’s escapee paid us a visit too, the other night — at least, that’s the rumour,” she said wearily. “I don’t know if it’s true, and Koku won’t speak to me about it — he’s too busy being rude to me at every opportunity, and honestly, I don’t know that I want to know. Just, he’s not been quite the same since then — more subdued, and pale.. Edogawa-san has had to treat him a lot more, and I think he’s pretty scared. The prisoner escaped, and nobody’s found any trace of him — but you’d know that, since it was a general report. We’re not to let Koku be unsupervised, in case he came back.”

So Kurotsuchi really did intend to kill Koku. Tenichi’s eyes narrowed for a moment, then he nodded.

“In that case, if I can help out, I will,” he decided. “I can’t stay too long, but I can talk and move stuff, if that’s what it takes to spend time with you. And watching over a sick kid isn’t really my forte.”

“Tsunemori-san’s with him now, and will be till mealtime,” Kirio assured him with a grin. “I’m only sorting weaponry for afternoon drill, but you can help if you like. Normally I’d get Ketsui to, but he’s training Ichimaru-san this morning, and so hared off after breakfast.”

“Ketsui’s busy?” Tenichi could not keep the disappointment from his voice, and Kirio nodded.

“Taichou gave him a special duty,” she agreed. “I think he’s decided it’s time Ketsui did some proper training — in any case, he’s been assigned mentorship of one of the recruits. She’s a rum little thing, but he’s persevering at it.”

“Well, he wasn’t called Ketsui for nothing,” Tenichi observed ruefully. “I guess I’ll have to make do with you, then, won’t I?”

“And you talk about my warmth and affection,” Kirio rolled her eyes, thrusting her burden of *bokken* at him. “Here. Take these then, and follow me. Since you’re a foreign visitor to our territory, I need to keep a close eye on your movements.”

“Being ranked up really has gone to your head, you know,” as Tenichi followed his old friend across the grounds towards the training arena, he cast her a grin, and Kirio glanced back, shrugging her shoulders.

“Duty is as duty does,” she said airily. “Besides, you look like you need a change of pace, too. Seventh must be pretty heavy right now, mood-wise. It doesn’t hurt to come here and be roundly abused by me once in a while. It’s what friends are for.”

“Yeah, I suppose I can’t argue with that,” Tenichi acknowledged. “Where are we putting these? In the rack, as always?”

“That’ll do,” Kirio watched him deposit his burden, then she frowned. “Tenichi-kun?”

“Yes?” Tenichi dusted his hands off, meeting her gaze quizzically.

“You called Ukitake-taichou ‘Taichou’ just now. You’re not regretting leaving Thirteenth, are you?”

Tenichi hesitated for a moment, then, slowly, he shook his head.

“No,” he said slowly. “Thirteenth is... my home-from-home. It’s probably... the place in Seireitei I love the most. But... I think... as I am now, it’s not the best place for me to be. For you, for Ketsui and for my own benefit, I needed to move. Seventh... seems like where I belong now. So long as I can come visit people here from time to time, I don’t regret transferring. Things have been heavy lately, true enough, but that’s all.”

He offered a faint smile.

“Ukitake-taichou was my first Captain, so in some ways he’s still

just Taichou to me,” he added. “Don’t let Endou-taichou know I said that, though. He’s not the kind of person you want to get angry.”

“I guess not,” Kirio reflected. “All right. If that’s how you feel, I won’t ask again. You know you’re always welcome to come here, so that’s fine. Taichou wouldn’t mind at all, and Ketsui and I like to see you, as well as the others. So when Seventh is a bit calmer, come by more, all right?”

Tenichi opened his mouth to repond, but as he did so, he caught sight of a familiar figure crossing the opposite side of the Division barracks, making his way around the far side from Ugendou towards the main building. About to hail his brother with a greeting, the words froze in his throat as he recognised the young girl in Ketsui’s slipstream, her long silver hair glinting in the bright sunlight.

Izumi?

“Tenichi?” Concerned by his lack of response, Kirio gave him a nudge, and he turned, glancing at her blankly.

“Mm?”

“You suddenly spaced out on me,” Kirio frowned. “What’s up? What’s wrong?”

“Kirio, who’s that with Ketsui?” Somehow Tenichi managed to moderate his tones, suppressing the waves of panic and anger that competed for dominance in his mind.

“Ketsui?” Kirio was startled, then, as Tenichi pointed, she grinned.

“I told you, didn’t I? He’s mentoring our latest recruit. Ichimaru Izumi-san. She got dumped into all this chaos with very little warning, and so Taichou thought it best someone looked after her specifically.”

Tenichi frowned.

“She just transferred in? Even though it’s the wrong time of year for recruits?”

“Hey, I’m just Sixth Seat. I don’t sign the forms or make the decisions,” Kirio dimpled. “I think it’s good for Ketsui to have some responsibility. It means he worries less about you and your impulsive heroics against would be shadow-assassins, and besides, he can’t lurk back behind you forever. It’s about time he took on a recruit of his own, and well, he’s certainly giving it his full attention.”

“I see,” Tenichi returned his gaze to the pair, his eyes narrowing as he digested Kirio’s words.

A new recruit out of season, conveniently sent to Thirteenth Division at a time when so much is going on. Koku's here, Kurotsuchi's free, and now... this.

He clenched his fists, then,

Does Ukitake-taichou know, then? When I spoke to him the other night, he made it sound as though he'd seen them too — the silver people. He must know she's one of them... but if so... why is she here?

His eyes widened suddenly in alarm.

Is she spying on Ketsui to get to me? Is this Keitarou-san's doing, or is it someone else? Kurotsuchi said that if I wasn't useful, there was always my brother, and now... I don't trust those silver-haired folk, even if Fukutaichou did. The man said his people were cursed, and Souja-dono wound up dead, so maybe its the truth. Kurotsuchi said they had guilt in all of this, and he didn't lie about the other things he told me, so I believe him when he says they're not folk I should put faith in. I know they're part of this whole thing somehow, and not in a good way. Now one of them is here... it can't be a coincidence.

I will have to do something about this, and soon.

Keitarou pushed back the flap of his new makeshift laboratory, gazing out across the uneven terrain of the Spiritless Zone. Since their arrival, there had been a few scraps between the Plus souls already resident here and those he and his family had brought with them but, as it had become clear that the resources were plentiful enough for all of them, the discord had settled into an uneasy kind of harmony, and even those souls who had been spoiled by the shinigami had begun to look towards Keitarou for support and leadership. It was largely thanks to Eiraki, he reflected fondly, and her genuine affection and loyalty towards those who had shielded them during their initial flight, and though it was growing late, he knew she was still abroad in the nearby villages, tending to the scrapes and cuts sustained by two young children following their first foray climbing trees.

This is a nice place. A place we could live in peace for a long time.

Her words echoed across his thoughts, and he frowned, his eyes becoming narrow slits as he reflected on this thought.

Can't we stay here and live like other people, in this place? The water is good, the air is clean and the people have food. We have freedom here. Can't we just leave it be?

He sighed, sinking back against the outer wall of the laboratory. Here was one of the few places in the Rukon where he could actually see the sun set for, although the atmosphere made it appear a pale imitation of its Seireitei incarnation, the sky here was clear and mostly free of cloud. Eiraki was not wrong in her judgement, he knew. The shinigami had built this place, but now, in their absence, it was the perfect place for them to settle.

Only there would be no peaceful residency. Time was short, and growing shorter by the second.

He slid his fingers beneath the folds of his *hakamashita*, pulling Chudokuga free from his dust-stained *obi* and glancing at the blade, tilting it to reflect the blood red rays of the dying sun. The surface of the weapon was hazy, indicating that its principal power was still in the middle of being executed, and Keitarou pursed his lips, running his index finger across the surface of the weapon gently.

One fox still lives, and insists on trying to fight me. Well, I don't suppose I expected anything else, not from a people whose entire existence has been about survival and nothing else for years. It's inconvenient, though. I have other things I need to finish off. My research into Haruya and the others is going well, and I'm almost at a point where I can confidently stabilise their spiritual decay. Yet if there are still foxes roaming free, everything will be for nothing.

“An exiled fox, feral from its kind will cross the woodland path, leaving new scent and causing the river willow to turn towards a new sun. Once met, this bond cannot be broken, for the willow will protect the fox even with its life.”

The words of the prophesy lingered in his mind, as clear now as they had been the first time he had heard them, and he thrust Chudokuga back into his sash with a measure of frustration.

Kohaku is still in danger so long as that one fox survives. I can't be lax about his life, not when so much rests on it. If Kohaku is lost... everything is lost. Which means... I can't return to the Real World tonight like I hoped. Killing the straggler has to take priority. Only when the Kitsune are all dead can I really start to think about fighting the shinigami and bringing their world to ruin.

A faint, bitter smile touched his lips.

And then, Eiraki-chan, maybe we can think about settling down in peace.

I think I've mentioned this before, but although the word *kohakuin* Japanese means 'amber', the kanji that Keitarou's Kohaku is written with is 杞白. 杞 is a pretty obscure character that means "river willow", and the other, 白 means white. Keitarou's children, as I said earlier, are all trees. The homonym to amber was deliberate, though... within amber is often preserved fragments of life from the past. ;).

The prophesy in this chapter is the same as the one that appeared in a much earlier chapter. ;)

45. Katakai

Chapter Forty Four: Katakai

Joumei pulled his body carefully up over a deep rift in the path, manoeuvring around it with his usual deftness before slipping between two tall saplings and up onto the dirt track pathway once more. It was little more than a trail put in place by the wear and tear of feet trekking back and forth, yet it marked a dark line through the vivid green terrain. He did not know where it went, only that when the main road had petered off into a winding strip of mud, he had felt compelled to follow it, allowing himself to be guided simply by the earth path, following where it led.

He didn't know how long he had been walking, nor why he was. The sun had set, risen and begun to set again, yet he had not paid particular attention to the lengths of the shadows, nor whether he was making his journey by the light of the sun or moon. He had been in Inner Seireitei, with Hirata — but since he had left the shinigami's hallowed compound, his memories had become more blurry, and though he tried to figure out where his journey had begun, he came up blank. Nor did he really want to question it. Though there was something lurking at the back of his mind that he was sure he ought to remember, he could not dislodge it from its cosy resting place. And so he walked, one foot in front of the other, taking pleasure simply in the steady rhythm of his steps.

As he reached a stretch of flat land, the path came to an end, and Joumei put his hand up to shelter his gaze from the amber glare of the setting sun, surveying his destination with a detached kind of appreciation. It was peaceful here, he noted approvingly. He had not seen many houses on his walk up here, but from this vantage point he could tell that he was both high up and far from any settlement. There was nobody to disturb him, he reflected. How long had it been since he had felt this way? It seemed as though a heavy burden had been lifted from his shoulders as, at last, he was simply able to follow his own whims. It had been hard, catering to the needs of others. He could not draw their faces to mind, but he felt certain that there had been others, once. Where had they gone? He couldn't remember, but it probably didn't matter. He was here now, and that was all that was important.

He took a few steps across the grass, pausing as he registered how

the land dropped away to reveal a sheer cliff face overhanging a ferocious pit of waves below. Joumei stared at this for a moment, fascinated by his first glimpse of such an expanse of water. So this was the sea. A pleasant salty breeze blew up from the water, teasing his senses and bringing a faint, slightly vacant smile to his face. Slowly and carefully he got down on all fours, moving closer to the edge and squatting down on the grass so that he could get a better view of what lay below.

The grey water swirled beneath, crashing and breaking against the rocks with a spray of whiteish foam. The more he stared at it, the more blurred together the impression became, until it was hard to separate one entity from another. The jagged edges of the rocks seemed smooth and welcoming, and he sank down onto the edge of the cliff, his fingers running absently through the blades of grass that surrounded him. It would be so easy, he thought pensively, just to let go. It would be like flying, with the open sea beneath him. He would be like a bird, in the fresh air — no longer cooped up among the dark stone that had sapped life and soul from those he had loved. He was fed up of being cooped up and caged. It was time to be free, to embrace the breeze and the elements and feel the splash of surf against his skin. He inched forward, his legs dangling off the edge of the bank of earth, and his sandal slipped loose, falling almost in slow motion to the waves beneath. He watched impassively as it was swallowed up by the grey swell of water, disappearing into the rapids. It did not resurface, yet Joumei was not concerned. With his bare toes he knocked free the sandal from his other foot, observing it intently as it too dropped like a stone into the sea below. It was a long way down, yet the smooth, swift descent was somehow intoxicating. *I could do that too.*

The thought crossed his mind as naturally as the sea breeze brushed against his skin, and the very air itself seemed to be luring him forward, enticing him into the freefall dive to the waters below. He had never learned to swim, yet he wasn't afraid. The water seemed to be calling to him, welcoming him to plunge into his depths. One quick movement and it would truly be at an end. He would find freedom like none of his kin ever had before... and see worlds they had never even dreamed of. He could... *Stop it!*

From the depths of his consciousness, a faint flicker of self-preservation reared its head, and panic flooded his senses as he realised how close to the brink he had really come. He scrambled backwards in alarm, his fingers gripping onto the fragile blades of grass as though trying to anchor himself to the safety of dry land, and

as his heart began to pulse in his chest, he stared down at the sea, his throat closing and spasming in fright as he realised how treacherous a drop it would have been.

His eyes narrowed, as something dark and stifling shifted through his chest, wrapping itself more tightly around his heart.

Keitarou.

He put a hand to his chest, gripping the fabric of his *hakamashita*. Keitarou's lure tightened once again, tugging and teasing at him to trust the open waves. It was a gentle, enticing sensation, but now Joumei was alert to it, and he knew that there was nothing innocent in these thoughts. Keitarou had found him, and was trying to dispose of him. He had rid himself of Hiko, and now there was only Joumei left to eradicate. He had not been walking aimlessly, but instead into a carefully laid trap. The impulses had been his but not his, for someone else had tugged and pulled at his thoughts, reassembling them into a new and frightening set of commands. They had been intense enough to bring him this far, yet gentle enough to soothe him into disposing of himself without complaint, and he knew that in a few more moments, he might have become hopelessly entangled in the spider's ruthless web.

I won't let you kill me. I'm not as weak as you think.

There was no spoken reply, but something scuttled across the shadows of his thoughts, and Joumei knew his suspicions were right.

I don't care how much you try. I won't kill myself. The Kitsune have faced far greater trials and come through them. Didn't you know? Vermin can't be eradicated in one easy swoop.

Now he was aware of the glittering red eyes of the arachnoid invader, lurking oppressively in the recesses of his mind, and his eyes narrowed, his brow creasing in concentration as he fought against his body's urge to move closer to the edge of the cliff.

That's it. Show yourself, spider. If you want to kill me, you're going to have to exert more power than that.

He let out a gasp, as something tightened suddenly around his heart, sending a stifling pain ricocheting through his entire chest. His lungs seemed to be suddenly on fire, every breath as though inhaling ash, yet despite the searing sensation, he forced himself to sit tight, knowing that the fire was only in his imagination, and that the water below could not save him, only sever him from his life.

I promised Hirata-sama I'd utilise myself in a way that would somehow help. I guess this is where I find out how strong I really am.

You can't fight me forever, Kitsune.

Now Joumei could hear Keitarou's voice, faint but clearly discernable against the rhythm of his palpitating heart.

You can die of fear, or you can drown, or you can suffocate. There are a thousand deaths that Chudokuga's spirit threads can mete out, and most of them are less pleasant than a simple drop into a roaring sea. I suggest you follow my advice and let me choose the easier option. Otherwise I can't guarantee how much suffering you'll go through. I've no intention of giving up until you're dead, which means that this fight continues until you are. And here, your Hirata-sama can't do a thing to protect you from me.

You have that the wrong way around. My life is Hirata-sama's. My people serve him, we don't look to him for protection.

No? Then why run to him with your tail between your legs, whining and yipping like a tamed beast?

You can bait me all you like. It won't work. I know you're there, and so long as I do, you won't take over my thoughts again.

Really?

Really. You might die of old age before you manage to kill me this way.

I suppose we'll see, won't we. I have the time to experiment, and I enjoy it more that way. It gives me some idea of how my power can be used, so if you want to be my guinea pig, be my guest. Just don't think I'll spare you. The Kitsune have to die, so don't think you could beg for mercy.

I wouldn't beg you for anything, least of all my life. It isn't worth the loss of my honour or my pride.

Joumei closed his eyes, forcing his mind away from the despair that suddenly crashed over his every thought, severing himself from the images of his dead kin that Keitarou's web had spun before his gaze. Interspersed among them was the crumpled, bloody body of Souja, and although he knew it was a fabricated, faceless image, rather than a real rendition of the crime, rage flared up in Joumei's heart.

You think that will break me? You think trying to lure me with faked hallucinations of Souja-dono will induce me to give up? You really don't know much about my people, do you?

I know as much as I need to to kill you.

I wonder about that.

Despite his retort, Joumei felt the nerves and tendons in his right arm twitch, reaching out tentatively towards the edge of the cliff, and

he grimaced, grabbing hold of his right wrist in his left hand and pulling it forcibly back against his chest.

You're my puppet, silly boy. Even if you stop the right hand with your left, who will stop your left?

Keitarou's voice was mocking now, but although the muscles in both arms had begun to react, his legs jerking into life as his body struggled to get to his feet, Joumei forced his mind to remain separate.

Before, he had seen the sword. Before, when Keitarou had pushed his power to extremes. Before...

He gritted his teeth, digging his heels into the ground, and as he did so, he felt Keitarou's threads of manipulation tighten yet again, the image of the spectral spider almost fully visible now at the back of his mind. Joumei's lips twitched into a faint, grim smile.

Got you.

Pushing all other thoughts aside, he plunged his consciousness back along the threads Keitarou had locked into his heart and mind, tracing them slowly and painstakingly back towards the spectral spider that signified the puppet-master's presence within his body. There was a sudden jerk of energy as Keitarou realised and tried to pull back, but Joumei was ruthless in his intent, and he threw all caution to the wind, grabbing hold of the spectral spider with his own spiritual energy, and, summoning the last of his strength, he enveloped it, watching as it fragmented and split into its component parts. Keitarou was withdrawing his energy, but he could not pull out every thread quick enough to avoid Joumei's assault, and the Kitsune looped his own ability through his enemy's last strands, picking up stray shards of energy from it as it disintegrated into nothing.

The next minute Keitarou's presence was gone from his mind, and, exhausted, Joumei crumpled to his knees, dropping back onto the ground and staring up at the hazy reds and golds of the twilight sky.

He had escaped, for now, but the battle was not over. He had won this fight, but not the war. The spell had not been broken, for Keitarou could return at any time, yet even so he felt triumphant.

I saw it.

He closed his eyes, revelling in the deep breaths he sucked into weary lungs, then,

If you use your power to the max, Keitarou, I can turn it back on you. To control me, you leave pieces of yourself behind. Puppet threads have to come from somewhere, and this time I was able to follow them to their

source. *It might've only been for a brief instant, but unlike last time, this time I knew where I was looking.*

He opened his eyes, watching a pair of birds wheel around in a circle before heading out to sea. He no longer wanted to fly like them, nor dive deep into the greyish sea.

On the contrary, he had somewhere else he needed to go.

He dragged himself into a sitting position, dusting his body down and examining his arms and legs one by one to make sure they had suffered no permanent damage and would bear his weight. Finding nothing amiss except the absence of his sandals, however, he hauled himself to his feet, staggering a few steps towards a nearby tree trunk as he regained his bearings.

Last time, I saw the sword. It didn't mean much to me, but it seems it was relevant. So this time, I looked for something more. And this time I found something useful... something even I understand the meaning of.

A bitter smile touched his lips.

When you showed me your fake Souja-dono, I understood. From that point on, tracing the thought processes was easy. Your memories, your ideas all opened up to me like a book. Even in pieces, I know what they meant. And more, I know where you are. You and the wench that killed my friend... and that's all I need to know to avenge him.

He stretched his arms over his head.

You shouldn't have picked a fight with a fox, Keitarou. There's a reason we've lived till now, and a reason we'll exist long after you're dealt with. You tried to kill me, but instead you told me something you really should not have done. Now I know you're in the Spiritless Zone. And now I'm going there too.

The assembly hall was already bustling with life as Juushirou made his way along the walkway that led to the Captains' main meeting chamber. Although the sun was still rising in the sky, the dawn summons had been received promptly and with proper seriousness by all and sundry, and Juushirou knew that he was not the only one wanting clarification of the mixed reports from the previous few days. It had been a jumble of information and chaotic happenings, culminating with Joumei's dishevelled appearance within the Seventh Division barracks and his ominous warning about Keitarou's level of power. Things were gaining momentum, yet Juushirou was still at a complete loss as to how best to act. Joumei's testimony was in direct conflict with the Third Division's report of Keitarou's Real World location, yet Juushirou didn't know how to question Nagesu's claim without raising Joumei's name and risking the safety of the remaining

Kitsune. Izumi in particular was his prime concern — the young girl had taken the news about her brother and old friend better than he had expected, but Juushirou was not naive enough to believe that beneath her composed, resolute exterior, her heart wasn't aching. Her home had been violated, her people killed, and whether she would see her brother again was still unknown.

On top of that there was the matter of Koku. Juushirou was certain that the escaped assassin had tried to take the young boy's life, and that the reason probably connected to his apparent ability to see things that nobody else could perceive. Shunsui was probably right, he mused darkly, that Koku had had some kind of interaction with Keitarou at some point — and yet, his instinct to protect the boy had prevented him from interrogating him again. He had clung so pitifully to Juushirou's uniform, sobbing copiously into the rough fabric, and Juushirou knew that he would not last five minutes under Onmitsukidou investigation.

Besides, I don't know what I have. That much hasn't changed. Giving Izumi the data helps in that respect, and Ketsui seems to be keeping a close eye on her, so I'm sure for now she's safe enough. But even though I feel confident I can help Sekime-taichou and Nagesu-sama in that regard, I don't know what to do about Koku. He might... be a quicker, clearer path to finding our target. If he really can see things in places far from here, maybe he could see where Keitarou was, and how he was planning to act. And yet... I remember his tears and his fright, and I can't even ask. I want to pretend what happened didn't. I've avoided speaking to him directly, and I've not said anything to Kirio or Tsunemori except that they should report to me or to Mitsuki if he has any bad dreams. And that's another thing. Mitsuki thinks he's unwell, and I can't refute her diagnosis. It's like this... whatever it is... is sapping away at him. By leaving it, I might be hurting him. But by dealing with it... it's like admitting that the future isn't something we individually decide. If he really did predict Souja's death, it means that everything is already written, and whatever we do, it's futile in the big scheme of things. That means Keitarou might win regardless of our efforts... and I'm not ready to face that possibility yet.

"You're early," A warm hand on his shoulder told him Shunsui had arrived, and he turned to acknowledge his friend. The other Captain was robed in his usual pink *haori*, the white of his Division rank poking out coyly from beneath the folds. His long dark hair was pulled back from his face in a haphazard tail tied with dusty ribbon, as though he had literally scrambled out of bed and wrapped the first thing he could find around his unruly locks. He looked tired, and at his expression, Juushirou arched an eyebrow.

"So are you, which is unusual," he observed. Shunsui nodded.

“Like you, I want to know all the pieces of the problem. Then I can sleep on it,” he said gravely. “Come on. Today isn’t a day to be standing out here gassing. You look tired, and I feel tired, and that’s not a good start to the day. I’m guessing you haven’t made any progress on things your end... and I’ve been working them over in my brain, but I still feel something important is missing. Maybe today will fill that gap.”

“Maybe. If it does, tell me?” Juushirou asked plaintively, as he fell into step with his friend, heading towards the meeting room, and Shunsui nodded.

“Promise,” he agreed. “I’m a bit unnerved that my hunch with the prophesy seems to have panned out, though. Hunches like that... I’d rather they didn’t prove right. And your kid — he still bothers me. I don’t even know why, but something about him does.”

“It’s the whole finality of it,” Juushirou reflected. “The idea that one boy could hold the threads of the universe together in that skinny, fragile body... beggars belief.”

“The threads, huh,” Shunsui’s eyes narrowed, and Juushirou cast him an apprehensive glance.

“Shunsui?”

“No. It’s not there yet,” Shunsui shook his head, frustrated. “Juu, whatever happens in this meeting, what Joumei told us is off limits, isn’t it?”

“Everything involving the Kitsune is,” Juushirou lowered his voice, nodding his head, and Shunsui pursed his lips.

“Then we’ll have to find another way to get across the worries we have,” he said simply. “All right. I know what the weight of the task is now. Let’s go in, and see what kind of state Keitarou left Nagesu-sama in, shall we?”

“Mm,” Juushirou nodded, allowing his friend to lead him inside the high-ceilinged chamber.

Several of the other Captains were already assembled, though not all thirteen had arrived yet, and as they took their places in respectful silence, Juushirou shot a sidelong glance towards the front of the room, taking in the figure of their current leader with a critical, objective eye. For someone who had just encountered a particularly sticky enemy at close quarters, he seemed remarkably composed and unruffled, but Juushirou had worked with the Gotei long enough now to know that Nagesu was not a man who displayed his inner feelings

unnecessarily. Instead, he took in the other man's pallor, and the slight tremble of his hands as he adjusted his spectacles — a new pair — and he knew that the stories had been true. Nagesu had returned alive from the Real World, but had more or less collapsed on re-entry, and as a result this meeting had been delayed until he had recovered his strength enough to stand before them and speak. Juushirou didn't know how much power the Third Division Captain had had to expend to bring him to the edge, but from the fair man's flickering reiatsu, it was clear it had far from recovered from the experience.

I wonder if that was Keitarou's doing, or something else.

Juushirou's eyes narrowed pensively.

Keitarou was unharmed, since he attacked the Kitsune after Nagesu-sama returned from the Real World. Whatever power Nagesu-sama released, it didn't touch Keitarou. So either Keitarou can withstand the Bankai of a Clan Leader unscathed now, or... something else happened there. There has been talk of masked creatures — but I don't know if that's just confusing the story Sekime-taichou told me about her Captain with the present situation, or whether it was real.

"I'm glad so many people have assembled so quickly," Nagesu himself spoke now, meeting Juushirou's gaze and offering him a quick, tired smile. There was a resolve in the pale eyes Juushirou hadn't seen before, and somehow it put the Thirteenth Division Captain on edge.

Whatever it was, it was clearly significant.

"Before we begin the meeting properly, I've received a message from the Academy," Nagesu continued, oblivious of Juushirou's concerns as the dull hum of chatter in the room began to die away. "A messenger has come on behalf of Genryuusai-sama, and I promised we would hear his request and act accordingly. As we're mostly assembled, I think we won't keep him waiting any longer. There are no objections?"

"A messenger?" Yuuichi looked blank, then his eyes widened in apparent surprise, "Wait... *I thought* I saw Tadaoki as I came down from First, but... *he's* come all this way himself? If Genryuusai-sama's sent Tadaoki personally, it must be an important message."

"A very important one, I believe," Nagesu agreed soberly, "following the emergency message Third sent out a few days prior. Well? If there are no objections, I shall summon him within."

There was a general murmur of assent, and Nagesu turned towards the guardsman who stood to attention near the big heavy door, gesturing to him with a flick of his index finger to admit the visitor entrance.

The man scrambled to obey the command and, as the divide slid open, a slender figure stepped into the small chamber, bowing solemnly before the assembled Captains before standing erect and straight before them. He was tall, and built on the lean side, though his gently suppressed reiatsu suggested his narrow frame hid a deceptive amount of strength and purpose. A shock of ash fair hair just long enough to cover his brow in the slightest of waves crowned a thin, well-defined face, high cheekbones giving him an air of austerity and officiousness which was shattered the moment one saw the glitter of humour and life in the bright, honey-coloured eyes. He was robed smartly but simply in the clothing of an Academy instructor, a white manteau covering his shoulders the only deviation from the regulation black, and, as he drew close to Nagesu's position, he bowed again, raising his gaze to meet the head of the Urahara's solemn eyes. They were almost equal, Juushirou realised with a jolt, the newcomer matching Nagesu for leanness, height and dignity almost exactly.

Something in his bearing told the District Captain that he was neither phased nor inexperienced in such a hallowed setting, and Juushirou dug through his memories, recalling that this individual who Yuuichi had hailed so familiarly as '*Tadaoki*' was Sasakibe Choujirou Tadaoki, Head of Sakusen at Genryuusai's Spirit Academy for the previous decade. Despite his modest clothing and polite demeanour, he was a figure of considerable influence in his own right, and a distant kinsman of the man who served as Shunsui's brother's right hand man, although Juushirou guessed that, unlike Yasuhiro, Tadaoki was from the main line of the family and thus wore the manteau signifying his higher born status. The Sasakibe were not one of the Eight Clans, yet they were highly respected as a warrior family across the Eight Districts, and though Juushirou had never met the man till now, he knew him by reputation. Tadaoki had been in Genryuusai's service longer than most in the Gotei either knew or remembered, and, ten years earlier, had been called from his position governing Genryuusai's private retinue to employ his skills teaching the expanding numbers of gifted young students flooding in the Academy doors. Far from the eighteen students who had made up Juushirou and Shunsui's own year group, in the previous quarter of a century intake had swollen to an average of a hundred new pupils each year, and, as a result Genryuusai had felt the need to draw on more trusted figures to help guide them. Tadaoki was not a person who liked the limelight, but the opportunity to play a part in Genryuusai's vision had been too tempting not to accept, and he had very quickly settled into his new role alongside his old mentor.

"I apologise for my intrusion, Nagesu-sama," he spoke properly

now, his words clear, carrying and respectful. “Thank you for allowing me to speak here before you in this manner.”

“Genryuusai-sama sent the missive, and given the Gotei’s great indebtedness to his efforts, we are always willing to listen to his counsel or requests,” Nagesu said solemnly. “Well, Tadaoki-dono? Speak. What message do you bring before us today?”

“I speak on account of the Academy as a whole,” Tadaoki’s features became grave, and he turned to glance around at the Captains. “It is impertinent, but my words are Genryuusai-dono’s, and I would like to ask you to hear them as though he spoke them. On account of the recent events in Inner Seireitei, we have concerns about the safety of our students. Following the message kindly sent to us by Third Division, Genryuusai-dono understands the severity of what has occurred, and in particular, the identity of the enemy involved. He knows that the Academy has come under attack once before, yet he is loath to risk releasing his own *zanpakutou* in such close quarters to our young students. Whilst of course I will offer my services as best I can, I am unsure that my imperfect skills would be adequate against such an opponent, and my colleague, Kazoe Ginji, who is the only other member of current staff in possession of a *zanpakutou* is likewise concerned considering how many young lives we have in our care. I have therefore come to ask the Gotei’s help — in ensuring the Academy is protected during this latest crisis.”

“I am quite sure, Tadaoki-dono, that you are underestimating your skills,” Guren reflected pensively. “Nonetheless, Genryuusai-sama’s request should not be ignored. The Academy has been important for many of our ranked officers, and, indeed, educated three of our Captains. That fact alone proves that the talent it nurtures ought to be protected, and Genryuusai-sama’s *zanpakutou* is... not the kind of weapon to protect the young.”

“Ryuujinjakka,” Juushirou murmured apprehensively, shaking his head. “Guren-sama is right. Sensei taught us that his sword was capable of immolating everything in the surrounding area, and that included lives.”

“Sometimes great power brings with it great weakness,” Shunsui reflected, and Tadaoki nodded gravely.

“Indeed,” he said frankly, “which is why it is preferable not to have to use it. If possible, we would not seek to release our weapons to engage in battle, but the world is not always a convenient place for those who train with swords.”

He smiled, inclining his head in first Shunsui's, and then Juushirou's direction.

"I was not fortunate enough to meet either of you when you were students, as I have only begun to teach Sakusen this past ten years," he added, "but Genryuusai-dono has spoken well of your skills to me, and I trust his judgement. If the Academy can produce Captains and fighters capable of defending the weak, then I believe it is something worth protecting in itself."

"Then we will act to protect it, as Genryuusai-sama suggests," Yuuichi said gruffly. "It's First District's business, and the Yamamoto will take responsibility. You needn't worry, Tadaoki. First Division will dispatch in numbers to answer Genryuusai-sama's request. You will have Akira and I as your back up."

"Yuuichi-dono?" Midori cast her neighbour a look of surprise, and Yuuichi's expression darkened.

"Twenty five or six years ago, men under my command lost their lives or were hurt by the antics of that man," he said blackly. "I won't let him have a second chance, nor put Genryuusai-sama's students at risk. This is First Division's task — I will not accept the involvement of any other Division within my District so long as my men are able to match up to the task."

"Tadaoki-dono?" Nagesu's gaze flitted to the instructor, who turned to bow his head towards Yuuichi.

"Genryuusai-dono will be much relieved," he said honestly. "I shall return and tell him that First Division will bolster our ranks in the case of any danger."

"Has the Academy been threatened, Tadaoki-dono?" Kyouki asked curiously, and Tadaoki shook his head.

"No, but last time the attack came unannounced and, as Yuuichi-sama stated, people were harmed," he said sadly. "Genryuusai-dono does not want a repeat, not when the number of students now is higher than it was then."

"But is one Division adequate?" Juushirou murmured. "We are dealing with Aizen Keitarou, Yuuichi-dono."

"Are you questioning my people's ability, Ukitake?" Yuuichi bristled, and Juushirou sighed, shaking his head.

"No, of course not," he said wearily. "I just wonder whether, given past events..."

“So long as your Third Seated officer is nowhere near the premises, I’m sure we’ll be fine,” Yuuichi’s lips twisted into an unpleasant grimace.

“That’s unfair, Yuuichi-dono,” Shunsui protested. “Naoko-chan was under Keitarou’s possession, and what happened to your squad members was unfortunate but far from being her fault!”

“Carelessness costs lives,” Yuuichi returned, unmoved. “Shikibu’s sword killed my men, regardless of who was in charge of it at the time. Ukitake, I trust that she will not be deployed near the Academy, and as a result, my squad will be able to do their job correctly this time.”

Juushirou’s eyes glittered with anger, but he nodded his head.

“Naoko will be here, with me, doing her duty as she always does,” he said flatly. “Other insinuations are not necessary. The girl suffered more in that event than anyone else, your men included, and I would not put her through it again, under any circumstances.”

“Hrmph,” Yuuichi grunted, and Tadaoki shot Juushirou a pensive look, before turning his attention to Nagesu.

“With your permission, Nagesu-sama, I will withdraw and convey the message,” he said softly, and Nagesu nodded, looking troubled.

“Yes. Do,” he agreed. “Yuuichi-dono will take charge of the Academy, and so will First Division. The decision is made, and we can turn to other things.”

“Yes, sir,” Tadaoki bowed his head deeply, then disappeared into shunpo, and, as the Captains were left once more alone, Anabomi let out a sigh.

“Ukitake, Yuuichi-dono, squabbling among Captains is unseemly, especially when we have someone from outside visiting,” he said reproachfully. “Most significantly, a man known to have the ear of Genryuusai-sama. It was not well done.”

“We are in a pressure cooker situation, tempers fly,” Midori said categorically, before either Captain could respond. “More importantly, we need to discuss our action plan and hear Nagesu-dono’s report in full.”

“We are not all present, yet,” Retsu spoke up softly, though it was clear from the glint of disapproval in her blue eyes as she glanced at Yuuichi that she had not appreciated the remark about Naoko any more than Juushirou had. “Endou-taichou is not here — yet I

understood he was to rejoin us from today?"

This last she directed at Shunsui, who inclined his head in a nod.

"He told J... Ukitake and I both that he would be," he agreed. "Minaichi isn't here, either, though, yet."

"Atsushi-dono isn't coming," Mareiko said softly, and Nagesu looked surprised.

"Not?"

Mareiko shook her head.

"He sent a terse message to Twelfth that I was to inform you of his absence," she said simply. "He said that he would accept whatever orders were handed down, but would not be in attendance himself."

"I see," Yuuichi's expression, which had become annoyed at Anabomi's words, now softened into one of comprehension. "I'd forgotten what day it was. I guess he has other things on his mind."

"Other... things?" Hakubei looked mystified, and Yuuichi nodded.

"Minaichi's a rum soul, and harsh on his men, sometimes," he ruminated, talking as though it were he and not the other Captain who were the senior in age and experience. "Father used to say it too, but in particular I've noticed it myself over the past twenty odd years. Today's the anniversary of his previous adjutant Sakanoue's death. He never attends meetings on those days. I think it makes him angry... either way, he always refuses to attend."

"Anniversary?" Juushirou's gaze flitted to Mareiko, whose own features had become pale and troubled.

"It's true," the fair haired woman nodded her head. "Atsushi-dono probably remembers a good deal more than I do, about that day — I imagine it haunts him more deeply than it could possibly haunt me."

"The loss of Sakanoue and Shougo-dono in service twenty five years ago was a heavy blow for all of us," Nagesu said soberly. "We all deal with losses in our own ways, and Yuuichi-dono is right. Minaichi does not attend meetings on the anniversary of his Vice Captain's death. Since he's made that known through Mareiko, we need not wait for him to appear."

"I had no idea Minaichi had sentiment for his officers, let alone enough to take a day off in memory," Hakubei remarked, and Yuuichi shrugged.

"I asked Father about it once. Apparently Sakanoue was as close to

a son as Minaichi ever had,” he reflected.

“We shouldn’t talk about this any more, however. It’s not relevant to the matter at hand,” Juushirou cast Mareiko another glance, noting keenly how her hands were twisting together beneath the white sleeves of her *haori*, her demeanour apparently calm but her knuckles almost pale enough to match the heavy white cloth that half-concealed them from view. Watching her, he remembered their conversation in Ugendou about the fateful trip to Rukongai, and his heart went out to her. “I am sure Hirata will be here, but he has a lot of things to catch up on himself.”

“Seventh Division have not made application to the Council to appoint a new Vice Captain,” Nagesu reflected. ‘Unless, of course, such an application has come while I was recovering from my trip to the Real World.’ He looked rueful. “I believe I slept a good deal more than I intended, and Shiketsu handled much on his own, not wanting to disturb me more than he thought necessary. I have not yet had a chance to look at anything but the most pressing matters.”

“I don’t think Hirata has thought that far ahead, yet,” Shunsui said wisely.

“Running a division without a Vice Captain is hard work, though,” Hakubei reflected. “We all take advantage of our adjutants a lot more than we probably should — and with his being away at the main house, Hirata-dono’s probably got a bigger workload to catch up with than most.”

“He’ll pull it round,” Midori said with certainty. “Kai’s been to Seventh recently and, despite the loss of an important officer, he says they seem to be functioning at a very... attentive level.”

“And Hirata-dono has a daughter who can inherit the mantle,” Kyouki agreed. “I’ve heard a lot of impressive things about Kikyuehime and her talents. Even the Endou, with all their prejudices, can’t ignore ability when it’s right there staring them in the face.”

“Kikyue is still very young, though,” Juushirou shook his head, “and her brother’s death has upset her badly. I don’t know, Kyouki-sama. I’m not sure it’s so simple as that.”

“Kai believes it will be Kitabata,” Midori said succinctly. “On his recent visit, he had the impression that it was Kitabata keeping things together... but I’ll guess we’ll see.”

“Kitabata Hajime?” Yuuichi raised an eyebrow, and Midori nodded. “He’ll have a struggle, then. I’ve met Kitabata — not a bad officer, but

not particularly high in the Endou. There are probably others of higher blood rank who'll be baying for promotion — it's one thing being subordinate to the Clan Leader's son, but another taking orders from a lower degree."

"I'm pretty sure that's the line of thought Hirata's keen on stamping out of the Endou," Midori reflected. "Otherwise why has he taken on the Kotetsu boy and ranked him over several of his own kin?"

"This is not the focus of our meeting, so we should perhaps move to other, more pressing things," Anabomi suggested, before the debate could become all encompassing, and Nagesu nodded.

"Agreed. We should begin, and Hirata-dono can join us when he is able," he decided with a sigh. "I know you've all had memos from Third via Hell Butterfly about the Real World trip, so there's no need to reiterate the fact my Third Seat and I saw Keitarou there with our own eyes. The question is what to do about it — when, and how."

"The biggest concern is that he was able to move freely," Guren said darkly. "My uncle smashed his body apart, yet he was apparently healed from the encounter."

"He seemed so," Nagesu agreed sadly.

"And he used Kidou?" Midori asked. Nagesu nodded.

"Byakurai," he confirmed. "He didn't make any other hostile move towards me or towards my men — but he wasn't alone, and he came to protect the young... whatever she was which attacked my officers and put Kamitani in need of treatment. He seems to have taken her and used the distraction of the volcano to flee — I used my sword to prevent the eruption, and he didn't take advantage of my concentration to attack me."

"So it was more important to him to get his ally somewhere safe than to take you down," Kyouki pursed her lips.

"I heard a rumour that the girl manifested a Hollow mask?" Guren murmured, and Nagesu lowered his head.

"A mask, but no more," he responded. "It put me in mind of your own account, Guren-sama, about your Lord brother and his affliction."

"There is no doubt Aizen was somehow involved in breaking the seal that led to Seiren's illness," Guren remembered. "It seems possible that he would apply that knowledge to his own experiments."

"If I may..." Anabomi hesitated, then, "I know that there was never any support for this, but Hyakken mentioned it to me following a Vice

Captain's meeting, and I feel it ought to be brought up now. Following Seiren-dono's incapacitation, there were the incidents in Rukongai... the ones that led to the tragic deaths we were discussing earlier. At the time, the official view was that there was no connection between Keitarou and these individuals, and Hyakken said that this view was maintained at the Vice Captain's meeting too, principally by Shirogane-sama. However... can we call this a coincidence, given this new evidence? Should we not be reopening the investigation into the deaths there, in light of Nagesu-dono's testimony?"

"Taichou..." Mareiko's eyes glittered for a moment with unshed tears, and Juushirou saw her close them, struggling to bring her emotions back under control.

"Shougo-dono's death was a tragedy for all of us," Nagesu's gaze had also flitted towards his kinswoman. "I admit, I wondered the same myself, when faced with such an enemy. But... for Keitarou to initiate such an event when injured as he must have been after meeting Kinnya-sama's sword... both Kinnya-sama and Hirata-dono testified that Keitarou was in a severely broken state."

"But he did have my sister with him, Nagesu-sama, and I don't think she can be underestimated in any of this."

Hirata's own words prevented anyone else from answering, and the Captains turned to register their missing member, who bowed his head in apology for his lateness.

"I'm sorry. I had more documents to authorise than I expected, and came as soon as I could."

"We have really just begun discussing the matter of Keitarou's activities," Nagesu gestured for Hirata to take his usual place between Kyouki and Anabomi, offering him a sympathetic smile. "We are all glad to welcome you back among us, Hirata-dono. From your words, it sounds as though you heard some of what we were saying... and your timing is opportune. You can confirm for us the physical condition of my wretched cousin when last you saw him, twenty six years ago."

"Mm," Hirata's expression became shadowed, but he nodded. "He had many broken bones. I should have killed him, because he couldn't escape by himself — but Eiraki appeared, and they managed to disappear into a *Senkaimon*. I've relived that moment enough since my son's death, berating my weakness — it's as vivid in my mind now as it was back then."

"To dig up unpleasant memories is not our intention, Endou-taichou," Retsu said gently, and Hirata shook his head.

“This is all I can do,” he said simply. “Come here, work as a Captain should and help to bring the people to justice in the quickest possible way. Souja would want that, too. Enough mourning. Time for action. Please, don’t mind my feelings, Unohana-taichou. Believe me, I am quite all right.”

“Keitarou drank the *reidoku* when he fled, correct?” Nagesu asked.

“He did,” Hirata’s eyes became slits. “He had no real discernable trace of spirit power before that, but when he drank it, his power flared and he was able to use his sword to open a Gate.”

“Did he walk into the Gate?” Anabomi asked.

“He used some kind of shunpo,” Hirata responded, “but he couldn’t stand up. Even the *reidoku* couldn’t do anything about that.”

“We did see it provide regenerative properties when Seimaru ingested it,” Kyouki glanced at Midori, who nodded.

“He did seem to use it that way, and probably that was a less developed formula than the one Keitarou risked drinking himself,” she agreed. “We don’t know what it might have done. He might have healed quickly or he might not have. He’s apparently made a good recovery, but we don’t know how long that took. The incident in Rukongai might have been his science or it might not. Eiraki-hime might’ve been involved or she might not. Right now we have no proof of it — and I’m more concerned about trapping the current threat rather than digging up past we can’t change.”

“But there was no evidence Keitarou caused the incidents in Rukongai,” Mareiko murmured softly. “He didn’t kill my Captain. The events aren’t the same.”

“We can’t be absolutely certain,” Hakubei frowned, and Mareiko shook her head.

“I believe my Captain,” she said stolidly, “and in Nagesu-sama’s science. There were disparities. Differences. The evidence was wrong, everything was wrong. Taichou said that it looked like the work of an individual who had been planning these outbreaks and incidents for a long time. Maybe they acted just when Keitarou had disappeared, but he thought it would have been the work of several years. We looked at all the data and the timelines when we were preparing to go... to go purge the areas that were worst affected, and... and...”

She swallowed hard, reaching up to brush the tears from her lashes.

“I’m sorry. It was so long ago, I shouldn’t react like this,” she

whispered, her voice trembling slightly. “Taichou plotted a timeline of all the occurrences and some of them clashed with times Keitarou was in other places. Some even occurred before Seiren-dono’s illness... but the witness testimony from Seiren-dono’s case suggested that Keitarou saw this phenomenon for the first time then.”

“Sekime-taichou is correct,” Guren pursed his lips unwillingly. “Keitarou might have been lying, but he did... give the impression that this was a new concept for him. Certainly he claimed not to have known what impact his actions would have on my brother. In fact, he seemed to think it had worked in his favour — far more than he had anticipated it would.”

“But do we really believe in spontaneously occurring Hollow mutations in Rukongai?” Midori said sceptically. “Sekime just said that Shougo-dono thought it was the work of an individual. We never brought anyone to justice for those incidents. If not Keitarou, then who?”

“Does it matter, since the incidents ceased?” Yuuichi demanded. “Eleventh and Twelfth took heavy losses, but their sacrifices took the bite out of the problem and the remainder were swept up and disposed of in the following years. There haven’t been any further eruptions like it, there. Maybe Shougo-dono was wrong... perhaps it was a spontaneous incident that spread like a plague among the souls there and we simply broke the back of the disease by reducing its ability to spread.”

“I am unaware of any disease that would present with such symptoms,” Retsu shook her head. “Seiren-dono was an exception. His was caused by latent spirit power sealed at birth. It was not the kind of condition I would anticipate being heritable or contagious — it was a flaw unique to Seiren-dono himself, and, as we have seen with his children and grandchildren, it has had no long term effects on the family’s line.”

“My investigation agreed with Mareiko’s account,” Nagesu sighed, offering Mareiko an apologetic look. “I had Shougo-dono’s data alongside my own when we reviewed the deaths in action, and I also examined the corpses of one or two damaged souls brought back by rescue squads. There was no evidence of *reidoku* — such as I understand that formula from the times Keitarou has used it — in any of the remains. I’m sorry, Mareiko, to drag up such a horrible recollection — but Shougo-dono’s testimony can only be conveyed here by you, and I’m grateful that you’re willing to do it.”

“That was why I became Captain,” Mareiko said softly. “For my

Captain's sake. This is all I can do now... I couldn't help him in the Rukon, so this is all there is left."

She managed a weak smile.

"Besides, in this case I can help. We didn't decide this was disconnected from Keitarou because we hoped it would be the case, or because we wanted to distance the Urahara from the matter. The truth is, it didn't add up. Had I known, I'd have brought Taichou's notes here with me today, but I remember that the evidence made it unlikely. We considered it carefully, especially because of concerns from the Kuchiki. The evidence was not there."

"But now we have Keitarou using these mutated souls in some capacity?" Kyouki asked.

"It seems so. Maybe he took the inspiration from Seiren-dono, or maybe, if he's been in Rukongai, he learned something there that we didn't," Nagesu replied wearily. "He's a genius. Every clue would shine twice as bright for him as it would for us. Whatever the reasoning, he had a Hollow-masked girl fighting for him. She was definitely involved with him, and hostile to us as a result. And he protected her, preventing me from taking her prisoner, so there was something he didn't want us to discover from her. That or he has a use for her still. She didn't appear stable — a flawed experiment — but more than that it's hard to theorise on without proper lab tests."

"We need to stop him before he can perfect the science, in fact," Guren ruminated, and Nagesu nodded.

"Hence why I called this meeting as soon as I was able," he said grimly.

"I trust you are not in a hurry to return to face Keitarou yourself, Nagesu-sama?" Retsu looked concerned. "You have recovered quite well from your exertions, but your reiatsu is still fluctuating and you appear exhausted. It would be a dangerous undertaking."

"You're not fit?" Kyouki cast Nagesu a sharp glance, and Nagesu grimaced, running thin fingers through messy blond hair.

"I'm tired," he admitted. "I had to release Sekizanha's Bankai and use all my *reiryoku* to stop the volcano and reopen the gate to return to Seireitei. There's no time for proper recuperation, though. This is my cousin, and in part, my battle. We know where he is and we can't wait for him to move to a new location. We need to strike, and I do not wish to be left behind."

"We don't know that he's there for certain," Juushirou spoke up,

aware that both Shunsui and Hirata had sent him surprised glances at his words. “We’ve seen in the past that he can travel between areas. He knows *Senkaimon* more than the rest of us.”

“Do you have evidence to suggest he’s somewhere other than the Real World at present?” Nagesu asked, and Juushirou hesitated, biting his lip as he debated out to answer.

“An unsubstantiated report came to our attention,” It was Shunsui’s smooth tones which broke the silence, and the Eighth Captain offered Nagesu a benign smile. “We don’t have any information as to his current whereabouts, I’m afraid. If we did, we’d report it here — but we already know he’s moved once. For him to move again would not be strange.”

“That’s true,” Hakubei rubbed his chin. “Thing is, Shunsui, if he’s not in the Real World, where is he? Where else is there to go? The World of the Hollows? Can you even get there? Can we? For now all we can do is investigate the leads we have, and we know for certain that he has been in the Real World recently. If he has allies there, we need to find them and stop them — and if he’s experimenting on individuals there...”

“No,” Nagesu shook his head. “The girl wasn’t a Plus Soul. Her aura wasn’t right. I don’t know what it was, but I know what it wasn’t. Which reminds me, Keitarou’s own aura was odd, too. I couldn’t detect him, even when he stood right in front of me. That’s never happened before.”

“Not at all?” Midori looked alarmed, and Nagesu nodded.

“He was making no attempt, as far as I could see, to hide himself from me, being that he stood in plain sight — but no, I couldn’t pick up a hint of his aura. I always have before, but this time I didn’t even sense his Kidou.”

“Is that possible?” Guren demanded. Nagesu shrugged.

“Scientifically, a complete lack of spiritual presence indicates a complete loss in *reiryoku* potential,” he said slowly. “However, there are theories that indicate the exact opposite. People in the Real World don’t sense our presence because their spiritual awareness is far too low to accommodate our frequency, yet we can still impact on them all the same. There are hypotheses that a similar gulf of power is possible between shinigami.”

“You’re saying that Keitarou’s ability has moved to such a level that it’s now beyond a Captain with Bankai to detect it?” Yuuichi looked

horrified.

“That would suggest he was more powerful than Genryuusai-sensei,” Juushirou breathed, alarm glittering in his hazel eyes. “But surely... that kind of spirit power...”

“Before everyone gets scared, I think that’s probably not the case with Keitarou-kun,” Shunsui interjected casually, and everyone turned to glance at him. “Yes, I know, I know not the first thing about scientific theories. But I was in the Rukon and I was there with Shikibu Naoko, who is not a Bankai level Shinigami, nor even ranked at adjutant level, though granted she’d be perfectly capable of assuming such a role if the need arose. My point is that, when she released her sword, she sensed Keitarou’s reiatsu. True, her weapon has a prior acquaintance with Keitarou, but when we were in the heartland of his former camp, I also picked up what was definitely his aura. And, Nagesu-sama, so did you — or rather, Sekizanha — at the Gate you had Naoko-chan investigate. Correct?”

“That’s true,” Nagesu admitted, furrowing his brow in consternation. “In which case...”

“Reidoku enhances natural ability, it doesn’t mutate it into something different from what it already was,” Shunsui said simply. “That’s how I understand it from the descriptions of Seimaru’s behaviour, anyway. Keitarou was always extremely good at concealing his reiatsu and cloaking himself with *Kyokkou* and other similar spells. I would guess that, if he wanted to suppress all trace of himself, he probably is able to do so.”

“You think the *reidoku* has had a permanent effect on him?” Anabomi asked, and Shunsui lowered his head soberly.

“I think that’s highly likely,” he said, meeting Juushirou’s gaze. “We don’t know for certain what his current status is. I think we should be more alarmed by the potential he does have — remembering the ruthlessness with which he manipulated Endou Shouichi to his death, not to mention his attempts on J... Ukitake’s life and his actions towards Naoko-chan, his ability to control other people can’t be ignored. That is our real danger. We don’t know to what degree he might have perfected this technique, nor whether he is as limited as he once was in terms of only being able to attack one person with his Bankai at a time.”

“It’s possible he’s already been using that ability, given Nagesu-sama’s testimony,” Hakubei suggested. “This Hollow-girl of his might carry his power inside of her.”

“That might be,” Nagesu acknowledged. “She certainly fought as though she didn’t care if she destroyed herself. It reminded me of your testimony in fact, Shunsui-dono — of the fight in the snows between you and Ukitake when you both were students.”

“Mm,” Shunsui’s eyes clouded slightly, and Juushirou frowned, moving to change the subject.

“What if he was using it on someone else?” he hazarded. “From what’s been said about the Rukongai incident and Seiren-sama’s illness, we know that turning Hollow can make you lose your reason and act more aggressively. Keitarou wouldn’t need to use his ability on someone he had already broken — would he? More likely he’d use it in other ways — ways we haven’t considered.”

“Such as?” Nagesu asked, and out of the corner of his eye, Juushirou was aware of Hirata’s anxious flinch. He pressed his lips together for a moment, then,

“I was thinking of the Onmitsukidou,” he said at length. “Suzuki Naoto. The man who has apparently disappeared from existence since he escaped from Second’s cells.”

“He didn’t quite just disappear,” Midori said bitterly. “He killed one prisoner, attacked the Seventh and, if I’m properly informed, made inroads into your own division — although that’s off the record, since you didn’t seem keen to make it an official report, Ukitake.”

“He had left my Division by the time the Onmitsukidou arrived,” Juushirou dismissed this quickly. “Nobody in Thirteenth has been able to clearly identify him, and nobody was hurt. It was my decision as Captain that we had already investigated thoroughly and the Second’s people weren’t needed. Besides, that’s not my point. Midori-sama, Kai and I already discussed once the idea that Suzuki could be a puppet like Onoe. When we encountered him, well, he wasn’t like that. He seemed in his own mind, but there was still something... off about him. One of my officers likened him to someone already dead. Kai told me that he was poisoned, and it’s pretty much for sure that Keitarou had a hand in saving him. Correct?”

“We believe so,” Midori said cautiously.

“Well, when Keitarou first put his spell on me, I was completely able to act of my own accord,” Juushirou said pragmatically. “I couldn’t hear my swords speak, but I didn’t know I was already under his control. Thinking back, I’m sure I only got out of that prison because he intended me to go. What if he’s used the same technique on Suzuki... and the night he escaped from the cell, it was because

Keitarou ‘activated’ him like he activated me... to kill?”

“And what, Keitarou has since reclaimed him?” Yuuichi demanded.

“Either that, or discarded him,” Juushirou nodded. “Maybe that’s how his power has changed. Perhaps, instead of creating zombies like Onoe, or damaging people the way he injured me... perhaps his technique is now so perfected that he can infiltrate someone and utilise them even when they’re within their own wits, and without hurting their spiritual abilities. Suzuki was capable of using Kidou, both to escape the Second and to attack the Seventh.”

“It’s a persuasive hypothesis, even without proof to back it up,” Nagesu admitted. “I didn’t meet this Suzuki, but your explanation makes sense, Ukitake. I suppose in this regard your own experience is critical.”

“Not really,” Juushirou responded, “but what Yuuichi-sama said about Naoko also made me wonder. Keitarou used Naoko’s own power against her, by infiltrating her sword, rather than releasing Chudokuga into her. It made me think that, if he could utilise Naoko like that, in order to control multiple people, maybe he now has ways of using his own *zanpakutou* that are less limited than when he killed Shouichi-sama.”

“You think he can control multiple souls at once?” Kyouki asked sharply, and Juushirou nodded solemnly.

“I think it’s a logical progression, based on how he used Naoko,” he said soberly. “Suzuki may or may not have been one of his puppets... but it doesn’t mean he’s the last or the only one.”

“Naoko-chan said in the Rukon that she thought Keitarou was building an army,” Shunsui rubbed his chin. “In some respects, maybe she’s right. Perhaps that is what he’s doing... only not quite in the way we thought.”

“That means that taking action against him has become top priority,” Nagesu said frankly. “We need to move on the Real World and suppress his movements. We need to capture him as soon as possible.”

“No, we need to kill him,” Midori said bluntly. “That’s the only way to stop this particular criminal from reoffending.”

Nagesu flinched, but sighed, nodding his head.

“Probably,” he agreed. “And any children along with him, too. We can’t risk this continuing into another generation. One of Keitarou’s

children has already taken the life of a Vice Captain and several healing shinigami, and we've had enough reports about the son to suggest he's as dangerous, if not more so. I don't like the kill-on-sight motif, but in this particular instance, I think it must be sanctioned."

"There are enough members of the Council here to sanction such a vote for action, if you wish to call it," Guren pointed out. "Tokutarou-dono is the only absentee — but I can't imagine why he would be opposed to the motion."

"My brother would support anything that involved eradicating a threat like Aizen Keitarou," Shunsui said darkly. "I will speak for him in this regard, Guren-sama. He would want me to. I'll be going to Eighth in person in a day or two to deliver my usual reports on the Squad. I can relay any decisions taken to him then and bring back any concerns on his part on my return — but I'm sure that his will and mine are the same in this."

"I agree with Shunsui," Kyouki nodded. "Tokutarou feels strongly about the danger a man like Keitarou poses. He would not mind the vote being carried in his absence."

"I cannot sanction an order to kill," Retsu said mildly, "without the consent of my Clan. I can, however, support a motion to capture Aizen Keitarou and bring him before full Council justice."

"Even your vote can be overridden, Retsu-sama, if enough of the rest of us pass a motion to kill," Yuuichi said frankly. "I am in favour of destroying the threat, as we have failed to do before."

"Retsu-sama's opinion is duly noted," Nagesu responded. "I shall consider the Kyouraku officially in absentia, though Shunsui-dono, I would be grateful if you reported the results of our discussion to your brother. I have so much to do already... it would be a burden off my mind if you could take on that duty."

"With pleasure," Shunsui nodded. "If there are any issues, I'm sure he'll contact you directly, but I don't see why he would raise a complaint. He's more brutal about these things than me, and I've heard his opinions on the Keitarou subject many times before."

"I'm sure," Nagesu looked weary, but nodded his head. "Then are there any other Council dissenters to the motion suggested?"

There was not a single murmur of a reponse, and Juushirou frowned, his gaze flitting to Hirata. His friend's pale eyes had become clouded, and Juushirou knew he was thinking of his missing sister. He did not object, however, and Nagesu nodded his head slowly.

“Then it is passed,” he said heavily, “by a majority vote of six members from seven present. Keitarou and his children are officially enemies of Seireitei and as such, adjudged outlaws. No punishment will be meted out to any who end their lives, irrespective of rank, and any who knowingly choose to shield them will be brought to answer charges before the Council of Elders.”

“And Eiraki-hime?” Guren asked sharply. “What of the woman who murdered my son?”

“If the measure applies to Keitarou and his offspring, it applies equally to my sister,” Hirata said quietly. “The Endou Clan has no objections to her inclusion.”

“Hirata?” Juushirou saw Shunsui’s gaze flit in the direction of his neighbour, and Hirata shrugged.

“She killed Guren-sama’s son, and remains unpunished,” he said simply. “There is nothing I can do. The Endou intend to maintain positive relations with their neighbours the Kuchiki, and my sister Eiraki is a felon.”

“I would like to request, however, that capture is considered as an option in the case of arraigning suspects whose guilt is less clearly proven,” Retsu said softly. “I do not believe in killing any individual, let alone one who has no recourse to a fair trial. I understand from personal experience the loss of kin at the hands of Keitarou, and whilst my people will not participate in any attempt to kill him, we will not try to prevent any such searches from taking place. His guilt is beyond doubt. In the case of Eiraki-hime and the children, there is the potential issue of coercion or *zanpakutou* manipulation. I would like to request that death is only sought in the absence of any opportunity to take these enemies captive.”

“Including the ‘Kohaku’ Souja-dono talked about, the one that Suzuki told Kai had the power to destroy the whole world?” Midori demanded. “Retsu-sama, with due respect, this is why your healers were taken out in the Spiritless Zone. They lacked the ability to properly defend themselves — they weren’t alert to the danger until it was already upon them. If Suzuki’s testimony is right, then for the good of all of Seireitei, eliminating this Kohaku is as paramount as eliminating Keitarou himself. It matters not whether he has acted against us yet — after Seireitei has been devastated will be too late.”

“If and when a case is proven against him, we shall discuss it further,” Retsu’s tone maintained its usual calm, but Juushirou could see steel in her soft blue eyes. “The testimony is suspect, and we have

no proof that such an enemy even exists. For now, therefore, the subject is academic. We are not at a Council meeting, but a Captain's one, and it is impolite to our fellows to discuss things in such a way without their participation."

"Then we will leave the matter as we have decided, and move on," Nagesu adjusted his spectacles absently. "We were agreeing the deployment of shinigami in pursuit of Keitarou's base."

"So we're going to the Real World?" Shunsui asked. "All of us? Don't you think that's a bit irresponsible, leaving Seireitei unguarded?"

"Well, First are going to the Academy," Nagesu glanced at Yuuichi, who nodded. "That leaves twelve active Divisions. I propose that three or four are dispatched to the Real World en masse to deal with Keitarou. Third will be one of them. The remainder will stay here and ensure normal tasks are completed and Hollows are disposed of. In the unlikely event that we fail, it never hurts to have a back up — but I believe Keitarou is in the Real World, and what he is doing there is of risk to a lot of people. We can't leave it alone."

"I agree," Kyouki said at length. "Fifth will come with you, Nagesu. We don't know what kind of army Keitarou might've amassed. You're not fit enough to take him on alone right now, and I doubt you'll listen if I try to tell you to stop behind, so instead I'll come and back you up. How does that suit?"

"Thank you, Kyouki-sama," Nagesu offered her a grateful smile.

"Sixth will also accompany you," Guren decided. "It seems prudent for Captains with Bankai to attempt to eradicate a illegal shinigami with Bankai of his own, and I have a score with Keitarou for both my son and my brother. Shirogane and I will attend the Real World also."

"I still wonder whether we should really send so many powerful individuals to the Real World..." Shunsui began.

"I agree with Nagesu-sama," Mareiko said softly. "Nagesu-sama, I would volunteer Twelfth's services to the Real World, but... I..."

"Eleventh and Twelfth should remain here," Yuuichi said categorically. "Minaichi's still not right in the head over Sakanoue twenty five years on, and Sekime, your shoulder was wrecked up by those creatures back then too, wasn't it? Seems stupid to me to send Divisions who'd only be in the way."

"Yuuichi-dono, that was harsh," Retsu chided, but Mareiko shook her head, looking relieved.

“No, I agree,” she said honestly. “I’d only get in the way. I’m not sure how I’d feel, faced again with creatures like those who killed my Captain. I’d rather stay behind... if Nagesu-sama doesn’t mind.”

“Eleventh and Twelfth will stay here, then. Yuuichi-dono, if you would inform Minaichi, I’d be grateful,” Nagesu decided. “Ukitake? What about you?”

“I’ll stay here,” Juushirou said frankly. “Someone has to, and Thirteenth isn’t a barracks I can easily leave unattended at the moment. I’d like to remain in Seireitei, just in case a threat chooses to come here.”

“Where Ukitake is, I will be too,” Shunsui added.

“Then we still need one more squad to the Real World,” Nagesu reflected. “I would rather take four, to be on the safe side.”

“I’ll bring some of Second,” Midori suggested. “The Onmitsukidou — in other words, my Vice Captain and my Third Seat, and all officers under their direct command — they’ll remain here, and continue their duties here. But I will bring a deployment of the other Division members and join you in the Real World. That will be three and a half divisions deployed there — and one at the Academy. The rest will remain here, plus the Onmitsukidou. That seems satisfactory — don’t you think?”

Nagesu pursed his lips, then nodded.

“We should begin preparations immediately,” he decided. “Third, Fifth, Sixth and Second will leave for the Real World a week from now. First will head to the Academy at the same time. All other Seireitei duties will be left to the eight Divisions remaining behind. Is everyone clear and settled on this action plan?”

There were moments of assent, though Juushirou cast Shunsui a troubled look across the chamber, and Shunsui shrugged.

“Then it is passed,” Nagesu’s voice cut through the air once more. “We will gather again in one week to dispatch forces to apprehend and remove the threat that is Aizen Keitarou — by whatever means necessary. Meeting is hereby dismissed.”

The *Senkaimon* was definitely somewhere in this area.

Joumei stepped carefully over the thick leaves of a low sprawling plant, avoiding the curl of a tree root and pushing back the lower branches of a flourishing laurel tree, plunging deeper into the heart of

the forest that had surrounded his home for as long as he could remember. Though there had been no logical reason for it, he had skirted a wide berth around the black hole that once had led to the heart of his people's lair. Like a wild animal avoiding the site of a previous disaster on instinct, Joumei's feral wits were alert and twitching as he probed through the woodland patch, trying not to remember the decaying bodies that lay beneath his feet.

It was not a proper burial, but, until he had completed his aim, he dared not risk returning to the den. Keitarou had proven that he could control Joumei's body even in the deepest depths of the Sekkiseki barrier, and to hide there would only put the Kitsune himself at a physical disadvantage. Out in the open air, Keitarou's lure would be more effectively cast, but the longer he spent above ground, the stronger Joumei had felt his own spirit power becoming. It had taken less than twenty four hours to rid his system of the effects of the Sekkiseki, the last lingering sluggishness pushed aside by the warm evening air, and he allowed a rueful smile to touch his lips, gazing up at the bright specks of light that littered the night sky through the thick foliage.

Foxes hunt at night. Keitarou called us animals. I wonder if he knows how right his judgement is. We preserve and protect our pride, but really we're no better than wild beasts scurrying to shelter in holes beneath the earth. I don't want that for my people any more. We've hidden long enough — but if even the hiding place isn't safe, well, it's time to adapt and move on. Hiko, Izumi and I have worked towards that end for a long time. Perhaps now it will come to fruition.

He licked his finger, holding it up to the breeze to test the direction it was coming from, then slipped downwind, automatically moving from shady patch to moonlit silhouette as he tried to leave as few traces of his presence as possible. There was nobody physically following him, but Keitarou was not his only potential enemy, and he did not have either the time or the will to tangle with those who might mistake him for an intruder.

I asked Hirata-sama to dissolve his protection of us, and any connection to the Kitsune. In a way, though, that died with Souja-dono. He was the link that bound us together, since Father died. We none of us imagined a world like this... who knew how important one person's life could be? I suppose the old adage is true. It's when something is lost that you understand it worth.

He frowned, remembering Hiko's frantic, blood-stained body and the crash of stone and dust as the ceiling of the underground chamber had come tumbling down around him.

There's only Izumi left now. At the very least, I have to make sure she lives

through this — whatever happens to me after tonight.

He paused at a particularly thick patch of green, running his hands lightly over the leaves. They had been disturbed recently, and as he pushed them aside, a slab of stone became visible, the crudely carved character for 'friend' scrawled across its surface. Old and mildewed, swathed in plant matter, this was the final resting place of Keitarou's cousin Daisuke, and Joumei squatted down beside it for a moment, resting his palm against the damp surface.

Daisuke-sama.

He let out a sigh, absently brushing his skin against the stone.
I never met you, but Father used to talk about you. How you used to come here, every spring without fail. How you'd bring us news and supplies, and speak with Father about important things before disappearing back into the mists again. Thanks to you, this area remained safe during the purges of Endou Shouichi and Endou Seimaru. Thanks to your messages, we knew when to hide beneath the earth, avoiding the hunts for exiled Urahara. This area remained peaceful and is still peaceful even now. I'm glad you're buried here. You protected this place, and so we protected your place of rest. At least, till now.

He wrapped his arms around his knees, contemplating.

He had been very young, the first time his father had brought him here. Confused and a little rebellious, Joumei had trailed behind Shunmei's larger steps, almost falling headlong into a plot of ferns along the way. Shunmei had hauled him up with a grin, lifting him over a particularly nasty tree root, and then they had been there, at the grave itself. It had not looked like much, and Joumei had asked his father bluntly what the point was of coming to the burial place of someone forgotten by the world. Shunmei had admonished him then, tapping a finger against his nose and shaking his head.

"Because Daisuke-sama existed, so now do we," he had said gravely. "Understand this, Joumei-kun. Not all Urahara are our enemies. Some are our friends, and loyal and steadfast ones at that."

Joumei remembered his confusion, gazing up at his father with startled eyes and gripping on to the long, stone-calloused fingers.

"But everyone hates us. We betrayed them," he had whispered. "Kaa-sama said so. We shouldn't ever go above ground alone, because if we do, people will come to punish us."

"Our history is a chequered one, and one day you'll understand all of it, because one day the burden will be yours," Shunmei had told him simply, ruffling his fingers through Joumei's silvery hair. "For

now, it's enough to know that this man was our kin, and not our enemy — and because he lived, we survived the purge. Be grateful for his existence, and honour his memory. Even if it isn't a grand tomb or memorial, it is at peace and a pleasant place."

"So it is," Joumei spoke out loud now, getting to his feet and brushing the leaf litter from his hands. "Now I begin to realise exactly how dangerous your life must have been, Daisuke-sama. You were Keitarou's ally and friend, yet chose to protect us without his knowledge. You died in his place, a martyr to his cause, yet you took our secret with you to your grave... and now, because of you, I can take action against Keitarou and his assassin daughter. The world moves in a funny way sometimes. Father said you considered us the same as you. I won't apologise for disagreeing — Keitarou has always been our enemy, and even if it upsets your ghost, I don't intend on turning back."

He glanced at his fingers, then spread out his hands, closing his eyes as he extended his senses to scan the surrounding area for traces of the *Senkaimon*. They were still there, fleeting but compromised, and Joumei frowned, moving towards them and running his fingers against the tattered edges of the gate.

Someone tampered with this, and now it won't open, at least, not safely. Well, I didn't count on it being a safe transition, anyway. The Gotei have almost certainly given up on activating it, and I don't blame them. It's very unstable... opening it once might make it implode on itself and swallow up whatever happens to be inside. That is, if it hasn't already collapsed in on itself... but I'll have to take the risk.

He flexed his fingers, thrusting them out against the expanse of space where he knew the Gate had originally been.

I guess the Gotei learned their Senkaimon technology from Keitarou, but it's originally a Urahara skill. Doubtless Keitsune-sama worked hard on its development, but he wasn't the only one. Before everything went wrong, my ancestors were also heavily involved in Senkaimon research. And more, in the time since we've lived in exile, we've perfected ways of opening and closing Gates in manners that allow us quick escape from one part of Soul Society to another. De-activated experimental Gates are all over Seireitei, and thanks to them I've managed to relocate most of the surviving Kitsune to safer pastures — but right now I need all my focus and concentration to open this gate... and go to Rukongai for myself.

As he had anticipated, the spiritual framework inside the Rukon gate was unstable, tendrils of malevolent black energy snaking up from the floor and out from the walls like tongues of acrid smoke.

They brushed against the edges of his clothing, leaving singe marks against the worn fabric as they reacted with the Sekkiseki dust that still lingered against his robes, and Joumei skirted around them as best he could, leaping deftly over a chasm that had begun to rip its way through the tunnel and quickening his pace towards the far side of the gate. This was only an internal passageway, built to facilitate movement between parts of Soul Society during an earlier experimental age, but, though it lacked the instability of the Dangai that parted this plane from the Real World, Joumei was educated enough to know that disappearing into a tear in the passage could be the same thing as dropping into eternal oblivion. The tunnel would probably not take him back, he reflected grimly, should he manage to survive the encounter with Keitarou and his kin. But there was no guarantee that he would walk away from the fight, and besides, such things as escape passages were an easy thing for foxes to find.

About three quarters of the way through the tunnel, he spread his hands, thrusting the palm of his left fist against the wall of the tunnel with deliberate intent. It burned and sizzled against his skin, but he ignored the sensation, forcing his own magic to override the built in coordinates of the gate. It was a skill which his father had taught him, and his grandfather before that, to divert a gate to a different exit in times of pursuit. It was simply one of the many survival techniques the Kitsune had employed to remain alive, but Joumei knew that, in comparison to his ancestors, his life had been relatively free from trouble.

Daisuke-sama helped, but it was when Misashi-sama got involved with shielding us after Daisuke-sama died that things really began to stabilise. We began to believe we could survive, instead of waiting to be killed every time we broke the surface.

Joumei gritted his teeth, pressing the palm of his other hand alongside the other and closing his eyes as he fought to warp the tunnel's direction without splitting it.

Because of that, maybe, I'm a weak, failed figure trailing in the shadow of those gone before me. I said I've been preparing for Keitarou's attack, but really, I was caught unawares. I knew it was coming, yet still lost lives. Father would never have been so careless, nor Grandfather before him. And now I'll put my life on the line to avenge a friend, but in the past, would my predecessors have done the same? Would they have not closeted themselves away in the shadows and let the world turn by without getting involved?

He opened his eyes, as he felt the judder that indicated his effort had worked, and he sighed, removing his hands and glancing at the

surface burns that now patched across his calloused skin.

I was friends with Souja-dono, and that makes all the difference. Father encouraged alliance with Hirata-sama, but with Souja-dono and I, it was different. We grew up together. We were cubs from different litters... birds from different nests... but running through the forest, climbing trees and playing at soldiers, those things disappeared. We were the same, and we played like we were. I was an exile, he was a future lord — but we were truly friends, and that's what hurts the most. I put both my closest friends in mortal danger, and both of them paid for it with their lives. I've failed both as a Kitsune and as a vassal of the Endou-ke. I can't even protect my own sister... I have to leave that to the shinigami.

He took a deep breath into his lungs, watching as the air before him slowly parted to reveal glimmers of light, the first rays of moonlight penetrating the blackness that had enshrouded him.

Unfortunately those aren't Keitarou's thoughts, but mine. Whether he seeks to kill me or not, I already know I've failed in almost every single objective. Only, if I'm going to be killed for it, then I'm going to make sure my death is useful where my life has not been. And that begins here, in the hunting ground of my enemy.

He already knew that the girl who had killed Souja had been entirely lacking in reiatsu, and so although the coast appeared to be clear, he stepped out of the gate cautiously, sniffing the air for anything that seemed out of place. He had landed in the midst of a grassy meadow, broken up in the middle by an elderly tree whose roots were covered with clusters of small white daisies, and above it all hung the white disc of the moon, its glow bright enough to illuminate the surroundings in its clear silver haze. It was a peaceful scene, but Joumei knew that his entrance would not have gone undetected. Keitarou would have sensed his coming, and prepared for it accordingly, and so the open space was a curse rather than a blessing.

Foxes hide in shadow, but this place has no real shadow, not with the moon so bright and clear. The tree is the only place to hide... which means that I won't be doing much hiding there. They'll expect me to do that — but even if I drop low, this grass isn't long enough to conceal me from sight. I can suppress my reiatsu, but so long as Keitarou is inside of me, I might as well not bother.

His eyes narrowed for a moment, then he let out his breath in a rush of resignation.

Well, if I can't hide, I might as well try the opposite technique. I'll tell them that I'm here, and see what their response is.

“You have more nerve than I thought,”

The voice, soft and even, echoed out of the air and Joumei flinched, half-sure that Keitarou had made connection with his thoughts once more. There was a chuckle, then the faintest flicker of reiatsu, and the scientist materialised before him on the grass, a look of amusement and derision on his clever features.

“I wonder about your strategy, though,” he said softly, his muddy eyes glittering coldly. “Coming into the heart of my lair — what have you proven? You’ve found me — but so what? Did I bring you here to me? You can’t be sure if I did or didn’t. It would certainly be easier to kill you here, away from the protection of the shinigami... maybe this whole thing has been a lure to bring you to the Spiritless Zone.”

“If it was, it worked to my benefit, because I wanted to come here,” Joumei took a step back, his words stiff. “I told you that you wouldn’t make me kill myself. You can’t destroy a Kitsune that easily. You want me, you’ll have to kill me yourself. But I think you ought to know... that killing me won’t stop anything at all. It won’t change anything. Nobody will cry. Nobody will care. And the fight will go on exactly as it did before.”

“On the contrary,” Keitarou’s eyes narrowed to near slits. “Eradicate the Kitsune and I eradicate one big problem in my path. You’re right if you think nobody will mourn you, but your existence is enough of a nuisance to me to make me take action against you. You, and all of your kind. With your coming here, I can complete the set and move on to the next point of my plan.”

Joumei’s lips twitched into a chilly smile.

“You’re afraid of my people,” he said matter-of-factly. “I felt it, within you, when you tried to make me go over the cliff’s edge. I played your game, and you played mine. It told me enough to bring me here, but also, other things about you. Things from deeper within. The truth about your family, and the real reason you came into our earth and tried to slay us all. I know, and because I know, I don’t care if it costs my life. I’m expendable, because I know things which you don’t about why your plan is flawed.”

“I don’t have time to discuss politics with vermin,” Keitarou’s arm barely seemed to move, but somehow the glittering silver of Chudokuga’s blade was now clasped loosely between the fingers of the scientist’s right hand. “I have your soul right here, in my hand. I can pull your heart out, vessel by vessel, and you would be able to do nothing to stop me.”

His eyes blackened.

“I would like nothing better than to do that,” he murmured, “to avenge the wrong done my father, over a century ago. Or will you claim that your people did not betray him and send him to his death?”

“I don’t deny things which are probably truth,” Joumei’s fingers flickered with Kidou energy, ready to flare a barrier around his body to deflect any attempt by the sword to penetrate his chest. “The past is what it was. The present is now. The future is what you think you can control, but you’re wrong. Even your prophet can’t do that.”

“I control your future, which is all that matters right now,” Keitarou snapped, and Joumei chuckled, shaking his head.

“You already put your Bankai into me, and yet I am moving of my own will,” he said softly. “I found you because you’re inside of me and I can track back into your thoughts just as you can manipulate mine. Your shikai doesn’t work against me — we already proved that. What other weapons do you have at your disposal? I’m not going to kill myself, but I don’t see how you can kill me, either. You don’t know how to fight in the same animal way you made Hiko and I confront each other. You don’t have those skills... which puts you at a disadvantage. I came here knowing that I might die, and I don’t care if I do. Therefore you can’t scare me.”

Before Keitarou could respond, a knife came flying through the air towards them, thudding against the bark of the tall tree and missing Joumei’s ear by a bare inch. Despite himself, Joumei felt his hackles rise, a chill running down his spine as he turned to face the intruder. She was young, maybe younger than Izumi, and slightly built, but killing intent blazed from her aura, and the hatred in the depths of the blue eyes told Joumei that he had found the girl who had killed his friend.

“Get away from my father,” her words were harsh and laced with anger.

“Saki-chan.” Keitarou’s gaze flitted to his daughter. “It’s quite all right. This creature is already under my control... he won’t be able to lay a finger on me. Your skills are not needed here — go back to the others and help your brother with the village supplies.”

“I’m going nowhere,” Sakaki bristled at the dismissal, but held her ground. “I don’t care who he is or where he came from. It’s my job to kill people who intrude on our business. It’s my job to protect you and the village and everything else. Besides, I can kill him. He doesn’t even have a proper weapon — it won’t take long.”

“You killed Souja-dono,” Joumei’s eyes became slits, and Sakaki

snorted derisively.

“I did, and I’d do it again,” she said bluntly. ‘He was an idiot who came to a place he wasn’t wanted — just like you. He tried to fight me, and thought he could beat me, but he failed, and so he died. See,’ she turned to Keitarou triumphantly. “I told you that I’d killed him. I told you there was a corpse! That idiot Koku might’ve taken it away somewhere, but who cares about him and them anyway? The fact is I did my job and killed an intruder, and I’ll kill this one too!”

Her sword was already drawn from the scabbard, and Joumei gazed at her, taking in the resolution in her slender frame.
The weapon is the girl, not the sword.

He frowned, trying to process the dichotomy.
A girl with no reiryoku at all, yet a killing aura enough to put an experienced fighter on his guard. Is this what you faced too, Souja-dono? I don’t know how she took you down, or what base skills she employed, but looking at her, I can believe it for the first time. This girl is a killer. She’s nothing but a killer... and that’s why she’s capable of destroying lives with such ease. It’s not about spirit power or strength, but the base instinct to slaughter those who cross her path. But wait... she said...

He raised his gaze to Keitarou, eying him thoughtfully.

“You haven’t told her?” she asked softly. “Your own daughter, and she doesn’t know? I’m surprised. Even your own kin — you don’t trust them with the truth?”

“Truth?” Keitarou arched an eyebrow, and he moved to rest a hand on Sakaki’s shoulder. “Truth is a subjective word, depending on the person speaking. Truth itself is often a lie, cloaked in better colours. I won’t be lectured on it by the spawn of a family that abetted my Father’s death.”

“Let me kill him, Otousama,” Sakaki’s voice became slightly plaintive, the sullen note of the teenager creeping into her words. “I can, and I’ll gut him good. Koku isn’t here to get in the way this time. I’ll do it. There’s plenty of space here, and he won’t be able to hide from me.”

Keitarou hesitated for a moment, then he released his hold on her shoulder, and Sakaki burst forward, the razor sharp edge of her blade thrust out towards Joumei’s torso as though she intended to slice him open with her very first swing. Joumei jumped back, fumbling at his belt for his own dagger, but Sakaki smashed it out of his hand with the swing of her weapon, bearing down on him with a triumphant glint in her eyes.

“Your friend Souja at least had some will to fight back,” she taunted, as he ducked out of her way. Strands of silver hair fell to the ground, telling him how close he had come to being properly cut, and Sakaki laughed, driving forth once more without even a second of hesitation to draw breath. Joumei dropped to the ground, rolling across the grass and scrabbling for the hilt of his own dagger, only just managing to grasp hold of it in time to push back a decided thrust towards his throat.

“That’s it. Fight me,” Sakaki goaded him, the glitter of the predator bright in her eyes, and Joumei gritted his teeth, using the dusty blade to counter the savage swings. She was still toying with him, yet he could tell that the intent was real, and with a jolt he realised that the Sekkiseki dust that still lingered on his body and his weapon would have no effect on this attacker.

An assailant without spirit power shouldn’t be underestimated. Just because she couldn’t be a shinigami or live in Seireitei doesn’t mean she can’t cause significant harm to those who can. You learned that the hard way, Souja-dono, and now I look like doing so too.

His fingers glittered with Kidou, and he thrust his hand forward, muttering the words for a deflection technique. It glanced off Sakaki’s blade, pushing her back just long enough for him to scramble to his feet, putting a foot or two more space between them as he weighed up his chances.

Kitsune don’t learn to fight like shinigami do. All I learned I learned from playing with Souja-dono... and it’s not enough.

“You fight like him,” Sakaki twitched her sword from right hand to left and back to right, eying him in the same way a hunting hawk would size up a mouse, and Joumei was struck by the resemblance she bore to the Clansfolk he had always served. This realisation unnerved him, and he swallowed hard, understanding anew the root cause of Sakaki’s savagery.

She’s an Endou, but she lacks a way in which to manage it. Hirata-sama’s hawk is legendary, but he gained control over it. Others have been controlled by their spiritual partners, and have become ruthless killers. But this one, it’s all her own. She is the killer. She doesn’t need the sword’s spirit to influence her temperament. It was born into her. She’s the zanpakutou’s desire to hunt in human form... born to kill and maim and nothing else. That’s why she’s such a deadly weapon. And this is a fight to the death, just like yours was, Souja-dono.

Sakaki launched herself at him again, and this time Joumei was ready, the spell already glittering around his fingers as he prepared to thrust her back with some force, but, to his dismay, he felt his arm

forcibly drop down by his side, the burgeoning spell flickering and dissipating into the atmosphere. He glanced up in dismay, seeing the amused smile on Keitarou's features, and cold dread spread through his body as he understood.

You're not going to let me kill your daughter. You'll let her play with me, but if I do anything that looks threatening, you'll stop it before it begins. You're toying with me too. I saw into your thoughts, but you saw a little bit into mine. Fighting like this, it's impossible to keep you out. You know what I'm planning, and you'll intervene. You'll make sure I can't win.

"I told you, Kitsune, your death here suits me fine," As though hearing his thoughts — which he probably had — Keitarou spoke, his smooth, even tones grating against Joumei's nerves. "Sakaki wants to play, so I'll let her play. But I'm not fool enough to let you hurt her. I don't mind by what means you lose your life. I'm sure I told you that I wouldn't stop until you were dead... death by Sakaki's blade suits me just as well."

"He's no competition," Sakaki snorted. "He can't do a thing to hurt me, Tousama. He barely knows how to hold a weapon, and he can't match my swings."

"Well, I don't suppose he was trained by an Onmitsukidou to hold his blade," Keitarou's words were rich with irony. "How the foxes have fallen. I was imagining a deadly enemy... and instead I find a fool who can't even avenge the death of his friend."

Fool? Yes. Probably that's true.

Joumei fought to move his heavy body once more from Sakaki's path, but this time the weapon slashed into his upper left arm, swinging back across to score a matching wound across his upper chest. He yelped, jumping back and guarding his upper body with his good right arm, but Sakaki simply laughed, adjusting the hold of her weapon and using it to hook beneath the dagger Joumei held, sending it flying across the grass a second time.

"This is boring," she mocked. "Souja was much more interesting to fight than you. He at least tried to keep his life. You don't care enough about yours, and it makes it dull."

"Finish it, Saki-chan," Keitarou turned away, gesturing to the bloody Kitsune with a flick of his left hand. "We're wasting time here, and there's more than enough to do."

"Yes, sir!" Sakaki surged forward anew, blade gleaming in the moonlight, and Joumei felt his entire body paralyze, Keitarou's influence seeping into every nook and crevasse, overloading his nerves

and tendons and rooting him to the spot. Sakaki's weapon bore down on him, ready to sever his jugular, and fear lurched in Joumei's heart. *I can't die yet. Souja-dono, I promised I'd avenge you. I came here to do that. I came here, and that means... that means...*

He drew ragged, heavy breaths into his lungs, forcing himself to stay calm.

He feeds off my fear and reads my thoughts because I can't hold them back. I need to focus. I need to... I need to... I need to find his fear. I need to bring that forth, and then...

"If you kill me, it won't protect your visionary!" he exclaimed, forcing the words through rebellious vocal chords as the shadow of Sakaki's weapon began to fall towards him. "If you kill me, others will take my place. You're afraid that a fox will hurt him, but you've misjudged! I'm not the last of my kind — and there are other foxes by the prophet's side!"

As soon as the words had left his lips, he felt the hold over his body slacken, the sudden jolt of release giving him the time to sidestep away from Sakaki's swing, reaching up to grab the blade with his left hand. It sliced through the skin of his palm, but he held it firm anyway, shaking it free from its wielder's startled hold.

"Hey, what are you..."

"I'm not the only fox living in Seireitei, and it's not me you're hunting, nor Hiko," Joumei spoke in low tones, glancing across at Keitarou and seeing the stricken expression cross the muddy brown eyes. "I disbanded my people long before you came to hunt us. I sent them far and wide. They're all over Seireitei, now. You could never possibly track them down. They might even be in the Gotei. Killing me does nothing to save your prophet!"

"Papa?" Sakaki faltered, apparently registering the change in Keitarou's demeanour, and Joumei took advantage of her momentary lapse to thrust his hands forth against her chest, energy glittering from his fingers a third time.

"*Hadou no Sanjuu Ichi. Shakkahou!*" he exclaimed, and, as he felt the burning hot flames of Kidou sear through his scorched fingers, he almost thought he could sense the fragments of Souja's spirit on the wind, watching him and willing him on. The illusion gave him strength, and he redoubled the energy, resolution glittering in his silver eyes.

The flames exploded through Sakaki's upper body, blazing a hole

through her chest and reducing her heart to ashes on the spot. She fell, silent and stunned to the ground, a crumpled heap against the fresh green grass, and Joumei took a step back from his handiwork, taking a deep breath into his lungs to steady himself. The whole area smelt of scorched flesh, his and hers, and in the haze of smoke that now separated them, he raised his gaze to Keitarou's horrified ones.

"A life for a life," he said coldly. "You see, you're not as smart as you think you are. Your daughter is dead because you make stupid decisions and assumptions. This world isn't your world — it's changed and moved on. People have accepted the Kitsune into communities, they've mixed and settled beyond the confines of that dirty, darkened mine. Who knows where they've all gone? Certainly not me."

His eyes narrowed.

"You killed my friend, I killed your daughter, that makes us even," he added. "The future you're so afraid of, its still to come. You can't prevent it — no matter what you do to me."

"Sakaki!"

A sudden flare of energy prevented Keitarou from responding, and Joumei found himself thrust back against the trunk of the tree with a thud, sliding down alongside where Sakaki's original dagger was still embedded.

"Katsura!" Keitarou's composure had apparently been shattered by Sakaki's death, but at the appearance of this fresh burst of energy, he responded, anxiety in his tones as he fought to reassert control. It was not Joumei, though, but the newcomer on the scene that had attracted the scientist's attention, and, at the sudden, oppressive waves of rage-driven reiatsu, the Kitsune leader could not keep the fear from flooding through his own body.

The intruder was older than Sakaki, perhaps Souja's age, with tousled dark hair and blue eyes that had been darkened by thunderclouds of fury. He paused for a moment by the spreadeagled body of the fallen teenager, moving to brush a gentle finger against her cheek, and then he turned, fixing his gaze on Joumei.

"*You* did this?" the words were soft, but there was no keeping the rage from his tones, and Joumei brought his hands together in front of his body in readiness to flare a protective barrier, defiance in his own expression. He nodded.

"She killed someone I cared about," he said flatly. "You can consider me her karma."

“Karma?” The newcomer, who Keitarou had called Katsura, got slowly to his feet, dusting Sakaki’s blood from his fingers, and turning to advance on his opponent. “Then let me introduce you to some karma, too. You killed my sister. You can’t think for a minute that I’ll let that pass.”

“Katsura, stop it,” Keitarou’s words came a surprise to both Joumei and the interloper, who glanced at his father in disbelief.

“You expect me to stand back and let this go?” he demanded.

“There’s a greater danger,” Keitarou’s tones were soft, and Joumei knew that he had read enough from the Kitsune’s own thought processes to know that his words had contained truth. “Killing this one won’t destroy the threat, and unless we act... unless we do...”

“Sakaki is my sister,” Katsura’s words were low-spoken. ‘If I don’t give her justice, what other justice is there for her? Do you think I’m just going to let this one escape, after doing that,’ he thrust his hand out at the charred corpse, “to a child?”

“A child who murdered innocent people!” Joumei spat back, using the embedded dagger to pull his aching body to his feet. Katsura’s reiatsu was oppressive and intimidating, but despite it, the man’s words had sparked his temper. “A child who killed healers, and who killed a man who would never have raised a weapon to a girl under normal circumstances? Your sister is dead because of *things she did!*”

“And you’ll die for the things you’ve done,” Katsura’s eyes were ice cold.

“Katsura, I’ve told you once!” Keitarou’s voice was impatient, but Katsura shook his head, not taking his gaze off Joumei for an instant.

“I’ll avenge Sakaki,” he said blackly. “You were the one who told me that a big brother protects his siblings.”

“If you make another move, I’ll use Kidou and pull you back by force,” Keitarou’s words were even, and despite himself, Katsura faltered.

“Otousama?”

“Let it go,” Keitarou spoke quietly.

“But!”

Joumei did not wait to hear any more of the dispute. Using the break in the reiatsu pressure, he slipped into shunpo, forcing his heavy, weary body through the Spiritless Zone atmosphere until he

was sure he was far from the field and it's grisly contents. Keitarou's judgement had surprised him, but deep down he understood its rationale.

He knew I told him the truth. And now, having his power inside of me... he thinks he can use it to find the real threat. Which means...

He glanced at his hands, then,
I shall go back to Seireitei, and hand myself in for the vigilante murder of a suspect, as well as the illegal manipulation of a Senkaimon to the Spiritless Zone. I will tell Hirata-sama everything, and then I will submit myself to execution. I will not see my sister or any other Kitsune again. I will not give him what he wants... but while I have life, I shall use it as wisely as I can. Even if it's just a brief respite... I have to do what I can.

"Why did you stop me!"

Back in the field, Katsura wheeled on his father, distress and frustration in his blue eyes. "He killed Sakaki! He hurt your daughter! Why would you let him go unscathed?"

"He's not unscathed," Keitarou held up Chudokuga, tilting it slightly so that the moonlight caught off the silver blade. "My Bankai lurks within him. I can monitor him, and Katsura, right now we need that source of information. I've learned something new, and it's changed things. I need him alive."

"And what of Saki-chan?" Tears glittered on Katsura's lashes, and he dropped down at his sister's side, brushing the waves of dark hair from her face and gently closing her eyes. "What about my sister, Otousama? Are you just discarding her, after all she's done for you? For all of us?"

"Your sister's foolish acts led to this," Keitarou sighed, replacing his weapon into his *obi* and rubbing his brow as though he could physically smooth out the wrinkle lines that crossed his brow. "Don't argue with me, Katsura. There are losses and gains in war, and Sakaki acquitted herself as a warrior should. If you truly want to avenge her, you have to stop focusing on the individual problems and settle on the bigger picture. We've taken no losses till now... Sakaki is the first, and I should like to make her the last."

"And what of Kurotsuchi?" Katsura demanded, slipping his fingers around his dead sister's and squeezing her hand loosely. "What of Koku, who's disappeared without a trace? What of them, Otousama? I never thought you'd discard Koku, of all people, and..."

"Kurotsuchi is probably dead," Keitarou admitted, "but his loss is

nothing to us. He had already exceeded his usefulness, and garnered too much interest from the Gotei. You told me that yourself, and you were right.”

He glanced at Sakaki’s body, then sighed again.

“Her too,” he added. “The Gotei knew of her by name and sight. The shinigami she killed got back there alive. He gave them enough for that silver-haired fool to come here and find her. I told you once before that mistakes made could cost us all dear. Sakaki paid for that with her life. You were luckier — but you can’t say you’ve made no errors so far.”

“Sakaki’s life isn’t just a piece in a battle plan,” Katsura objected, getting to his feet and dusting down his clothing. “I won’t stand for it, Otousama. I don’t care what she did — she was my sister. There’s only us to find justice for her — who else will? She’s fought for you the whole way, and now... if you won’t avenge her, then I will. I’ll find that silver-haired man and I’ll slit his throat.”

“And if doing so resulted in your death?” Keitarou demanded. “He’ll go to Seireitei. I’ve picked up on that from his thoughts — he’s heading in search of a *Senkaimon* and he’ll go back to report to the Endou. If you follow him, it will be the end for you. You won’t have a place to come back to — I won’t take you back, if you choose to defy my instructions. Stay here and help your mother prepare Sakaki for burial. It’s seeming more and more likely that we’ll have to breach Seireitei before long, but it’s not time yet, and if you go now...”

“Koku’s there too, isn’t he?” Katsura cut across his father, a dark look in his eyes. “He’s there, because he’s not here, but you’ve left him alone. Have you abandoned him too?”

“I wouldn’t ever abandon Koku,” Keitarou said gravely. “Our lives depend on it, yours as well as everyone’s here. I’m monitoring the situation and he’s safe enough so far. But in order to retrieve him, I have to have the Gotei taken care of. And if you fly in there now, guns blazing... when we don’t know what kind of threats are there...”

“Right now, I care about Sakaki,” Katsura snapped back grimly. “I’m going to Seireitei, Father. I’m going to find him and pull his heart from his chest myself, the way he burned a hole in Sakaki’s. I’m going to show him that my family can’t be treated like that. I’ll kill anyone who gets in my way. If it kills me, so be it. I’m decided. I’m going.”

“If you go, there won’t be a place to come back to,” Keitarou repeated. “If you go, you put us all at risk. It will be on your head — I won’t take you back a second time.”

Katsura frowned, gazing down at Sakaki's body, then he shrugged.

"It doesn't matter," he said softly. "I don't believe in all the things you do, Otousama, but I do believe in protecting my family. As the eldest, that's my job. I'll avenge Sakaki, even if it kills me. I'll kill shinigami, if I have to. If they catch me, I'll tell them nothing about you and nothing about anything. But this is my choice. You won't change my mind."

Author's Note:

A lot seemed to happen in this chapter o.O.

My writing of this has been slowing right down lately, with the hunt for a job and other stuff pressing on me. I went back the other day and read through some of the reviews for Maki, and the support really touched me all over again. I'm pretty sure at this point that (yes I keep saying it but this time I do mean it) Sukuse will be the last Juu-Shun based fic I write, but re-reading the reviews have reaffirmed my determination to finish this story and do it properly. Usually when I post chapters, I'm about 15 ahead of what I'm posting, but this time around I'm only writing chapters a few ahead of this one. There's a good chance this might mean updates will slow down, but if they do, please keep poking me and make sure I don't give up ;) You people are seriously the ones who keep me writing, even when everything else is crazy.

Sasakibe Choujirou Tadaoki.

So I've been wanting to do this for a while, and by this I mean involving Sasakibe in the plot of this story. I had dabbled with the idea of doing it in Meifu, but hadn't been completely sure of just how old he was, so I played safe, and left the matter open. Now we know for certain that he is of the right vintage to be here, well, here he is.

I wanted from the moment Byakuya spoke the eulogy to include him under his real name, too.

Historically, it was not uncommon for samurai — or nobility, or others of status of some kind — to be referred to by a name which was neither their family name nor their given name. A famous example of this is, of course, Minamoto no Kurou Yoshitsune, who is known by his given name, Yoshitsune in modern times, but in historical documents is often known as "Kurou". Kurou means ninth son, and Yoshitsune was the ninth son of the Minamoto at the time. Therefore this 'nickname' was his "rank" within his family. Not all nicknames are like this, however — his cousin, Yoshinaka, was known by the name "Kiso" and his other brother, Yoritomo was known as "Kamakura-dono" (Lord Kamakura) because of the places from which they came or governed.

Taking it back to Bleach, Yamamoto Genryuusai Shigekuni and Sasakibe Choujirou Tadaoki are the same kind of names. Shigekuni and Tadaoki are archetypal traditional Japanese male names which you would probably not find commonly today in Japan but historically would not be out of place. When young men came of age, they were given a proper name, taking one character from the person who sponsored and oversaw that coming of age, and one other character. Both Tadaoki and Shigekuni fit this process — both are two-kanji names with specific readings familiar to an older historical period.

504 told us how Genryuusai got his name. I think most folk knew it was a nickname, but now we understand its evolution. It makes sense to consider Choujirou like this too. The characters for Choujirou are “chief” or ‘long’, “next”, and “man/person”. In 504, we got told that Sasakibe wanted to be Genryuusai’s “right hand man”. Choujirou roughly means “The main person next in line”, or Genryuusai’s right hand man. Therefore I believe it’s a nickname given to him by Genryuusai which has stuck into common parlance.

Whatever the truth of it, I wanted Sasakibe to appear here under his given name. I think it’s perfectly possible that there was a time when only Genryuusai called Sasakibe by the name Choujirou, and in the little he appeared in Bleach in modern canon, we didn’t see anyone but Genryuusai refer to him as that either. When he received that name, only Kubo knows. But Japanese names do not have middle names as we understand them, not even historically.

As a result, in this story — even if nowhere else — Sasakibe will be Tadaoki. And that’s that.

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I had to put a note in here just to say that — without spoiling — this week’s manga chapter is the best in the arc so far, pretty much hands down. For the first time in a LONG time, Vraie is not bitching about the manga. Miracles can happen... now, if we can just have some closure for 494 please, Kubo-sensei...

46. Koku's Dream

Chapter Forty Five: Koku's Dream

“It’s getting late.”

Ketsui stifled a yawn, turning to gaze out of the window of the compact Thirteenth Division archive. The night over Seireitei was a clear one, and the moon shone brightly through the window, illuminating the grounds in a deceptively bright glow.

From her seat across the table, Izumi let out a sigh, raising her gaze from the book she had been poring over and fixing Ketsui with a look of irritation. It was true, she reflected, they had been at work in the little alcove for a good number of hours together, and it was clear from her companion’s demeanour that he was not used to spending so much time studying in this manner. For the young Kitsune, however, it was a matter of course — and, having grown up mostly beneath the ground, the passing of daylight hours meant little to her. At her expression, Ketsui offered a rueful grimace, shrugging his shoulders.

“I don’t have your concentration span,” he acknowledged sheepishly. “We have been in here since dinner, though, Ichimaru-san, and we’ve spent a good part of our time going over the same few figures. If we don’t call it a night soon, I might fall asleep in here and that will be hard to explain to Fukutaichou tomorrow when I miss morning drill.”

Izumi closed the book with a snap, resting her chin on her hands and surveying her companion critically. He did look tired, she reflected grudgingly. Truthfully, she had expected him to flag before this but, as they had spread the notes from Mareiko across the surface of one of the more secluded desks within the small archive, she had been surprised at how quickly he had picked up both her methods and the shorthand style in which the original notes had been scrawled. Izumi had no words with which to explain the various theories and systems of calculation, yet as he had watched her work, he had quickly grasped her line of thought, occasionally making suggestions that had made her stop and stare at him in surprise.

I don’t really believe that intelligence is inherited. It’s more a case of hard work and dedication.

The girl’s silver eyes narrowed thoughtfully.

Maybe I'm wrong, though. Perhaps there's something in the Urahara genes that I didn't understand before.

"Ichimaru-san?" At the intensity of her gaze, Ketsui frowned, looking confused. "Is there something wrong? Obviously you've a lot more experience in this than me, but I did promise Taichou that I'd look out for you, and so... well... I don't want to leave you here working on your own. It is late, and, well, the division has had unwanted visitors in the last few days. It's not impossible that they were looking for you, and didn't find you where they thought you'd be."

Izumi's eyes became slits as she remembered Juushirou's report about her brother and Hiko, and then she sighed, rubbing her temples. *He's right, damn him. But I'm so close to breaking through to the core of this. These notes are so well produced, I almost missed it, but there's a serious calculation flaw in one line of logarithms and I wanted to pan it all out properly before I went to bed. I'll probably dream about it, if I don't, and it isn't as though I can ask him for his thoughts.*

She glared across the table, suddenly resentful at Ketsui's ignorance.

If he could understand me as easily as my brother, it would be so much easier.

"All right, what did I say?" Ketsui held up his hands in mock-surrender, and despite herself, Izumi started, looking at him in surprise. "You were glaring at me as though you wanted me anywhere but here. I thought I'd been quite helpful — was I wrong? Because my skills aren't necessarily tied to the academic, you know. I'm good at swords and stuff, but that's because that's my background. I haven't had any training in this, so I'm trying to pick up what I can as you race along."

You're wrong.

Izumi processed this with a weary sigh.

You're so stupid you don't even realise it yourself, yet you're actually very bright. I don't understand that contradiction, but it's true all the same. You're completely different from your brother. Maybe he's the showy one, but you're far more useful and I... I trust your motives a lot more. Yet you say such idiotic things. If you were a Kitsune, I'd slap sense into you, but you're not... and I don't suppose you'd understand, even if I tried to tell you. It's frustrating... dealing with someone who has the brain but none of the knowledge. It's such a waste. I don't understand shinigami.

She scooped up the book she had been reading, returning it to the pile of others at her right hand. Slowly and reluctantly she began to

gather up Mareiko's paperwork, and Ketsui offered her a rueful grin, moving to help.

"We can come back to this," he promised. "I know it's probably extra hassle having me around, but... Ichimaru-san?" as Izumi paused, glancing again at the sheet of paper she held in her hands. Her brow creased, her fingers gripping the sheet more tightly as she ran her gaze over the list of figures again.

There was definitely something not right, and yet...

"What's up?" Ketsui's voice from behind her made her jump, for she had been so deep in concentration that she hadn't noticed him get to his feet, coming to stand at her shoulder in order that he could read the document more clearly. She waved the sheet in his face, frustration clear in her expression, and Ketsui frowned, taking it and glancing over it.

"This sheet bothers you, huh?" he asked softly, and Izumi nodded.

"But you can't figure out why?"

Izumi shook her head, her eyes glittering with annoyance, and Ketsui offered her a sheepish grin.

"Well, one thing I've learned about you, Ichimaru-san, is that you understand all of this a lot more than I ever will," he said honestly. "If you say something's up with these numbers, I believe you. But I don't think we're going to get anything done about it this evening. It's a matter of... hang on a minute."

He frowned, setting the sheet back down on the paper and running his finger down the list of figures. Izumi stared at him incredulously, half-wondering if he'd had some kind of arithmetic epiphany, but as she watched, Ketsui's finger slipped from the numbers to the list of terms below, his eyes narrowing as he processed each one carefully. At length he shook his head.

"I don't know what the calculations say or don't say," he said at length. "It's beyond my level of education in all respects. But I wonder... about this. I don't know if it means anything or it doesn't, but... if those were really the spell traces discovered on the *Senkaimonin* the Rukon, well... it seems odd to me."

Izumi's brows knitted together, and she took the sheet back, poring over it once more.

"I don't know how much you know Kidou," Ketsui continued, "and I'm not the best person in the division at it, ever. But I did pass it at

the Academy, and I have had training since I've joined here. I was never so bad at the theory behind all these things — spells and technique and most of all, *reiryoku* distribution. So even though I might not be able to fire all of those spells like that practically, it seems like... an odd combination to me. I mean, if you wanted to conceal where you were going to, surely you'd use some kind of barrier combination in with that mix? Perhaps I'm crazy, but... don't you think that it's a bit, well, showy for a gate that's meant as an escape route?"

Izumi's eyes widened, and she raised her gaze, staring at him in disbelief. Ketsui scratched his head, looking awkward.

"Or maybe I just don't know anything about science," he conceded. "Or Kidou application. And I'm tired. It's fine. Ignore me if it's not important."

He really is an idiot. An intelligent idiot, but an idiot.

Izumi rolled her eyes, turning her attention back to the sheet of paper.

He's right, though. I've been looking at it scientifically, trying to make it add up, but it's far more fundamental than that. The spells used to seal the gate are all spells which utilise particular facets of reiryoku. They all leave a definite trace of the person who fired them, and there's no attempt to cloak it. More, there's no spell to seal the gate from prying eyes. The shinigami were able to draw on the emissions from the Senkaimon and deduce that Keitarou had opened it, and that he'd gone to the Real World. One of those slips might be considered an error of judgement if the enemy was in a hurry, but even if they were... this enemy doesn't seem like he would make two such basic mistakes. In which case, we shouldn't think of them as mistakes at all... but... lures?

"Ichimaru-san?" Ketsui gazed at her quizzically, and Izumi tapped her index finger against the sheet of paper absently.

These figures were recorded by the Head of the Urahara in the Rukon, and it took him to the Real World. He saw Keitarou there. Those things Ukitake-dono reported to me because he thought them important to my study. But he attacked my brother after that, which means his movement is fluid. And if the Urahara head saw him in the Real World, then almost certainly he isn't using that place as a permanent base. This gate, all of it, its designed as a diversion. He wanted to bring the Urahara head to the Real World, so he could show himself, and distract the shinigami in that direction whilst he... did something else. But what? Attacking Oniisama and the mine can't be the end of it. It has to be something more. Something bigger. Something that requires the shinigami to be away from here...

Her eyes became huge, and she grabbed Ketsui by the sleeve, giving his arm a little tug. She flickered her fingers in an automatic attempt to communicate, but at her action Ketsui frowned, shaking his head.

“I can’t read your signs, Ichimaru-san. Whatever it is, I can’t understand.”

Wretched stupid pointless shinigami and their worthless education systems.

Izumi bit back her impatience, instead reaching for a sheet of fresh paper and her writing brush. The ink stone had almost dried in the gentle warmth of the summer evening, but she scrubbed the brush against it anyway, drawing a ring in the centre of the paper and dividing it into three parts. Ketsui stared at her, bemused, but she ignored his expression, instead focusing on her diagram. The brush tip was too scratchy and dry now to write proper kanji, and in any case, Izumi wasn’t sure she wanted a written record of her suspicions, but nonetheless she persevered, scraping a single character into each of the three divisions, then jabbing at them with her finger.

Ketsui furrowed his brow, trying to make out the haphazard kanji, and Izumi prodded each section in turn once again, gazing at him expectantly.

“Ru... Sei... Gen.” Ketsui’s eyes narrowed, then, “Rukongai, Seireitei, Real World?”

Well, at least he’s literate. Thank goodness for small mercies.

Izumi sighed, nodding her head. She ran her finger around the outside of the circle, then with her hands indicated the opening and shutting of a *Senkaimon*. Pointing to the Rukon segment, she made the gesture again, then pointed to the Real World. At length she repeated the action a third time, this time placing her finger on the middle segment marked with the kanji for Seireitei.

He probably won’t follow, but I have to make him understand. If I don’t, how will I make anyone else?

Ketsui did not respond immediately, and Izumi glanced at him, expecting to see a look of complete confusion on his fair features. As she met his expression, however, she was taken aback by the look of horror that had surfaced in the man’s pale eyes.

“You think he’s not there at all, don’t you?” he whispered, grabbing up the diagram and running his finger over it. “You think it’s too obvious — the science from the Gate is too good. You think he’s moving from place to place, and that we just haven’t anticipated his real plan of action yet.”

Izumi nodded her head, relieved, and Ketsui’s eyes darkened.

“In that case, the Kidou is a distraction, and so the use of it makes sense,” he murmured. “If Keitarou’s not really in the Real World, then he’s anywhere but. There are plenty of rumours circulating, especially since it was decided that certain divisions were going to be deployed there to hunt him, so the stories about Nagesu-sama seeing him there must be true. And if they’re true, then... probably that’s the place they’re least likely to find him.”

Izumi nodded again, and Ketsui sighed, dropping the diagram back down onto the table and moving to gather up the remaining sheets of paper.

“It’s late,” he said quietly. “Tomorrow, we ought to report this to Taichou, but there’s nothing we can do right now. The squads are still preparing, so we’ve time. I might be jumping to conclusions, but if Keitarou wants to act against the shinigami somehow, he’s set the decoy for a purpose. If he wants to reduce our numbers here and weaken our forces, then he’ll not make any move until he’s sure the decoy has worked. We have a little time... tomorrow we’ll talk to Taichou and see what he thinks. All right?”

He eyed her keenly.

“I have understood you right, haven’t I?”

Izumi nodded her head, holding out her hands for the science notes, and Ketsui obediently handed them over.

“You think Keitarou’s ultimate target is here, and that all of this is designed to that end,” he observed, “and I think you’re probably right. In the Rukon, he attacked healers when they were split up into two groups, using different agents, right? It’s not impossible that he’d try the same strategy again, only this time on the core of Seireitei and on a much bigger scale. We know he’s not operating alone, yet the allies we know he has... weren’t sighted in the Real World. That means they must be somewhere else, even if Keitarou himself is — or was — in the Real World. So, even if my opinion isn’t worth a lot in this, I’ll back you up. Even if it means taking on the views of the Captains en masse. If squads go to the Real World and deplete our forces, then clearly we’re under threat. And it’s not then just a case of your safety, or Koku’s, but everyone’s.”

Koku...

Izumi frowned, moving towards the window as something odd assailed her senses.

That’s another thing. Another anomaly that I can’t account for. That boy... it’s almost as if... but is that possible?

She pressed her lips together, considering the possibilities.

I don't have any evidence, so there's not much I can do. Not much... but something. I don't like the feel of that reiatsu. Something is afoot... something I should be able to stop. Oniisama said I should be of use here in whatever way I can — so I suppose that's what I ought to do, tiresome as it might be.

Without a backward glance at her companion, she pushed open the window further, deftly leaping over the sill onto the soft grass below. Behind her, Ketsui let out an exclamation, but she ignored him, hurrying across the grounds towards the door of the main building. It was locked, but she quickly manipulated the fastening open, slipping inside the darkened barracks. Ketsui's reiatsu flickered at the edge of her awareness, and she knew he was not far in her wake, but she did not slow down. Instead she fixed her senses on the alien flare of energy, pinpointing its exact location.

There. Maybe I need evidence to prove my suspicions, but I don't need anything to keep matters from getting out of control. That reiatsu shouldn't be allowed to flow through a place like this, and I intend to stop it. Right or wrong, I have Oniisama's orders to think of, and they surpass everything else. If he says the shinigami are our allies, then they are... which means using whatever means necessary to clamp down on anything that's not.

Her eyes were open, her limbs spreadeagled on the ground, as though she had fallen from a height and landed in an ungainly position against the grass. Her lips were parted, forming an 'o' of surprise, yet her skin was ash pale, the blood already draining from her body. There was no lifebeat. Just those eyes, accusing and frightened, a young girl not yet an adult, with the glint of a killer lurking in their depths. The light in the eyes was fading now, making them appear more grey than blue. Grey like the clouded sky of the Rukon.

There was anger. The atmosphere was full of fury, rage building to a point that it was hardly possible to hold it back. Shouting voices, but words were not coherent, and a flash of images, each one disorientating and confused. Tears were falling, or was it rain from the heavy overcast sky? They were angry, that was for sure. A silver fox, something cold glinting in his eyes, stood high and proud, blood staining his fur as he gazed down at the scattered fold below. Where the girl had been, branches of pine now covered the spot, cloaking the blood and hiding the corpse from view. A shadow cast across the ground, and then, in a moment it was gone, its loss creating a sudden hollow ache.

The other images were there too, now. It was becoming harder to separate them. There was a dead girl... no, now a man, now men and women, dressed in black, their robes shredded and covered in blood. There were monsters — had the monsters killed the girl, or was that the fox? He could no longer see the animal, for it had disappeared like moonlight when the rain had begun, but all around the forestland the trees had begun to take monstrous shape, their branches reaching out like clawed hands, their wizened trunks the uneven deformity of an unmistakably Hollow mask. Glints of light, like sharp teeth cut through them, dark energy surrounding them as they fell like destringed puppets onto the floor. They did not rise again, but he could not see their faces. They were nothing, not even dust — just dead for whom he could not feel anything at all.

And then in the rain, there were voices. Two living souls — both robed in black and white. One wore a white coat, like that which he had seen before, but where? He was not sure, and the symbol on the back appeared no more than a rain-smudged blur. There was blood on the cloak and on the blade, but it was the other whose body was enveloped in darkness. In his hand, the hilt of a weapon, yet his fingers were breaking and twisting, his expression one of desperation and terror as his features began to morph into something else. He was fighting, yet it was a battle he could not win. It was a battle to the death, and like the others, he would be felled.

There was a jerk, and suddenly the perspective changed. He was inside the shinigami, now... inside his head, inside his eyes, merging with his very consciousness. The shinigami's feelings flooded through him, stifling his own objective perspective and drawing him deeper in until he and the shinigami were one and the same.

It was still raining, the blood and water mingling to form a grotesque kind of swamp beneath the feet of the two men. Was it sweat or was it rainwater that made the shinigami's hair slick against his cheeks? Was it tears or the inclement weather that had blurred his vision, making it hard to see the enemy's features through the haze?

The sky had never been this heavy before in all the times they had come here, yet even a zanpakutou could not cut through the thickness of the atmosphere. The shinigami drew breath with difficulty into ravaged lungs, his fingers slipping slightly against the hilt of his weapon as his opponent lurched towards him once again. Something silver wobbled through the air towards him — a swing but not a swing, as the weapon faltered and slid beneath the enemy's thickening, calloused fingers. The eyes, gleaming and red bulged from sockets too small to hold them, and a tell-tale sheen of white had

begun to ooze from the other's pores, slipping over his nose and mouth until all that remained was that vivid, crimson gaze.

"Stop this!"

The shinigami found his voice, forcing back his wet hair from his face with his left hand, whilst parrying the weak, drunken shot with the sword in his right. It jerked and twisted against the hand too clumsy to hold it, falling with a soft thud onto the muddy ground, yet the wielder paid it no mind. Instead an ungodly screech emitted from beneath the bare white surface of what had now hardened into a mask, pocked and uneven as it tried to harden under the relentless assault of the rain. The blood on the enemy's clothes and arms seemed in complete contrast to the sudden waxiness of his skin, and he launched his body forward, arms outstretched, yearning for the kill. His fingernails scraped against the white fabric of his opponent's haori, leaving bloody prints across the sodden cloth.

The shinigami's blade swung down, almost by instinct rather than by design. With a single sweep it sliced through the corner of the mask, sending cracks through every corner of it and causing bits to fragment and break away. Pale lips became visible, moving with difficulty as though fighting against some unknown force. There was a moment of restraint, as the crimson eyes dulled, and through those chapped, colourless lips came words.

"Help... me."

The tones were hoarse and strained, each syllable squeezed through vocal chords which were no longer responsive to their owner's instructions. In the pall of fighting, a clubbed hand reached out, in desperation, towards the other's blade, and despite himself the shinigami took a step back, no longer wondering if it was rain or tears that saturated his lashes.

"Heiji," he murmured, and at the sound of his name, the creature's body lurched up, true agony in the crimson eyes. For a moment they met gazes, then another blood-curdling shriek broke forth from the pale lips, and the moment of sanity was broken. As the toxic level of reiatsu whipped around them both, a mixture of rage and then despair thudded over the shinigami's body.

Help me.

The enemy's words resonated against his senses, over and over, in time with the beat of the rain. As he raised his sword, defending himself from a clawed swipe with only just enough conviction to push the attacker away, he understood what his companion had truly been

asking for.

He glanced at his sword, and a ripple of regret washed through its spirit in answer to his question. Was it the overcast sky reflecting on its surface, or had the silver of the blade dulled slightly, as though going into mourning for an ally well loved?

Summoning his resolve, the shinigami hardened his heart, forcing himself to see only a beast before him, lurching and in pain. It was a Hollow. It was his enemy. To kill it was his duty. It must end now.

The blade came down in a decisive arc this time, sweeping through shell and bone to the soft tissue beneath, and in the cascading spray of blood, there was a bloodcurdling scream of pain and despair as the creature fell to the ground. It writhed and moaned against the mud for a moment, and the shinigami did not hesitate, striking cleanly through the jugular. The moans became gurgles, bubbles forming against the pale lips, then the body lay still. Bit by bit the shell coating began to fall away from the hands and arms, and, as the shinigami stepped over the body towards the head, he realised that it had not been a creature at all.

It had been Sakanoue Heiji, the young man he had mentored and looked on as a son, who now lay dead in the Rukon mud before him. A Sakanoue who had been hurt beyond all recognition, tainted and broken beyond saving. A Sakanoue who had begged him for help... A Sakanoue who he had killed with his own sword.

Discarding the weapon as though it were made of burning metal, Atsushi cradled the broken body desperately in his arms, searching in vain for the signs of life he knew were no longer there. Even the final rattle in the man's throat had dissipated into silence, causing a dull hush to fall over the scene, broken only by the splashing drops of the rain which was beginning at last to abate.

Slowly and painstakingly, Atsushi broke the remainder of the mask that still covered the upper part of his protege's face, gently smoothing the flakes of white away from his Vice Captain's skin. The eyes were still open, but no longer that gleaming red and, with a heavy heart, Atsushi closed them, gazing for a moment at the body with hate and grief surging through his veins.

"I won't forgive you," he muttered, reaching for the bloodstained sword with renewed resolve as he got to his feet, swinging around in search of his target. "I won't forgive you for this,

Kusakawa!"

Koku's eyes snapped open, his breath coming in short, panicked gasps, and he grabbed hold of his blanket, for a moment too disorientated and frightened to realise where he was. He struggled into a sitting position, the images still vivid in his thoughts, and as he did so, he realised that he was crying, the shinigami's lingering sense of grief causing the tears to stream down his cheeks.

"Sakaki," he murmured, then, "Saka... noue?"

"Koku?" Tsunemori's voice came out of the darkness, anxious and uncertain, and the next minute the room was bathed in a soft Kidou glow as the young officer activated the lamp. Though the light had shown him that whatever he had seen had not been real, the sudden brightness disorientated Koku's scattered wits, and he closed his eyes, half afraid that his feelings would overwhelm him and make him nauseous once again. If that happened, he knew, Tsunemori would likely panic and send for more help, and for Koku, whose senses were already on overload following his nightmare, the idea of anyone else entering the small chamber was enough to make his head throb even more. Tsunemori's presence was gently controlled and unthreatening, but at that moment it felt to Koku as though his companion was flaring his *reiryoku* at the highest level possible.

"Are you all right?" Tsunemori was beside the bed now, and Koku forced his head up to meet the other's concerned gaze.

"A bad dream," he managed. "Just... that."

"A dream?" Tsunemori frowned, then, "Do you want me to send for someone?"

"It's just a dream," Koku shook his head, then regretted it, as his world swam and his brain protested. "I'm fine. I'll sleep again. I'm sorry."

"You look really pale," Tsunemori observed. "Taichou said that we were to keep an eye on you... if you're unwell, I'm supposed to send for Edogawa-san."

"I told you, it was just a... a dream," Koku protested, but Tsunemori shook his head.

"I'm going to do as I'm told," he said firmly. "I'll be back presently. She's only a few doors down, and I'm sure she'll be able to help. Bad dreams are one of the things she and Taichou both told me to look out for... and orders are orders."

With that he was gone, hurrying down the hall to wake Mitsuki, and Koku shivered, foreboding flooding through his body. He gazed at

the Kidou lamp, seeing the silhouettes of the fighting men once more brought to life in the flickering glow, then the broken body of Sakaki, and his heart lurched into his throat as once more he felt the overpowering sense of another's rage.

Sakaki is dead.

With one eye to the door, he pushed back his blankets, pulling himself unsteadily to his feet.

Katsura... I have to stop him. I have to stop him, before he... before he can't be stopped. I have to find him and make him listen.

His vision danced and swayed again, making him feel even more seasick, but urgency added to his determination. Tsunemori would doubtless be back in seconds with Mitsuki in tow, and then she would sedate him as she had done before. He would lose precious time, and he wouldn't be able to stop Katsura, and then...

He stepped out into the hallway, taking a couple of uneven paces along the passage, leaning heavily on the wall in order to prevent himself from falling headlong.

A silver fox killed Sakaki. A silver fox felled the sacred evergreen, and then the souls of the dead whimpering in the wind... the long past, but is it really past? Too many images, and I don't understand. I can't tie them all together, but that fox... I've seen it before, somewhere. Somehow. Keitarou-san always talked about foxes, too. He was worried by them, and now... this.

He had about made it six paces along the hallway before a sound at the end of the corridor made him glance up. Half expecting to see Mitsuki standing there, a gentle reprimand on her lips and a vial of soporific in her hands, he was struck silent by the sudden glitter of argent eyes, followed by the overwhelming urge to sleep. He clawed desperately at the bamboo panels, but it was no good. His body had given up the fight, and as he slid to the floor, he was sure he caught sight of silver hair framing a pale, impassive face. Then the world went dark, and he knew no more.

“What the hell did you do to him?”

Ketsui stepped out from the shadows in Izumi's slipstream, casting his companion a look of alarm as she knelt down at the young invalid's side, checking absently for a pulse before brushing back the tousled hair that covered his brow. She tut-tutted slightly under her breath, then raised her gaze to Ketsui's quizzically. Though she did not have the power of speech, even a short time in Izumi's company had taught Ketsui that that particular look was one of defiance, and he

sighed, shaking his head.

“So I guess that answers the question about how much you know Kidou — if, in fact, that was Kidou. You do have skills other than scientific knowledge, even if you can’t use a sword,” he said with a grimace. “Fine. All right. I guess you’re right that he shouldn’t be out here on his own. I thought Tsunemori-san was with him tonight, but maybe something happened.”

Izumi pursed her lips, eying Koku critically, and Ketsui arched an eyebrow.

“That’s the look you were giving those notes of Taichou’s in the library earlier,” he reflected, moving down to crouch at Koku’s other side. “The ‘I want to investigate this further,’ look. This kid isn’t a science experiment, though. He’s Taichou’s business and we’re not to interfere in it — but we’re protecting him from harm. He’s not dangerous.”

Izumi shot Ketsui an incredulous look, followed by one that was undoubtedly pity, and Ketsui sighed.

“Fine, to you everything is an experiment,” he reflected wearily. “We’ve been in the archive all day, and now it’s past midnight. We’re finally finished for the night and now you want to dissect this poor kid too? Well, it’s a no go. Firstly, we don’t have orders to. Secondly, this is Taichou’s business, not ours. Thirdly, we have enough to pursue with what we were talking about earlier. And, finally and most importantly, you’re a recruit and I’m a Tenth Seat. That means you’re meant to follow my orders and not the other way around.”

Izumi stared at Ketsui in indignation, and Ketsui met her gaze with an even one of his own.

“Whatever you did to him, you’re not going to do it to me, too,” he said matter-of-factly. “What you are going to help me do, though, is get him back to his room before anyone finds out he’s escaped.”

Izumi’s expression became one of disbelief, and despite himself, Ketsui laughed.

“People don’t often answer you back, do they?” he realised. “I’m serious, though, as it happens. If we’re found here, with him, there’ll be questions. People will want to know why we’re still up, and then they might ask questions about you. And you don’t want that to happen, especially considering what you’ve already uncovered. I’m in charge of you, so it wouldn’t be any good for me, either. You put him out for the count somehow — I trust that means he won’t wake up for

a while?"

Izumi sighed, looking resigned, then shrugged, nodding her head. She dusted her hands off, as if to say, "I'm done with it," and Ketsui eyed her keenly.

"Meaning I'm carrying him? Well, fine. I can do that," he said easily, moving to scoop Koku's limp form up in his arms. Though he wasn't as well built as Tenichi, Koku's undernourished body posed little challenge and he hoisted the unconscious boy up more securely into his arms, indicating the door of Koku's chamber with his head.

"You open the door and make the bed and I'll dump him in it. Then we'll disappear before anyone sees us. Hurry up and don't argue! I can hear voices — I think Tsunemori-san will be coming back this way soon and I don't want to answer awkward questions."

Izumi shot him a poisonous look, but stalked forward anyway, pushing back the door with very bad grace and disappearing inside. Ketsui rolled his eyes, but followed her, finding that she had at least managed to pull back the covers so that he could deposit his burden neatly inside. Izumi cast the blankets over Koku's limp form with a dismissive sniff, as though she felt herself above such things, and Ketsui grinned.

"We're leaving here, now," he said matter-of-factly, and, before the young woman could protest, he had grabbed her by the arm, pulling her into a flash-step. Dropping out of it outside the door of the Thirteenth archive, he released his hold, taking in her censure with amusement.

"Better here than where we were just now," he remarked lightly, and Izumi put her hands on her hips, her delicate features twisting into a most unladylike scowl. Ketsui returned it with a graphic grimace, then he sighed, dropping back against the wall.

"I think it's weird too, but I don't want to get involved," he said honestly. "The boy, I mean. It's Kirio-nee's task, and not mine. I'm fine being out of it and you should be too. You're not safe here, right? So it doesn't make sense getting involved in other stuff too. We've already dug deep into dangerous territory today. Let's not add more. Right now our priority is with the notes you have and what we think they mean... all right?"

Izumi pressed her lips together, folding her arms across her chest, and Ketsui nodded.

"Something happened," he agreed. "I don't know what it was, but I

felt it too. I didn't like how it felt, if I'm honest. It felt like... we were better staying out of it."

Izumi lowered her head slowly, and Ketsui saw resignation enter her gaze.

"Tell me something. Does Taichou know you can lay a guy out with just one stare?"

Izumi shrugged her shoulders again, a faint hint of mischief glittering in her silvery eyes, and Ketsui rolled his eyes again.

"Taichou's assignment is turning out to be high maintenance," he realised. 'If I'd known that before I took it on, maybe I'd have said no. Clearly you can protect yourself... Ichimaru-san?' As Izumi shook her head firmly. "If you can drop someone to the ground just by looking at them, nobody is going to touch you. That poor lad didn't get more than a few paces towards you — if you can put an enemy out that easily, then..."

Izumi shook her head again, looking mournful, and to Ketsui's surprise, she reached out to grasp his sleeve, giving it a little tug before letting it go. His eyes narrowed.

"You seriously tried to use it on me just now, didn't you?" he asked suspiciously, and Izumi nodded, a faintly sheepish glint in the depths of the argent eyes.

"And come to think of it, you stared at me pretty hard in the Archive earlier." Ketsui tilted his head on one side as he considered. "I suppose you can control it, but... were you trying to lay me out then, too?"

Izumi pursed her lips, slowly shaking her head, but there was hesitation in her expression, and Ketsui's frown deepened.

"But just now, you were serious?"

Izumi nodded.

"And it didn't work?"

Izumi shook her head.

"So there are people it doesn't work on?"

Izumi shrugged, and Ketsui realised that the frustration in her expression was real.

"This was the first time, huh," he reflected, and Izumi nodded. She sighed, looking troubled, and Ketsui felt sorry for her.

“I guess it’s not for me to ask about, anyway,” he reflected. “Probably you’re tired, and if you already used it on Koku, maybe there wasn’t any juice left for me. Or maybe it just doesn’t work on me — I don’t know, you’re the scientist. I’d rather you didn’t try it on me again, though. Whether I annoy you or not, Taichou gave me a job, and I figure we’ll do it right. If you skip out of sword drill by putting me to sleep, you won’t get any better at it. And while you’re here, they’re skills you’re expected to have — otherwise folk will be suspicious.”

He grinned, tilting his head on one side as he gazed at her.

“When I first was assigned to look out for you, I was really uncertain how to act,” he admitted, “but I enjoyed working in the library with you, and all the science stuff we’ve been doing lately. And maybe I can’t understand your sign language, and you can’t speak to me in words, but I feel like I’m coming to understand you anyway. I don’t know a lot of things about you, but I do understand Taichou’s reasons for putting faith in you, and I think you’re right, where Keitarou is concerned. So it’s all right, if you can’t put me to sleep. I’m on your side anyway. We’re both going to do what we can to bring someone dangerous to heel. That’ll help me and it’ll help you — and so we have a common aim, don’t we? We’re allies now, right?”

Izumi looked surprised, then she smiled, slowly nodding her head.

“Then it’s settled,” Ketsui assured her. ‘Now it’s late, though. I’d walk you to your room, but that might be seen as inappropriate if Naoko-san is on duty, so I guess I won’t. Don’t put anyone else to sleep in the hallways, all right? I’ll see you tomorrow, early, after breakfast. And Ichimaru-san?’ as the girl turned to leave, “I think it’s better nobody knows we were abroad like this this evening. All right? If Koku remembers seeing you, well, maybe it would be better if people assumed he was wrong. Otherwise everyone will find out your secret power, and I think that might cause chaos.”

Izumi sighed, but nodded, and Ketsui patted her lightly on the shoulder.

“Tomorrow, then,” he said firmly. “Sweet dreams.”

Izumi pushed his hand away, but it was not with quite as much indignation as her earlier scowl and, as Ketsui watched her disappear down the hallway towards her own quarters, he pursed his lips pensively.

I don't understand what it is about her, but I do know that she understands science. The hime image is completely broken apart when you give her

books and data, and whats more, I'm finding that stuff interesting too. We do have a common goal and though I can't ask her what her reasons are, I really do feel we're connected somehow. Maybe Keitarou-san hurt someone close to her — those tears the other morning made me wonder if Taichou had given her some bad news.

He ran his fingers absently through his pale blond hair, turning on his heel and making his way towards his own chamber, where Kira was already lost in dreams.

Working with Ichimaru-san makes me realise there are really high stakes involved — stakes a Tenth seat and a recruit shouldn't normally be tangling with. If what we think is right, we've stumbled onto something big and that's a little frightening to take in. At least it means I can keep my word to Taichou about helping her. Now I've seen her work, and spent time with her on something she cares about, I don't feel so awkward around her. But I do like being with her. She's smart and different and I've not met anyone like her before. I never thought anyone would bring out the dormant science gene in me, but it seems I was wrong. But if her magic doesn't work on everyone... that means there are people who could hurt her. So I have to make sure I stick to the rest of Taichou's brief, too. I have to make sure Ichimaru-san is kept safe... and if that means lying about what happened tonight, well, then that's just what I'll have to do.

"Well, whatever disturbed him, he seems to have overcome it on his own."

Mitsuki brushed her fingers against Koku's throat, feeling the steady beat of his pulse beneath her touch. "He's sleeping soundly enough now, so it doesn't look as though I need to use any chemicals on him this time. You were right to alert me, Tsukabishi-kun, but in this particular instance, he seems to have settled without my help."

"Taichou said that any bad dreams should be taken note of," Tsunemori admitted. "Since I let him escape from here and run riot around the gardens once because of my lack of attentiveness, I didn't want to risk this being another case like that. He seemed really quite upset, and he was crying... so I thought I ought to alert someone about it."

"You did exactly what you should, and if it happens again, follow the same procedure," Mitsuki advised, withdrawing her hand from Koku's throat and brushing back the messy hair from his brow. "He seems stable enough right at the moment, but I'm not happy with his recovery, and I want to get to the bottom of why. His appetite is

uneven and his reiatsu unsteady... and these dreams are bothering J... Ukitake-taichou, so they're bothering me too. It might be a case of post-traumatic shock, but I suppose we'll see."

She sighed, getting to her feet.

"For now, though, there's nothing to be done here," she concluded. "Tsukabishi-kun, when he woke up, did he say anything in particular? You said he was crying... was there anything else?"

"Mm," Tsukabishi's brows knitted together thoughtfully, and he nodded his head. "Well, I might've misheard him, but it sounded like he said 'Sakanoue.' There was something else, too, but I didn't make that out."

He looked rueful.

"I might've just imagined the other word, too," he admitted. "It wasn't really clear, just I heard Fukutaichou mention that word — that name? — in a conversation with Shikibu-san the other day, and so it struck me as familiar."

"It means nothing to me," Mitsuki owned. "Oh well. Keep doing what you're doing, and if there are any more disturbances, let me know, all right?"

"I will," Tsunemori promised. "Honestly, it's a relief to me that he's gone back to sleep on his own. He didn't seem like he was in a particularly... cooperative frame of mind, and I didn't want to have to physically haul him back to bed."

"Fortunately, we're spared that," Mitsuki's eyes twinkled with amusement. "All right. If that's the case, I'm going back to bed. Here's hoping we have a peaceful rest of the night, huh?"

With one last glance at Koku's sleeping figure, she withdrew from the small bed chamber, pulling the door softly shut behind her.

"Mitsuki?"

Juushirou's voice from the shadowy hallway behind her made her jump, and she swung around, meeting his concerned gaze with a sheepish one of her own.

"I didn't sense you there," she admitted. "I was so busy thinking about the boy, I didn't pick up your reiatsu at all."

"Something happened to Koku?" Juushirou moderated his tones, gesturing for her to come away from the bedroom door, and she did so, shrugging her shoulders.

“A nightmare, but he seems to be settled again now,” she said frankly. “Tsukabishi-kun came to get me, but by the time I saw him, Koku was asleep again.”

“I suppose that’s a good sign,” Juushirou sighed, rubbing his brow, and Mitsuki was aware of how weary her old classmate looked. She frowned, reaching out to take him by the wrists, and he started, gazing at her in surprise.

“You should be resting, too,” Mitsuki murmured. “You’re working far too hard, and we both know where that will lead if you’re not careful.”

“Yes, but I don’t have a choice about it,” Juushirou grimaced. “I’m sleeping pretty lightly at the moment. I sensed a flurry of reiatsu and came to investigate, but it seems you have it all under control.”

“Seems so,” Mitsuki agreed. “Koku’s resting, so there’s no need for you to be up, too.”

“Your concern is reassuring, but I can’t just sit back and let the division run itself,” Juushirou shook his head. “There’s too much at stake, especially given that the Captains have now decided on an expedition to the Real World to flush out Aizen Keitarou.”

“Are you going?” Mitsuki asked sharply, and Juushirou smiled, reaching up to touch her cheek briefly.

“Would it worry you, if I was?” he asked softly, and Mitsuki snorted, swiping his hand away.

“Don’t be an idiot, of course it would,” she said frankly. “This person has tried to kill you specifically on at least one occasion, maybe two. I don’t want you anywhere near him, whatever the provocation.”

“Mm,” Juushirou pressed his lips together for a moment, then, “well, I’m not going. I’m staying here, but it will mean an increase in Thirteenth’s workload. We’ll have to take on the duties of the missing however long it takes them to flush out whatever they’re looking for... and that might be tricky, given the nature of the opposition.”

“I suppose I ought to go back to Fourth,” Mitsuki looked guilty. “I’m another burden adding to your existing ones, and I don’t need to be here, not now. Koku is doing a lot better physically, and he doesn’t respond to me as well as he does to Hikifune-san. He’s on edge around me, so it’s more than likely I’m not helping him — maybe I’m making his stress worse. If you want me to leave, I will. I don’t mind. I’m much recovered now, and...”

“You’re not going anywhere,” Juushirou put his finger to her lips, offering her a sad smile. “If this is the only way we get to spend time together, so be it. You’re not a burden, so don’t think of yourself that way. And you have helped Koku a lot — he’s just frightened generally, not of you specifically.”

“Possibly,” Mitsuki acknowledged. “It’s a bit hurtful, though, as a healer, to be constantly met with this wall of resistance.”

She sighed, shrugging her shoulders.

“In any case, before I forget, Tsukabishi-kun said that Koku said ‘Sakanoue’ when he woke up from his dream. Does that mean anything to you?”

“Sakanoue?” Juushirou’s eyes widened in consternation. “As in the Eleventh’s former Vice Captain, Sakanoue?”

“I wouldn’t know?” Mitsuki looked blank. “I haven’t been here in a long time, and it’s an entirely new name to me. Tsukabishi-kun said he wasn’t sure he overheard right, only that he’d heard Houjou-kun say that name a few days ago. It might not even be relevant, but... he didn’t seem to know who Sakanoue could be either, so...”

“Well, he died a long time ago. Twenty five years ago, to be exact — before we even graduated,” Juushirou’s eyes had become grave, Mitsuki noted, and she frowned.

“You think it is relevant, don’t you?” she asked. “You think it means something.”

“I think most things mean something,” Juushirou admitted. “Koku said your name when he first saw you, and it might’ve been coincidence, and it might not. Now he’s said the name of a dead officer who even I didn’t meet... but who was the Eleventh Vice Captain who died in action in the Rukon twenty-five years ago. Your life was threatened in the Rukon, and your comrades died. I don’t like the potential connections there.”

“Juushirou, what exactly is bothering you?” Mitsuki asked gently. “Something is, I can tell. Something relating to that boy, his dreams... it’s not like you to latch on to tiny fragmentary clues that might mean nothing and try and pull them together into one big picture.”

Juushirou was silent for a moment, then he reached up to tuck a stray wisp of Mitsuki’s hair behind her ear.

“I’m not sure,” he admitted. “I haven’t got it worked out in my own mind, and I don’t know how to explain the bits I have. I’ve probably

already said more than I ought to an officer without rank, and whilst I trust you... right now it's complicated."

"Juushirou..." Mitsuki's eyes flickered with hurt, and Juushirou sighed.

"I'm sorry," he murmured. "Maybe when things are calmer, we can talk. We haven't been able to lately, and when we have it's all been tied up with the latest crisis. But we will talk, Mitsuki-chan. I promise. When this is over, we will."

Mitsuki gazed at him for a moment, then, slowly, she nodded her head.

"I understand," she said softly, though she could not keep the swell of melancholy from wrapping itself around her heart at his expression. "I'm sorry, Juushirou. Goodnight."

"Goodnight," Juushirou echoed, and Mitsuki could see identical pain in his hazel eyes. Not wanting to see it any more, she bowed towards him, turning on her heel and making her way slowly but purposefully back down the corridor to her own small chamber.

Once there, however, she dropped back against the door, burying her head in her hands.

Maybe too much has changed. Perhaps there is just too much between us, now, to make it work in the way it might have done before.

She let out her breath in a rush, moving towards the window to push back the shutter and allow the night air to ruffle through her hair.

There are things I haven't told you, and things you're not telling me. Yet I still love you like I did when we were students. That hasn't changed. And if something's bothering you... it bothers me too. You still can't understand that a healer's heart picks up every single fluctuation in another's reiatsu, and even more so with someone she cares for like this. I don't like it when you shut me out, Juushirou-kun. Even if I understand, I don't like it. And I can't help but get a bad feeling that... we're never going to get that chance to talk.

Author's Note

Just in case it isn't clear, Koku dreams about Sakaki's death at the same time it occurs. The events of this chapter are therefore running almost simultaneously with the ones of the last — in the dark of the same, death-stalked night.

47. Rage

Chapter Forty Six: Rage

Opening the *Senkaimon* had been more difficult this time.

Joumei slipped through the back streets on the outskirts of Seireitei, pressing his body tight against the wall to avoid the gazes of the security guards on duty. They seemed busy and distracted, and as he observed their flitting about, Joumei could sense a general tension in the air. It was like the calm before the storm, a storm that these officers probably didn't have the rank to fully understand, but Joumei thanked his stars for their occupation, dropping down into an alcove between two old storage sheds with a heavy thud. He reached his good hand up to his shoulder, ripping apart the fabric to reveal the slash across his upper chest before repeating the action with the cut to his arm and wincing as the frayed edges of the ragged cloth raked through the seeping wound. They were nasty gashes, and had bled profusely, but a cursory examination told him that they had not pierced any important vessels. Already the flow of red was slowing, and Joumei spat on his hand, rubbing it briskly across his arm, doing the same again with the cut on his chest. It was not ideal, especially considering the grime and dust coating his fingers, but he had not travelled with any better antiseptic, and he did not have the time to worry about patching up his body.

He was here and at present, in his own wits. Whether Keitarou was lurking, ready to pounce, or whether the shock of his daughter's death had stunned him into a moment of hesitation, he didn't know, but he was smart enough to realise that the other individual — the young man, Katsura — would probably be on his tail physically, even if his father held back psychically. There had been true hate and rage in Katsura's order, rage like Joumei had never encountered in the whole of his life, and despite his frequent proximity to death, it had frightened him.

His brow creased, derision at his own cowardice washing over him. *A man resolved to death doesn't fear attack. He does his duty and that's all I'm good for now. I've killed and I'm tainted and there's no way to reverse either one of those actions. While I'm rational, I'll report to Hirata-sama, and entreat him to confine me. I'm willing to answer for the death of the girl — to him or to a greater power. With no Kitsune to lead and my sister safe, my life is forfeit and I shouldn't care about preserving it. There's no*

going back, Joumei. Stop distracting yourself — let's go.

He had entered Seireitei somewhere near the Thirteenth Division's barracks, where he had visited Juushirou so covertly following Souja's funeral. It was further from Seventh than he would've liked, but at the very least, he had learned his father's stealth drill to perfection, and, ignoring the stinging pain in his arm and upper chest, he hauled his thin body up onto the roof of the nearest building, pressing himself low against the tiles and pulling himself carefully along the edge, concealing his body behind the narrow rim edging.

"Be where they don't expect you," his father had told him, "even if that has to be in plain sight. Birds are up. Butterflies, too. Foxes don't fly, so they won't look up to find you, but you can always look down on them."

Down is where the guards are, and I don't have time to play with them.

Joumei inched towards the small gap between one roof and the next, crossing the divide with little or no hesitation and beginning to progress across the next. Although he knew his reiatsu was suppressed far below the levels that a shinigami could sense him, he was on edge all the same. The pursuit had not yet materialised, but he felt certain it would come... and it was not just that which now concerned him.

He turned his gaze towards Thirteenth Division, consternation flickering across his silverish blue gaze.

He can sense me. He must know I'm here. If everything I picked up from Keitarou's thoughts is true... there's nothing I can do to stop him finding me. I have to find Hirata-sama first, else it doesn't bear thinking about. If I'm right about what Keitarou's really planning...

A shiver went down his spine involuntarily, and he hastened his pace, dragging his body as nimbly as he could manage between the various buildings until he could see the courtyard and emblem of the Endou Clan from his cautious hiding place. He had refrained from using shunpo up till now, afraid that even the faintest flurry of energy would give away his location and prevent him from reaching his destination but, with the target in sight, he let go of his inhibitions, pushing his body into shunpo and dropping out of the step onto the cobbles of the Seventh Division.

"State your business!"

Almost as soon as he had arrived, a huddle of officers crowded out from the wooden buildings, each one bearing a weapon of some sort, though Joumei was relieved to see that many of them were simple

asauchi and not the more complex shinigami *zanpakutou*. There was at least one seated officer in their midst, however, a tall, austere looking young man whose weapon was clearly something more, and it had been he who had spoken, the imperious note in his tones implying he was not used to being defied.

“I have business with your Captain,” inwardly bemoaning his raggedy appearance, Joumei bowed his head low before the advancing man, holding up his hands to show that he carried no weapons of his own. “I mean no harm, but I must see Hirata-sama, as soon as possible.”

“Hirata-sama?” The man swung his sword in a flourish, a gesture clearly intended as much to impress the junior officers as to intimidate their intruder, and his lip curled in a derisive sneer. “And you think that I’m fool enough to let a bloody ragamuffin into the core of our Division without asking any questions? You insult our pride by even stepping over our cobbles... wearing... whatever that is you’re wearing.”

He extended his weapon, brushing the tip disdainfully against the torn flaps of Joumei’s *hakamashita*, then withdrawing it with a shudder.

“This is a shinigami barracks, peasant. Not the kind of place for your kind. I don’t know how you got in here, but I suggest you repent your impudence and withdraw, before you find yourself a good deal more bloody than your current state.”

“I can’t go back,” Joumei’s pride flared at the clear insult, but he railed in his temper, making no attempt to follow the man’s orders. “I told you, I have urgent business with Hirata-sama. Please, send a message to him. It’s extremely important I speak to him — I can’t leave here until I do.”

“I’m sure you can... in one way or another,” the man prodded his sword up against Joumei’s chest, forcing the Kitsune to stumble back despite himself. “Perhaps you didn’t hear me. This is a shinigami barracks. You are not a shinigami... you are not even washed, and your manners are atrocious. I should kill you for your cheek in even daring to breathe the same air as us, and certainly for considering yourself in a position to order my Captain and Lord to attend you at a moment’s notice.”

His eyes became slits.

“Last chance. Leave on your own, or I shall remove you. In pieces, after I use this,” he swished his sword again, “to dissect you.”

“Please,” As the man drew closer, Joumei threw his pride and his sense of self-protection to the wind, grabbing hold of the trailing ties of the shinigami’s pristine *obi* and tugging on it desperately. “I’m begging you, send a message to your Captain. It’s important, it could mean people’s lives. You can do what you want with me, but it’s vital I speak to him. I need to speak to him. Please, tell him Joumei has come. I know he’ll see me... he told me that if I needed to, I should come.”

“You’ve crossed the line,” the man’s expression went from derision to anger, ripping the *obi* from Joumei’s bloody grip and pushing the tip of his blade up against the Kitsune’s jugular. “Touching a senior officer’s uniform is offence enough for a recruit, let alone a vagabond, but to lie about the intentions of a man as honourable as Hirata-sama, that is unforgivable. Do you think that a Lord has any time for *something* like you? Be glad I’m a merciful man, else I would torture you for your crimes... as it is I shall simply slit your grubby throat, and you should be grateful for such forbearance.”

“Please, tell him Joumei has come,” Joumei reached out for the *obi* again, ducking around the weapon and extending his other hand to grab hold of the black fabric of the officer’s *hakamashita*. “Tell him Joumei has come. I’ve come to report. I’ve come to report!”

“Unhand me, you filthy creature!” the shinigami was beside himself, reaching out to grab Joumei’s wrist and throwing him down against the ground, raising his weapon as if to decapitate him on the spot. All around Joumei was dimly aware of the huddle of mesmerised recruits, each one staring at their senior officer in dazzled silence, all of them awed by the spectacle unfolding before them, but none of them making even the slightest of movements towards the barracks and the Captain’s office. Joumei’s heart lurched and sank as he realised his predicament. Had he escaped Rukongai just to die here, at the hands of one of Hirata’s trusted retainers?

“Wait!”

The single word ripped through the tension, casting a sudden hush over the gathered recruits, and to Joumei’s surprise, the officer pulled back his blade, turning with a mixture of impatience and deference to greet the newcomer on the scene. From his position on the ground, Joumei could not see the speaker, but he was aware of brisk footsteps towards them and the sound of the man who had challenged him sheathing his weapon, bowing as if to welcome a superior officer. Joumei’s heart pounded in his chest, and he grimaced, aware once again of his cowardice, for despite his resolve, his body was relieved it

had escaped death a second time.

“What’s going on here, Ohara?”

It was a woman’s voice, Joumei realised now, but he did not dare move, in case his doing so brought a fresh assault in his direction. There was the sound of the male officer clicking his tongue against his teeth, then,

“Just a peasant trying to push his luck and demanding to see the Captain. I think he’s out of his wits, and he certainly has base manners. Look,” he tut-tutted again, “my *obi* is covered in his blood and grime. I was going to teach him a lesson for trespassing — Lord only knows how he got in here, but I was going to send him out in pieces, since he refused to go on his own.”

“An intruder?” There was a pause, then something grabbed the collar of Joumei’s abused clothing, hauling him to his knees. A hand thrust itself roughly under his chin, forcing his head up, and for the first time he caught sight of the newcomer, surprise reflecting in his argent eyes as he took in her appearance.

She was young, far younger than he had expected from the firmness of her orders or from the quick obedience of his tormentor, yet one glance at the blue eyes told him that despite her youth, a true hunter’s spirit lurked within her soul. She wore the same uniform as the man, crisp and clean, yet somehow the neat lines only emphasised the slightness of her form, and Joumei estimated that her height could not be close to the man she had called Ohara. She was dark haired, her long hair tied back in a functional warrior’s tail that made her look more of a soldier than a lady, but there was something else in her bearing which gave Joumei the sudden impression that whoever she was, she was of significant rank and knew it.

There was a long silence, then the girl pressed her lips together, tilting Joumei’s head from side to side, then giving him a little shake.

“Well?” she demanded, her tones clipped and impatient. “Why are you here? What do you want? Are you a halfwit, like Ohara thinks?”

“I have urgent business with Hirata-sama, ma’am,” Joumei forced words hurriedly through shaken vocal chords, wanting to bow his head but unable to on account of her tight hold. “My name is Joumei. I was told to come here and report to him.”

“Joumei?”

Suddenly the girl’s grip on his throat was gone, and she took a step back from him, clear surprise in her voice. “Did you say Joumei?”

That's who you are?"

"Yes, ma'am." Joumei's heart constricted as he saw the sudden clouding of her blue eyes, half expecting her to draw her sword and behead him on the spot. She did no such thing, however, turning to Ohara with a sigh.

"I'll deal with it myself," she said at length. "You have plenty enough to do. Leave this to me. I'll handle it."

"But *hime*," Ohara was clearly displeased with this instruction, for Joumei felt the thud of a sandalled foot against his back, almost causing him to overbalance forward once again. "A derelict like this? You shouldn't be wasting your precious time handling such vermin. Please, allow me to dispose of him. I will quite gladly blood my blade if it saves you from further unpleasantness."

"I've said I'll handle it, Ohara, and you can consider that an order," the woman's words were firm and edged with steel, but Ohara was not noticeably crushed by the harshness of her rebuff. He sighed, bowing his head to her command, then gesturing for the recruits to join him across the yard. Left more or less alone, Kikyue reached out a hand to grab Joumei's arm, yanking him to his feet with more force than it seemed her lithe body possessed. Joumei let out a yelp, almost tripping over his own feet at the suddenness of the movement, but Kikyue did not stop until they had reached a more sheltered corner of the yard, out of earshot of the other Seventh members. She deposited him unceremoniously against the cobbles, putting her hands on her hips and glaring down at him expectantly.

"Well? You said you had a report to make? Make it."

"I..." Joumei faltered, then shook his head. "I can't."

"Can't?" The woman arched an eyebrow. "Or won't? You were frantically begging to see the Captain a few moments ago. I'm the most senior officer currently on duty, and he's not available to take your message. Therefore report to me. If it's that important, you can entrust it to me and I'll pass it on myself."

"I can't," Joumei repeated, frustration in his eyes. "I can't put anyone else in danger..I can only... your Captain..."

"You intend to put Taichou in danger?" Suddenly the girl's hands were about the throat of Joumei's *hakamashita*, and he found himself thrust up against the wooden wall of the barracks, the beams creaking on impact. He winced as his spine clattered against the unforgiving surface, but his companion showed no sign of caring, one hand

grasping the flaps of fabric tight beneath Joumei's chin, the delicate fingers of the other pressing against his brow.

"Endou are very good at swordplay," she said, her tones taking on a sudden dangerous edge, "but I'm also extremely experienced in Kidou. One spell and I blast your brains from your skull. Don't think I'm ladylike enough to be squeamish. I've seen worse and I'm quite prepared to deal with the aftermath, unless you decide to tell me precisely why you're here and what you intend to do to my Father. Who sent you? Why did you come here? I swear, if you mean any harm..."

Father?

Joumei's eyes widened with dismay as his sluggish brain suddenly realised who it was who had him pinned to the barrack wall.

"Ki... kyue... *hime*?"

The words dropped from his lips half disbelieving, and at the sound of it, Kikyue snorted, pressing her face close so that her gaze bored deep into his.

"You know my name," she murmured. "A vagabond from the Districts knows who I am just from a few casual words. Well, but I shouldn't be surprised, should I? Not since you're a vagabond whose name my *brother* knew... and more, who met with Souja-nii, the night before he died."

Joumei swallowed hard, struck speechless by the resentment in her tones, and Kikyue's lips thinned.

"I'm right, aren't I? The man Souja-nii defied Father to go see, the one who told him something about Aizen Keitarou... that was you, wasn't it?"

Joumei chewed on his lip, then slowly, he nodded his head. Kikyue's eyes darkened.

"Then report to me," she repeated blackly. "Tell me who you are and what you want. Why are you here? What do you intend to do to Father?"

"Nothing," Joumei found his voice, resisting the urge to push her bodily away from him with his bloodstained hands. "I'm sorry, *hime*. I didn't realise... I didn't know who you were. We haven't met before... if I had known, I would have behaved with more respect."

"I don't want your respect," Kikyue spat out at him, anger and frustration flaring from her aura. "I want some truth! Why did my

brother come see you? Did he die because he came to see you? Who are you? Why wouldn't Father tell me about you? What do you want with my family?"

Joumei was silent for a moment, then he let out a heavy sigh, reaching up his hands in a gesture of surrender.

"I mean the Endou no harm," he said soberly. "Your brother was my friend. He was a true and good friend in whom I trusted implicitly and for whom I would have given my life. It's true we met, but the information I gave him was intended to prevent harm, not cause it. I would never have hurt Souja-dono... never."

"Information... such as?"

"Something I thought he needed to know," Joumei was vague. "That is the truth, *hime*, and as much as I can tell you."

"Why can't you tell me more?" Kikyue's hold had loosened, and Joumei saw the glitter of tears against her lashes. "Why am I not good enough to know? Is it because I'm a girl? Because I'm a proper fighter and I can do anything the men here can! Why would they keep you a secret from me — what is your connection to my brother and dammit, why couldn't he or Father trust me to know about you? If you and Niisama were such good friends, why did I only ever hear your name when he was dying, and never once before that?!"

She released her hold completely, taking a step back from him, and Joumei pulled himself gingerly to his feet, bowing his head low towards her.

"I've come to speak to your lord Father, if I may," he said softly.

"You can't. I told you, he's not here," Kikyue shook her head impatiently. "I'm the highest ranking officer on duty. Father's gone to District Seven — Mother sent an urgent message for him and he left before dawn."

Her expression became bitter.

"Mother's been ill since Oniisama died," she said flatly. "She has nightmares and believes horrible things will befall Father, so she becomes hysterical and sends for him at a moment's notice. You might not think I'm good enough to report to, but I'm all there is. It's me or nobody."

Joumei eyed Kikyue for a moment, then he shrugged his shoulders.

"There's much I can't tell you, but little I still have to protect," he said with a heavy sigh. "I have come to confess to the vigilante

murder of the girl who killed Souja-dono, and to submit to Seireitei's justice."

He held out his hands.

"I have poison within my body which can turn on me at any time, and I do not want to put anyone innocent at risk," he added. "Please, secure me in a cell beneath the Seventh and cuff and confine me as you see fit. I shall not resist your arrest."

"Vigilante... murder?" Kikyue's expressions went through a full gamut of emotions, then, "Souja-nii's killer? Is dead? You..."

"I promised myself that I would avenge him, and so I have broken Seireitei law in several ways," Joumei admitted. "I would give my life for your brother, and fully intended to when I acted, Kikyue-hime. I don't know whether he lost his life because of what I told him, or whether my information came too late to prevent damage... but I swore to myself I would be his justice, whatever the consequences to myself. My life has no other value, so I have come to submit to your Captain, and tell him everything I know."

"To my Captain," Kikyue's eyes narrowed as she absorbed this. "About Aizen Keitarou?"

Consternation flickered across Joumei's expression, and Kikyue nodded.

"I thought so," she murmured. "Whatever you want to tell Otousama, it has something to do with what you told Oniisama, the night he died. Oniisama never could tell us everything — he was far too badly hurt, and he'd lost too much blood to be coherent. But that's why you can't tell me. Father's instructed you, hasn't he? He lost Souja-nii, and he doesn't want me to know in case I hare off looking for revenge. You won't tell me where you found that wench, nor anything else you learned. Right? You'll only tell Father, because Aizen Keitarou's a Captain's prey, no matter how the rest of us think about it."

"I'm sure Hirata-sama would not want harm to befall you, *hime*," Joumei said softly, "and I know Souja-dono wouldn't sanction it. He spoke of you often, when we met... he loved you very much, and if I am soon to join him on the other side of existence, I don't want to do so knowing I'd brought you harm."

"You don't need to tell me anything about my brother," Kikyue snapped, but her eyes had softened, the tears that now trickled down her cheeks making her appear more like the young woman she was

than the composed commanding officer who had given Ohara his orders. "I knew him better than you did. But I suppose if it's like that... I can't override Father's will. He's my Captain, and even if he's acting from an emotional standpoint, I guess I can't... I promised Ojisama not to..."

She swallowed, dashing the tears away.

"I don't know when Father will be back," she admitted. 'If you can't talk to me, is there nobody else? Oh... what about Juushirou-dono?' Her eyes glittered with sudden comprehension. "Juushirou-dono was there when Niisama died, too! I didn't know your name, when Soujannii said it, but Juushirou-dono..."

She ran her fingers absently through her thick dark hair, and Joumei could see the grief and agitation that lurked just beneath the surface.

"It's not like I want to remember the day my brother died, but I can't forget it," she murmured, her tones low as though she was trying to control her emotions. "I see him lying in the forest, I see myself strike down the boy who saved him, and I feel Juushirou-dono pulling me back. Then, I see Onisama lying there, so helpless and bloody... fighting even to speak. I remember every single word he spoke, every look he gave, everything. I dream about it even now. It hasn't faded, and maybe it never will. But it means I know... his last words, I remember them clearly. And I know that what he said, Juushirou-dono understood. So if you won't speak to Father, will you speak to him instead?"

"Ukitake Juushirou-dono?" Sudden hope flared in Joumei's heart, and he nodded his head. "That's right. Juushirou-dono is a Captain as well, isn't he? If it was him... I could... maybe I could..."

"Then I'll send for him," Kikyue cut across him, raising her voice to make contact with the recruit group at the far side of the yard.

"Ohara! Send a recruit to find Tenichi. I want him to go to Thirteenth Division right away and sweet-talk his old Captain into coming here at once. Quickly! The sooner the better."

"Hime?" Ohara blinked, but shrugged his shoulders. 'Very well. You,' he pointed at the nearest youngster, "go do as Kikyue-hime orders. Be quick about it!"

"Yes, sir!" The recruit hurriedly saluted, scrambling off to obey the instruction, and Kikyue turned back to Joumei.

"I don't intend on locking you up," she said matter-of-factly. "The

only crime you've committed in my eyes is taking my brother's vengeance from my Clan. But... I can see it in your eyes, when you speak about him. Even if I don't know anything about you, I know my brother did. I know he trusted you, and you him... so I guess that gives you as much right to the girl's blood as any of us."

"I would sooner you restrained me, *hime*," Joumei put a hand to his chest grimly. "I don't know how long before the poison activates, but when it does, I may turn violent. I would sooner not die before I have made my full report, but I won't have Souja-dono's sister come to harm. Besides, someone is likely to come after me. I might bring that person here, and..."

"I won't get hurt," Kikyue cut across him, folding her arms across her chest. "Just because I'm young, or a girl, you shouldn't underestimate me. I was the *hime* whose power rose too quickly and too violently for me to even go to the Academy, let alone train through the normal methods. I had my *zanpakutou* earlier than any of Seventh's other members... and I'm not Third Seat just because I'm Taichou's daughter. I can fight my corner, and with all respect, right now you don't look capable of much in that line."

"But *hime*, I..."

"You're Father's man, and Souja-nii's friend. For now, that will do, though it won't suffice forever," Kikyue put a hand to the hilt of her weapon, sending him a warning glance. "Besides, it doesn't seem like there's much more time for talking. I don't know how good your senses are, but mine are pretty good. Something's in the air, and that something is coming this way. Whatever is following you... it looks like it's about to show itself."

"*What?*" Horror flooded Joumei's expression as he realised that his companion was right, and that where the air had been clear before, suddenly the dull swell of rage that had engulfed him in the Spiritless Zone was beginning to creep once more across the atmosphere. Kikyue frowned, muttering a very un-ladylike curse, then she raised her voice again.

"Ohara! I want Nakata and Hajime-dono out here now, and tell them to come armed and ready for a fight! Never mind the recruits — we're about to get a visitor, and this one means business!"

"You're up early."

As the members of the Thirteenth Division not on dawn patrol finished their morning meal and headed to begin their usual tasks,

Ketsui paused to greet Izumi, stifling a yawn with the back of his hand then offering her a rueful grin. "I'm surprised to see you around at this time — you're not scheduled on any of the patrol or drill rotas and with the work we did last night, I'm amazed you're even awake. If Kira-san hadn't accidentally dropped his sword getting ready for dawn patrol this morning, I might not have made it up for breakfast myself."

He stifled another yawn, eying the young girl keenly, his grin widening as he saw the look of long-suffering derision cross her face. She grimaced, rolling her eyes skywards, then grabbed him by the arm, giving it a little tug before gesturing in the direction of the library. Ketsui's eyebrows disappeared into his floppy fair fringe, and he shook his head.

"There's nothing else we can do there right now," he said softly, his expression becoming grave. "After what we discussed last night, the next step is telling Taichou. You need my help to do that, don't you? Or does Taichou understand your sign language better than I do?"

Izumi shook her head impatiently, then reached into the sleeve of her *hakamashita*. Carefully she pulled out what appeared to Ketsui to be a rolled up scroll, but the next moment it was gone, and she eyed him expectantly, her gaze darting back in the direction of the archive. The corridor was still busy with people, coming this way and that, and after a moment of consideration, Ketsui pursed his lips, then let out a heavy sigh.

"Fine. You win," he said reluctantly. "I'm following you. Lead the way."

Izumi nodded in satisfaction, setting off at a bright pace along the corridor and, as he loped after her, Ketsui realised that even if he was feeling the effects of late sleeping and early rising, his companion apparently was not.

The archive was deserted at that time in the morning, and Izumi had clearly anticipated this, for she shut the door with a sharp click, pushing one of the big heavy chairs up against the runner to prevent anyone else from pushing it open unexpectedly. This done, she crossed the room towards the table where they had been working the night before, pulling the scroll from her sleeve and spreading it out on the wooden surface.

Ketsui came to gaze at it over her shoulder, letting out an exclamation as he realised what it was.

"When did you write this? Did you actually even sleep last night?"

Izumi shot him another scornful look, then gave the paper a little shove in his direction. She folded her arms across her chest, glaring at him, and Ketsui grimaced, reaching out to scoop the single sheet of parchment up.

“I see. You don’t trust me to report it clearly and concisely to Taichou, so you’ve written me a failsafe script to help me along. Is that about the root of it?”

Izumi nodded, and Ketsui gazed at the neatly sketched out diagram once more, taking in the carefully scribed figures and the abbreviated notes that framed the page. Izumi’s writing was in an archaic style, her use of characters far more traditional than the rough script he had learned as a child, but her calligraphy was of superior quality, and he found that even though some of the kanji were unknown to him, he could work them out all the same. He ran his finger over the notes, realising that his first impression had been mistaken and, far from being abbreviated, they were, in fact, uniquely structured sentences, comprehensible but unlike anything in spoken Japanese.

But Ichimaru-san doesn’t speak, so I suppose she wouldn’t think about things like that. Maybe she writes in the same way she signs... perhaps if I read this more closely, I’d understand her language better.

Out loud he said,

“But you’re coming with me, aren’t you? You can jab me in the back and glower at me if I read something wrong. It’s your work, anyhow — not mine.”

Izumi pulled a graphic face, moving over to the window and pushing it open.

“Ichimaru-san?” Naoko’s voice from the yard made Ketsui jump, hurriedly shoving the scroll into his *obi*. “What are you doing, hiding in the library? Didn’t I tell you yesterday that I wanted to see you right after breakfast this morning?”

“Shikibu-san?” Ketsui pulled himself together, coming to stand at the recruit’s side, and at the sight of him, Naoko let out a sigh.

“Ah, she’s with you, is she?” she observed wearily. “Well, I didn’t tell you, so I don’t suppose you’d have found out any other way. I need Ichimaru-san this morning. All recruits have to sign and seal certain paperwork on arriving in the division, and Ichimaru-san’s not filled in any of the necessary documents since she’s been here. They’re waiting for her in Fukutaichou’s office — now that he’s finally dug them out from the mountain of junk he calls his paperwork in tray — and I need to countersign them, so I’d like to get it done before he

comes back off morning patrol and starts getting in our way.”

She arched an eyebrow.

“Unless, of course, you have something more pressing to do?”

“It’s all right, Shikibu-san,” Ketsui held up his hands hastily, shaking his head. ‘I had no idea you needed Ichimaru-san, but it’s all right. I have... I have another errand I need to take care of, anyway, and paperwork is important. I’ll see you later,’ this last to Izumi. “Wait for me under the willow tree in the gardens and I’ll come find you there.”

Izumi gazed at him for a moment, and Ketsui was aware of the gravity in his companion’s silver eyes. She nodded her head, then bowed to Naoko, pushing the window fully open and dropping nimbly down onto the grass outside. She turned, saluting Ketsui in a way that seemed more an exchange of trust than a gesture of respect towards a senior officer, and then she and the Third Seated officer were gone.

Ketsui dropped back against the wall of the archive, letting out his breath in a sigh. He had trained with Naoko as a recruit, and even now knew that it was often best not to argue when she had something specific in mind to do. Though in terms of rank, Enishi had always held the higher honours, Ketsui was fairly certain that even the Vice Captain would not win in a battle of wills with Shikibu Naoko, and, he reflected wryly, had probably volunteered for dawn patrol that morning in order to clear his office and avoid the long lecture about disorganised documentation that was doubtless coming his way.

Still, it means I have to take Ichimaru-san’s knowledge and report it to Taichou, so I shouldn’t waste any time.

Ketsui pursed his lips, patting his *obi* absently.

It’s not good to have something like this in writing, not if it can be traced back to Ichimaru-san. If she starts signing documents, then someone will be able to make a match, and while I’m pretty sure everyone in Thirteenth Division is trustworthy, if someone really did break in the other night, it doesn’t mean it’s entirely secure. I don’t know what Ichimaru-san is hiding from or why she might be in danger, but I did promise I’d protect her. Taichou obviously brought her here to figure out things the rest of us haven’t been able to — so it’s my job to act as her voice now and make sure the people in command know about it too.

Glancing for a moment at the jammed door, he decided against trying to move the heavy chair back in place, vaulting instead over the windowsill and out onto the grass beyond.

“That’s not the usual way people exit libraries, unless Thirteenth

has developed some new habits since last I was here.”

An amused voice greeted his landing, and he glanced up, surprise and pleasure crossing his face as he recognised his brother.

“Ten-nii! What are you doing here?”

“Much as I’d like to say it’s to see you and Kirio, I have an errand from Kikyue-dono and she’s not usually a person to argue with, especially not at the moment,” Tenichi pulled a face. “Do you know where Ukitake-taichou is right now? I have to speak to him — apparently he’s needed at Seventh, though for what I couldn’t tell you.”

“Taichou?” Ketsui pursed his lips, a troubled look crossing his brow as he remembered the precious scroll Izumi had entrusted to him. “I was about to go look for him myself. At this time, probably in Ugendou. Fukutaichou isn’t here, and Shikibu-san is using his office, so I imagine Taichou would be in his own quarters.”

“Fine, then I’ll come with you and nobody will get suspicious about my being here,” Tenichi suggested warmly. “It seems like a long time since we’ve spoken, and I’m sure that’s mostly my fault.”

“No, I think it’s just a case of being busy,” Ketsui rubbed his temples. “Kirio-nee has said you’ve visited, only I’ve not been around at the time. I’m sorry for that, Nii-chan. It wasn’t on purpose.”

“Like I ever thought it was,” Tenichi snorted, though for a brief instant Ketsui thought he saw his companion’s greenish eyes cloud over. “If a Tenth seat isn’t busy, he’s not pulling his weight properly. It’s all right — besides, I’ve had plenty on my plate too, and Kirio said you’d been dumped with a recruit. It’s a lot of hassle, I bet — taking on someone new all of a sudden and out of season like this?”

The question was innocent enough, but Ketsui hesitated, unsure of how to answer.

Taichou entrusted Ichimaru-san to me, which means that I can’t talk about any of our work to anyone, not even Ten-nii. Even though I trust him more than anyone else in Soul Society... I decided I wasn’t going to be a burden on him any more, and I was going to do things for myself. Well, if Keitarou was involved in your abduction, Ten-nii, reminding you about it might upset you again. I don’t want to ever see you the way you were when Souja-dono died, so even if I trust you... no, because I trust you, I can’t tell you any of this.

“Ketsui?” Tenichi was looking concerned, and Ketsui roused himself from his reverie, offering his companion a rueful smile.

“She can’t hold a sword, and doesn’t really seem inspired to try,” he said honestly, “otherwise there’s nothing much to say. Recruits are recruits. We’ve all been there. She’ll shake down and be fine. And I don’t consider it a burden — it’s actually an honour that Taichou trusted me with the job. I’ve never had this much responsibility over a recruit before.”

“An honour, huh,” Tenichi rubbed his chin, turning his gaze away from his brother to glance around the division barracks, then he sighed.

“Well, it’s not like it’s my business. I’m a foreigner in these parts now, and so your recruits are hardly anything to do with me.”

“Maybe that’s true, but that doesn’t mean you can’t ask,” Ketsui assured him. “I’m just trying to stand on my own two feet and think about things for myself, that’s all. If I have to mentor someone else, I can’t always be running to Nii-chan or Kirio-nee for help, now can I?”

“I suppose not,” Tenichi ruffled Ketsui’s hair playfully, and Ketsui shoved him away.

“Oniichan! I’m not six years old any more!”

“No, thank goodness, or I’d still have you hiding under blankets whenever there was thunder or lightning over the village,” Tenichi’s words were teasing, but there was something strained in the light-hearted words, and Ketsui frowned, eying his brother more closely for the first time. There were shadows under the older man’s eyes, he noticed with surprise, and Tenichi looked weary, the creases in his brow making him appear troubled. He sighed.

“Seventh has been chaotic lately, hasn’t it?” he asked softly, and Tenichi started, staring at him in surprise.

“What do you mean?”

“I heard about the intruder, and how you almost blew up half the boundary fence getting rid of him.”

“Yeah, and a fine scolding I got for it afterwards,” Tenichi said darkly. “Don’t worry about me, Ketsui. I’m fine, I can handle a little extra work and right now that’s all I can do. Besides, I didn’t nail the guy. I wanted to, but he slipped my hold. I heard a rumour he’d come here... was that true?”

“I didn’t see anyone, but it’s a rumour here too, and most people think it’s true,” Ketsui agreed. “Nobody was hurt, though, so whatever he came here for, he was obviously scared off and hasn’t been back.”

“You didn’t see him?” Tenichi asked anxiously, and Ketsui laughed, shaking his head.

“I didn’t, so you can take that worried look off your face,” he said firmly. “I mean, it Ten-nii. I was assigned the most boring task of everyone — babysitting the recruits within the barracks, and I didn’t get to see or even hear anything except Shikibu-san giving orders late into the night. Nor did Kirio-nee... nor did anyone, apparently. It really was a non-event, and Taichou didn’t let the Onmitsukidou in to search, so I guess he thinks its a settled issue.”

“A settled issue, huh,” Tenichi’s lips thinned, then, “Okay. If you didn’t see him, I guess it doesn’t matter if he came to Thirteenth. But the boy who Kirio brought back — the one who was here when I came to report Souja-dono’s death to Fukutaichou — is he all right? Kirio said he’d been targeted... did they resolve that at all?”

“Resolve..?” Ketsui frowned, remembering the encounter the previous night, then he shrugged.

“I haven’t had much to do with him, but I’ve heard he’s been up and around a little, so I guess he’s healing properly,” he hazarded eventually. “I haven’t had a single conversation with him, but if he can get up, that must mean he’s doing all right. I don’t know anything about anything else. Kirio-nee would be able to tell you, but I’ve had my hands full with Ichimaru-san.”

“I suppose so,” Tenichi looked thoughtful, but before Ketsui could ask him anything, they reached their destination, and the Eighth Seat strode forward, rapping smartly on the wooden door.

“Ukitake-taichou? I’m sorry for the abrupt invasion, but it’s Kotetsu Tenichi. I’ve come with an urgent message from Kikyue-dono — can I come in?”

“Tenichi?” Juushirou pushed back the door, glancing from older brother to younger, then, “and Ketsui too? Are you part of this deputation as well, Ketsui, or...?”

“No, sir. I had another matter to discuss with you, and met Ten-nii in the grounds,” Ketsui shook his head. “Seventh’s message seems an urgent one, so I thought he should speak to you first.”

“Well?” Juushirou cast Tenichi a quizzical look, and Tenichi reddened slightly, faltering for a moment beneath the intensity of his former Captain’s stare.

“Tenichi?” Juushirou’s prompt was soft-spoken, and Tenichi sighed, bowing his head before the older man.

“Kikyue-dono would like you to come to Seventh immediately, sir,” he said, his words suddenly deferential and polite in a way that made the two men seem like strangers, instead of former Captain and subordinate. “She said that there was a visitor and it was urgent. Apparently that’s why she sent me... she thought I might convince you to come more easily than a stranger.”

“Kikyue, but not Hi... Endou-taichou?” Juushirou questioned, and Tenichi shook his head.

“Taichou was called away at dawn,” he replied earnestly, at last managing to meet Juushirou’s gaze. “Apparently Ai-hime sent for him, and he left before most of us had risen.”

“I see,” Juushirou’s eyes became sober. “And Shunsui’s no good, either, is he? Today’s he’s going to Eighth to deliver reports to his brother... that’s why it has to be me?”

“I don’t know,” Tenichi admitted. “Kikyue-dono is in charge, and it was you she asked me to...”

“What was that?” Before Tenichi could finish his explanation, Juushirou clapped a hand down on his shoulder, sending an anxious glance in the direction of the Seventh Division barracks. “An unfamiliar reiatsu... and an angry one at that. When Kikyue said a visitor...”

“An attacker?” Ketsui whitened, his hand going instinctively to protect the scroll in his *obi*, and Juushirou’s expression became grim.

“I’m going to Seventh,” he said frankly. “Tenichi, Enishi is on patrol, but Naoko is in his office. Go report to her in full whatever it was you were sent to tell me, and that she’s to take charge here — in the event of any danger, she’s to send to Twelfth without waiting for my authorisation, and if Enishi comes back in the meantime, she should convey this information to him. When you’ve done that, return to the Seventh as quickly as you can. Ketsui,” he turned his gaze on the anxious Tenth seat, even as Tenichi saluted and disappeared into shunpo, “go find your recruit and stick to her like glue. Do you understand me? Whatever you had to tell me, it can wait till I come back — in the meantime, that task ought to take priority over anything else you had planned to do.”

Ketsui stared at his Captain’s grim expression, then nodded his head.

“Yes sir,” he said softly. “At once.”

The words had barely left Kikyue's mouth before the swirl of burgeoning reiatsu exploded into the courtyard of the Seventh Division, the force of the creature's shunpo exit enough to blow apart the slats of the substantial new barrier fence as though they were made of nothing more than paper. At first Kikyue struggled to see the face of their intruder, the haze of dust and reiatsu surrounding his body was too great but, as the debris from the explosion began to settle, she saw for the first time that it was not a creature at all, but a young man of around the same age of both Joumei and her brother. He was lean and dark haired, his unkempt appearance enhanced by the flickering energy around his body. He did not appear to be carrying a weapon, but the gleam in his blue eyes was both unmistakable and deathly familiar, and Kikyue swallowed hard, recognising both the intent to kill and the instinct for it lurking in those vivid depths.

Despite herself, Kikyue felt a chill run down her spine, and, more by instinct than conscious thought she grasped the hilt of her own weapon, moving to stand in front of the bloodstained Joumei. She cast the silver-haired refugee a sidelong glance, taking in the tension in his weary frame and the glitter of consternation in his argent eyes, but there was no time to say anything further, for with a second devastating whirl of *reiryoku* energy, the interloper advanced, his aura alone causing the Endou crest to rattle and tug free from its chains above the division gate. Like it had been fired forth from a cannon, it flew through the air, smashing through the roof of the division's training gymnasium with a tremendous crash. The severed chains dangled folornly in the breeze, colliding with a mournful, clanging chime.

"Everyone, get inside!" She screamed, and across the courtyard, the recruits who Ohara had been overseeing mere moments before shrank back towards the safety of the squad outbuildings. Though Kikyue inwardly derided their cowardice, she was also relieved at their quick obedience, for she had soon realised that she would struggle to protect both them and the Kitsune, and Ohara had not yet returned with his companions to help bolster Seventh's defences. Had Hirata been there, it would've been a different matter, she acknowledged to herself grimly, but he was not, and it had never been her battle strategy to stop and think of might-have-beens when there was a job to be done.

She summoned her courage, trying to emulate her brother's calm, professional front, then took a step forward, drawing her sword resolutely from its sheath and standing straight and indignant before the intruder.

“Get out of the way,” The man’s aura prickled with frustrated energy, his blue eyes absorbing her stance. “My business isn’t with you.”

“This is Seventh Division,” Kikyue held her ground, though her heart was pounding in her chest just from the force of his reiatsu. “I’m the senior officer in charge. An incursion here is an insult to my squad and my Clan and I don’t take either one of those lightly.”

“I told you, my business is not with you.”

“No, but you made it my business the moment you came here,” Kikyue twitched her weapon slightly in her grip. “You can leave, or I will kill you. Those are your options. Once you step into our territory, you take our justice. The Endou are hunters... we track down our prey.”

“Kikyue-hime, please, step aside!” From behind her, Kikyue could hear Joumei’s voice, “He’s Keitarou’s agent. He came from...”

“Do you think I haven’t realised that?” Kikyue’s eyes sparked with genuine anger at this, her resolution quashing her fear. “I’m not a little girl or a pampered princess, whatever Father might’ve told you about me. I can work things out for myself... if he’s come after you, he’s clearly on that side and that means it’s my job to kill him, no questions asked.”

“But *hime*...”

“Shut up!” Kikyue cut across the protests, staring instead at the ebb and flow of the intruder’s unusual reiatsu as she worked out how best to counter it. She had never before seen anyone whose spirit power was visibly glittering around their body, fluctuating and flaring like sunspots of iridescent light, and with a jolt she realised it was because it was raw and uncontrolled, a sleeping instinct driven by rage and hatred rather than by any formal training or instruction. Somehow this knowledge bolstered her, for she had trained long and hard against her Father’s Wind Hawk as a girl, and she had learned to counteract raw power with skill and speed.

“He’s Keitarou’s son, *hime*!” Joumei’s words broke her concentration once again, shattering her focus as the meaning of them sunk in. “The one who killed Souja-dono was his sister, he said so! He’s here to avenge her... and if he hurt you...”

“Keitarou’s son?” Kikyue’s eyes became slits of glittering rage, her own aura flaring and dancing indignantly as she regarded her enemy anew. It was true, she realised with angry clarity, for the blue eyes

were a hunter's eyes and though they had never met, she could see enough in the curve of the man's jaw and the sweep of his brow to make a match between his features and that of her beloved dead brother. Somehow this only made her more furious, as though just by breathing this newcomer had somehow sullied Souja's memory, and she let out a soft hiss of disdain, shaking her head.

"I see. So this creature..is the spawn of my traitor aunt? A bastard Endou child?"

"Fine words from a little girl with a toy blade," her opponent's words dripped with hatred, and he raised his left hand, flicking it in the direction of the four or five recruits lagging behind the others, still within sight of the courtyard. He twitched his fingers out towards them, and to Kikyue's horror, a wave of psychic energy pulsed through the air, warping and distorting the atmosphere and sending the juniors crashing to the ground where they stood, each one laid out cold against the cobbles in a single strike. He turned cold blue eyes back towards her, a challenge in his gaze.

"They're not dead. Not yet," Every syllable of the man's icy words sliced through her. "Can you protect them from me with a pathetic piece of metal? I don't think so. Do as the vermin says and step aside... he's my prey, and I came to take his life. I didn't come to wage war with the dregs of the Endou gene pool, but if I have to go through your body to get to his, I'll do that too. Right now I don't care who I eliminate, so long as I reach the one I came for."

"Well, then we have a problem," Kikyue retorted blackly. "I'm not going anywhere. As a shinigami, it's my brief to kill you on sight. As an Endou, it will be my pleasure. Your sister killed my brother. Let me return the favour to your family by speaking for you. *Mezame, Kaisoushu!*"

Author's note:

Well, so the Kestrel is finally released. Kikyue's zanpakutou is called ***Kaisoushu*** 壊爪狩, which means "Broken Talon Hunter". The release command, '***Mezame***' 目覚め means "awaken". More on it in the next chapter/AN.

Also, this week's manga — did anyone else feel like we stepped into the Wizard of Oz? "I'm going to take you to the palace! Come with me!"

Or maybe I'm just a bit bitter because Juu didn't get any dialogue...

48. Vengeance

Chapter Forty Seven: Vengeance

The mixture of reiatsu swirling through the powerswept Seventh courtyard was enough to make anyone feel dizzy.

Joumei dropped back against the wall of the barracks with an involuntary sigh, rubbing his temples as he struggled to focus on what was about to take place. His mind, tired and befuddled though it was, wanted him to step forward and interfere, but his body was unwilling to move... and so he found himself a helpless witness. He had once more become pathetic, he reflected bitterly to himself, yet there was nothing he could do. He had built up a long term tolerance to Sekkiseki, having been around it since he was a small child, but he had never been exposed to massive levels of *reiryoku* before, and he was quickly finding this to be his achilles heel. Inner Seireitei's enriched environment was already harsher on his battered body, but Katsura's appearance here had been the last straw. Whatever strength he had wielded in Rukongai, here, in the heart of the shinigami's spiritual domain, it was magnified many times, and had the building not been there to prop him up, Joumei felt sure he would've sunk to the ground, unable to even raise his head under the pressure of such hostile energy.

The sister had been one thing, but the brother...

His eyes narrowed.

Keitarou called him Katsura. It's the first time I've heard that name... which means this one... is probably outside of Seireitei's predictions. He's the unknown — the wildcard — and he's clearly something of a threat.

He moved clumsy fingers to his chest, feeling it tighten, but to his relief he could not sense the threads of the lurking, watching spider. He did not know whether Keitarou was watching the whole proceedings through his eyes, waiting for an opportunity to intervene to Kikyue's detriment in the way he had manipulated the fight in the Spiritless Zone, but at the very least he was not using him as a weapon in his own right.

His gaze flitted to the courtyard. Maybe Keitarou could not manipulate him fully this time, he acknowledged to himself, for if Katsura and Kikyue's flaring power levels were affecting his own spiritual awareness, maybe it was also weakening the exile's hold on

his soul. Whichever it was, he was too weary and drained to move, the real strain of the last few days crashing over him in spades now that he had reached his intended destination and resolved on how to act.

His gaze darted in Katsura's direction, and he frowned.

If I can live a little longer, I can report to Hirata-sama, but better that one takes my life than Kikyue-hime's. I couldn't protect Hirata-sama's son, and doubtless his daughter is stronger than I'll ever be, but if there's a need, I'll have to meet it. I can't fail again.

A fresh flurry of *reiryoku* seared through the Seventh Division grounds at that juncture, and Joumei jerked his gaze across the cobbles to where the resolute figure of the Seventh Division's Third Seat stood, sword in hand. She had spoken what was probably a release command, though Joumei could not clearly make out her words, for the next instant the whole length of the silver blade had been engulfed in a whoosh of energy, sending scattered pieces of broken fencing flying across the yard in a miniature tornado. Despite himself, Joumei's expression became one of surprise and consternation. Did Kikyue also possess a Wind Hawk? *Could* such power be inherited? Souja had once told him that his sword, Iwanosuri, had manipulated stone, so Joumei had assumed that elements could not be passed from parent to child. As the chill wind whipped around the division, however, he found himself hurriedly rethinking his hypothesis.

Souja-dono used to talk about Kikyue-hime, and how she had started training so very early, but he never did tell me what her power manifested as. I jumped to the conclusion she was weaker than her brother... maybe I was wrong.

A sudden hush followed, and, as the dust and debris began to settle once more, Joumei blinked, squinting to make out the result of the young woman's release. Her blade had elongated and sharpened, curving slightly more than a normal katana, and the hilt, patterned with gold and fawn thread, extended from a diamond guard edged in sky blue crystal. It shimmered as it caught the light, or no, that was not just the effect of the sun's rays for, as Joumei watched, the glittering fragments of energy began to draw together. Spellbound, he watched as they knitted themselves into the unmistakable grey silhouette of a bird, two ghostly wings spreading out one on either side. It hovered like a hunting kestrel above Kikyue's head, and as Joumei's gaze flitted to Katsura, he realised the invader had faltered, similarly startled by this sudden manifestation.

It was then Joumei noticed that the very tip of Kikyue's blade had

disappeared, the raggedy edge of the metal suggesting it had been broken somehow. Joumei's eyes widened as he realised what it meant. *A shikigami? Kikyue's sword power is... spirit manipulation using her own blade?*

Oblivious to her companion's thought processes, Kikyue thrust her sword forward, the kestrel above her head opening its beak in a silent screech of defiance. It launched itself across the cobbles at speed, an eerie glitter in its translucent eyes, and Katsura's expression hardened, his hands coming up instinctively to defend against its strike. A wave of psychic energy distorted the atmosphere once again, but the kestrel wheeled above it, sending another silent proclamation of its intent to hunt before coming in for the kill.

"Hadou no Sanjuu San: Soukatsui!" Kikyue slammed her free hand down against the end of the weapon's hilt, and the kestrel spirit arced in the air, extending its wings in acceptance of her command. It opened its claws, light glittering from the ends of its talons, and as Joumei watched in horrified fascination, he realised that this too was another facet of Kikyue's *zanpakutou* — a *shikigami* who could fight on her behalf, while she still held the blade in her hands.

"Get back from me!" Katsura's tones were angry, not frightened, and a second pulse of energy hit the kestrel head on, sending fragments of greyish energy like pieces of ash into the ether. The blue light exploded between them in a sudden glare of azure *reiryoku*, and it was all Joumei could do to shield his eyes against the sudden intensity of the glare. As the light levels began to return to normal, however, he saw that Kikyue had not been so distracted, for she had launched herself forward with a cry of defiance, the jagged end of her broken blade sweeping down towards Katsura's undefended left side. Distracted momentarily, Katsura stumbled back, only just managing to deflect her swing with a poorly formed flare of energy.

Joumei's heart clenched in his chest.

I underestimated the Endou hime. My apologies, Hirata-sama. I had no idea your daughter was capable of this.

The kestrel had gone, apparently dispersed by the kidou explosion, but as Katsura turned his focus to deflecting unarmed the determined slashes of an expert sword, Joumei saw the bird begin to take shape once more, the scattered pieces of its ghostly body pulled together like some kind of spiritual magnetism. Hunting spirit glittered in its eyes, and it seared down fearlessly towards Katsura from the other side. Slow to react, Katsura raised a hand to deflect it, but the bird neatly avoided his attempts, and Joumei winced involuntarily as the bird's

talons ripped through the man's shoulder, leaving long jagged cuts through his clothing and his skin. Blood began to seep from the wound almost immediately, but if Joumei had thought Katsura was pinned back, he soon found himself mistaken.

A tremendous spasm of psychic energy rocked the barracks, dispersing the kestrel a second time, and forcing Kikyue to take a step or two back, shielding herself with an instinctive barrier Kidou.

"Two on one is a cheap fight trick," The intruder spat out, clearly all the more annoyed by the assault.

"So is attacking recruits who can barely hold a sword," Kikyue snapped back. "You chose to come here. The consequences are on your head. I told you that I'd kill you. Maybe you think shinigami are a pushover... but Endou ones aren't."

"That's not what I heard!" Katsura snapped back, anger and frustration in his bright blue eyes. "Your brother was killed by a girl with not even the faintest fragment of spirit power, you know. Duped and cut down by a child. I saw the blood and I know what happened to him. He was carved up on the end of Sakaki's blade, and good riddance to him too! Shinigami do nothing but cause trouble... and if I could, I'd kill you all!"

"Don't you *dare* speak like that about my brother!" Kikyue screamed back at him, and, as though reflecting the disturbance in her emotions, the kestrel's form wavered slightly, its intent to attack lessened and its body becoming more translucent than ever. Katsura smirked.

"Well? I thought you had the conviction to kill me," he said softly. "Are you backing off already, just because I made one little comment you didn't like?"

"I told you I'd kill you, and I will, dammit!" Kikyue flew forward again, but this time Katsura had her measure, and he ducked out of her range, flaring his own energy once more to force her onto the backfoot.

"Doesn't look like it," he taunted her, and to Joumei's dismay he realised that the interloper had moved beyond reason or rationale. Intoxicated by his own flood of power, his rage pumped *reiryoku* through his body, transforming it into the impetus to kill. He was, effectively, out of all control — even his own.

He hasn't been trained. His abilities are messy and his control nonexistent. Because of that... he's a loose cannon. Who knows what he's capable of... or how long he can sustain this before he burns himself out.

“Kikyue-hime!” At that moment Ohara rushed into the yard, Nakata and Hajime in tow, but Joumei’s relief at seeing the arrival of reinforcements was short-lived, for Katsura wheeled on them with an irritated glare, sending a concentrated flare of psychic energy in their direction. Nakata dropped to his knees immediately, Ohara not far behind him, and though the third man remained on his feet, Joumei could see his brow crease in determination, his gritted teeth and the white knuckles of the hand that gripped his *zanpakutou* showing that only force of will and resolution to aid his comrade was keeping him on his feet.

“Pitiful,” Katsura’s words echoed eerily around the devastated barracks. “I thought the Endou were more than just talk, but I guess you were lying. I’ve got your measure now, and I know how to kill you.”

“Shut up talking!” Kikyue snapped, her gaze flitting briefly to her fallen companions, but Katsura tut-tutted, taking a step towards her.

“They won’t do anything to help you,” he said dismissively, his eyes focused intently on her, and Joumei saw the kestrel hovering above Kikyue’s head once more, this time in a defensive posture, its body language announcing that it was ready to strike if the attacker came any closer. Katsura was unphased, however, for he took another step forward, and Joumei saw a truly terrifying smile cross his features.

“What?” he challenged. ‘Do you think your bird scares me? Do you think you scare me? Don’t be silly. I came here with a purpose and I intend to complete it. I want that,’ he waved a hand in Joumei’s direction, a ripple of energy following the line of his gesture, “and I want it dead. All other corpses are bonuses. They matter nothing to me, and nor do you.”

Somehow Joumei managed to fling up a barrier of his own, deflecting the worst of the casual psychic flare, but under the pressure of Katsura’s *reiryoku*, the defensive spell shattered like fragile glass, fragments of his spiritual energy joining the morass that already hung heavy over Seventh’s territory.

“I told you you’re not going to get him,” Kikyue rallied her determination, putting herself once more directly in front of Joumei, weapon drawn and tension running through every sinew of her body. From this range, Joumei could see the beads of sweat coursing across her brow, and Katsura laughed, apparently amused at her bravado.

“I can read your mind,” he said softly, and a chill ran through Joumei’s entire body, the same sense of horror reflected in Kikyue’s

own gaze. 'I know everything you're thinking — about your brother, about that,' he cast Joumei a derisive glance, "everything. The moment you started thinking about your brother's death, you opened yourself up to me."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Normally I can't penetrate through the thoughts of people with high level spirit power," he added, "but today seems to be my lucky day. Past experience has told me that if their emotions are shattered, I can read even those minds far more easily. And who knew? It looks like that was true. So I can avenge my sister... and send you to join that brother that you loved so much."

His gaze hardened.

"You call yourself a hunter," he murmured, "but you're the one who's ending up hunted."

Almost before he had finished speaking, his aura glittered with renewed energy, and Joumei's heart lurched in alarm as he realised that Katsura was gearing up to fire a decisive attack at his opponent. He intended to finish the battle, and then...

"Kikyue-hime!" Hajime's sword glittered briefly with light, as though he were preparing to release, but Katsura flicked a hand in his direction, knocking the blade clean from the Fourth Seat's grasp and sending the officer tumbling back onto the ground.

"Don't interfere. I'll kill you properly afterwards," he said coldly. "Right now I've business with your *hime* — and the vermin who thought he could interfere with my family."

"People who mess with the Endou don't live to tell the tale," Kikyue managed to rally herself, but Katsura snorted.

"You said it yourself," he said derisively. "In your own words — a bastard Endou. Isn't that what you called me? What applies to you applies to me, *Kikyue-hime*. It seems we're cousins... and in this respect at least, we're extremely alike."

He extended his hands towards her, unclasping his fists, and a concentrated pulse of energy shot out across the yard, making the entire atmosphere sway and twist as it crashed like a wave over the Seventh barracks. Kikyue seemed to brace herself, but Joumei could see that her kestrel's power had faded until the bird was little more than a ghost watching from above. He struggled to pull himself into a more upright position, taking one stumbling step and then another towards the epicentre of battle. Even as he fought to block the wave,

however, he knew he wouldn't make it. The pressure of Katsura's oppressive reiatsu, coupled with his own weakened state made him slow and clumsy, and try as he might he could not bring together the concentration needed for one last shunpo jump. Even if he did get there, it might not be enough, but nonetheless... nonetheless...

The next instant Katsura's blaze of psychic energy ricocheted back across the yard towards its master, sending him flying off his feet with the force of the blow. He landed on the cobbles with a thud, momentarily dazed, and Joumei stared at him in disbelief, trying to work out what exactly had just happened. He had been so intent on his own movement that he had not registered a change in the spiritual pressure across the yard but, as he raised his gaze, he saw a fresh figure standing between Kikyue and Katsura, half silhouetted in the light of the sun. A white *haori* framed his body, the distinctive slashes of the number thirteen emblazoned across the back in black, and long white hair whipped against his shoulders in the breeze, torn loose from whatever tie had kept it neatly in place. In each hand he held a sword, long and pointed with a juttied back fin at the midpoint, the right one of which was glittering with residual light, as though it had just fired some kind of attack. Joumei swallowed hard, unable to comprehend what he was seeing.

"Juushirou... dono?"

Kikyue's voice broke through his confusion, and he stared at the interloper anew, his fogged brain finally putting together the pieces and identifying the new arrival.

Ukitake... Juushirou?

"Stand back, Kikyue," Juushirou's words were lacking in any of their usual geniality, and without a word, Kikyue did as she was bidden, something in the Captain's tones quashing her killer instinct and compelling her to obedience. She lowered her sword, the kestrel dissipating into nothing more than dust, and Juushirou turned to glance at Joumei. They met gazes for the briefest of instants, then Juushirou turned his attention back towards Seventh's intruder who was now picking himself up, getting to his feet and glaring at the newcomer in obvious disgust.

"What the hell was that? Who the hell are you? Get out of my way!"

Joumei could not see Juushirou's expression, but from the flicker of reiatsu that flared then settled briefly around the Captain's body, he knew that the District shinigami was unamused.

“This is Seireitei,” he spoke quietly, and suddenly the soft clinking of tokens on the thin reiatsu ribbon connecting his blades was the only sound in a yard that had fallen once more into a deathly hush. “I don’t know who you are or why you’ve attacked my comrade’s division like this, but launching an assault when the Captain is away is a coward’s game.”

“If he were here I’d kill him too!” Katsura spat out, and Joumei realised that the psychic energy was beginning to build up around him once more, the momentary lull having done nothing to calm his anger. “I told the girl, I’m not leaving till I get what I want! I’ll kill you too, if I have to — I’m not going to turn tail and run away. Shinigami don’t scare me... I’ve killed enough of them to know they’re not a challenge. If I have to, I’ll take you out too. You’ve been warned. Stay out of what isn’t your business.”

“I see,” Joumei saw the silver light glittering around the edges of Juushirou’s sword grow more substantial, and he gasped, his breath suddenly stifled as Juushirou allowed the stoppers on his own reiatsu to relax momentarily. “In that case, there’s nothing to talk about. Sougyo no Kotowari and I will have to subdue you by force... and have you answer to Seireitei’s justice.”

It was Katsura’s reiatsu that was flooding Seireitei.

Mitsuki rested her hands on the sill of Koku’s sick room, chewing on her lip as she interpreted the raw waves of energy coursing relentlessly through the atmosphere. Though she knew that her healing skills made the force all the more potent, she was not fool enough to believe that an aura of this level would be ignored by the Captains in the surrounding vicinity. It was distorted and rough, as though it had flared horribly out of control, and Mitsuki’s fingernails dug into the wood of the sill, drawing blood from the tips without her even noticing the pain. This was as far as possible from the young man who had smiled and teased her in the Spiritless Zone, and who had come in such fear and secrecy to beg for her silence. There was no mistaking the killing intent in his presence, and it tore at Mitsuki’s heart.

She sighed, turning back towards the bed. There was nobody else at Koku’s side at present, else she knew that she might throw caution and sense to the winds and head off to find Katsura herself, but she was only too aware of the risk of leaving a vulnerable young patient alone. She had undertaken to care for him, regardless of how much he seemed to resent her presence, and she knew that her responsibility as

a healer would not let her abandon him. He was still sleeping deeply, apparently having overcome the trauma of last night's bad dream, and there would be nobody to miss her if she did slip out, yet she soon discarded the idea with a sigh.

Juushirou is trusting me. I can't let him down. If anything happened to Koku in my absence...

Another spirit power had risen to meet Katsura's, now, she realised, and though she had never seen the release before, she recognised the flare of reiatsu as belonging to the person who had slashed Koku's gut. *Hirata's daughter. Which means... what does it mean?*

A murmur came from the bed, and Mitsuki sat down reluctantly at the young man's side, watching as his eyelids twitched then flickered open, a dazed, hazy expression in their brown depths. He blinked a few times, as though to bring her into focus. He was breathing more quickly than normal, she realised, and his pale skin was unnaturally flushed, as though he were beginning a fever, but as she put a hurried hand to his brow, she felt only cold, clammy skin. She frowned, pushing her concern over Katsura aside and scrutinising the young man's demeanour more carefully. He was sweating profusely, she noted in alarm, though it was not pain but fear that was reflected deep in the brown eyes, and Mitsuki wondered if he was even able to see her at all. For a moment he didn't react to her touch, but then, as though triggered by some unknown force, he pushed back her hands, struggling to bring his body into a sitting position. Dragging huge gulps of air into his lungs, he rubbed his brow, and Mitsuki wondered whether he was trying to suppress another bout of nausea. She opened her mouth, about to speak, but before she could, thin, pale hands reached out to grab her around the wrist, making her jump.

Koku's lips moved, the sound barely coherent, but Mitsuki's heart almost stilled in her chest as she understood the three syllables he had uttered.

Katsura.

She stared at him in dismay, her mind racing. She could feel the overwhelming spirit pressure — could Koku possibly feel it too? But even if he could, that didn't explain... it couldn't explain how...

"I need to go... Katsura." Koku was speaking again, his words broken and hoarse. "Have to... stop him. Need... to... go..."

"Woah," Mitsuki regained her wits, grabbing him firmly by the shoulders and pushing him back down onto his pillow. "You're not going anywhere, Koku-kun. You're under orders to stay here and they're orders I'm going to make you obey. You just had another bad

dream, that's all. Rest, and it will all..."

"He'll be killed," Koku's words were barely more than a whisper now, and Mitsuki gazed at the tears that now glittered on the young boy's lashes, stricken by the depth of emotion in his brown eyes. "Please, Edogawa-san. Let me go. Here... is no good. I can't... he can't hear me. I can't... make him stop."

At first, the real implication behind Koku's words didn't sink through Mitsuki's own sense of confusion, but, as little by little Koku's last words penetrated her thoughts, she sighed, her hold on his shoulders loosening.

"Stop him? Stop him how?" she murmured, and Koku swallowed hard, closing his eyes briefly to pull together his composure before meeting her gaze with a troubled one of his own.

"He isn't listening," he admitted softly. "I can't... reach him from here."

"Reach... him?" Mitsuki's eyes narrowed, then she drew breath sharply. "You mean... read his mind?"

"I can't read your thoughts now, Mitsuki-san, but I have read people's minds before. I don't know if it's normal or if it isn't — I don't know enough people with spirit power to ask"

Katsura's own words came suddenly to mind, and she drew her hand back from Koku's body, eying him in consternation.

"Can you read my mind? Or... or *his* mind?"

"No," Koku looked frustrated at her lack of comprehension, but he shook his head. "I can't. Only Katsura... if he wants to hear me, he will."

"You know Katsura from before?" Mitsuki demanded, and Koku drew a heavy breath into his lungs, lowering first one leg then the other over the side of the bed and grasping hold of Mitsuki's sleeve for support. He didn't answer her at first, and though Mitsuki knew she ought to be stopping him, she made no attempt to interfere. At length he shrugged.

"It's hard to put into words you'd understand," he admittedly.

"So you and he... are allies?" Mitsuki's brain lurched and wheezed back into life, putting together the fragments into a bigger picture. "He saved my life, and you tried to save Souja-dono's... so I suppose that makes sense. But... this reiatsu..."

“He’s angry,” Koku looked troubled. “I should’ve stopped it. Last night... I was going to...”

He rubbed his temples furiously, as though trying to recall something, and Mitsuki’s brows knitted together in consternation.

“Last night?” she echoed. “Last night, when you had your nightmare?”

“I don’t have nightmares,” Koku said grimly. “I wish I did. But right now, I... I need you to... believe me. I can stop Katsura. Maybe I’m the only one who... who can. And I want to stop him. I need to. I don’t want him to kill anyone... and you don’t want to lose any more friends, do you?”

“Kill...?” Mitsuki stared at Koku in alarm, and the young boy nodded.

“This reiatsu is out of control,” he whispered. “If we don’t stop it, someone will get hurt. Maybe Katsura, maybe... someone else. I can’t tell, it’s too... it’s too wild. It’s making me dizzy, but it’s my fault. I should’ve been able to stop this. Last night... I should have...”

Mitsuki gazed at him for a moment, then she got to her feet, hauling him up alongside her. He stared at her, non-plussed, and she offered him a rueful smile, kicking a pair of spare sandals across towards him.

“It’s cold on the cobbles, and you’ll split your feet,” she said matter-of-factly.

“You... believe me?” Koku stared, and Mitsuki nodded, grabbing a spare robe from a hook on the wall, and wrapping it firmly around Koku’s thin shoulders.

“I don’t know what connection you have to him, but I don’t want to see him — or anyone else — killed,” she admitted. “I don’t know why he came, or why he’s so angry, but this is not good. It’s just going to become a bigger incident, and if that happens...”

She froze mid-sentence as another, more familiar reiatsu pierced the air, and her heart clenched in her chest.

“Juushirou,” she whispered, horror curling around her heart, and Koku gritted his teeth.

“We have to go. Now,” he begged. “Otherwise... someone is definitely going to get killed.”

Mitsuki nodded her head, moving to open the sliding door. Before

she could touch it, however, it moved back on its own, and she jumped back with a yelp, almost falling over Koku in her surprise.

“Edogawa-san?” Kirio flung out a hurried hand to right her companion’s balance, casting her a concerned look. “I’m sorry, I thought you’d have sensed...”

She trailed off, seeing for the first time Koku’s attire, and her eyes widened, a question in her expression as she glanced from Mitsuki to the young Rukon stray.

“Edogawa-san?” she murmured, and Mitsuki grimaced, hesitating for a split-second before making up her mind. She grabbed Kirio by the hand, giving it a little tug.

“Your shunpo will be better than mine, since I’m still healing,” she observed, “and with all the reiatsu, I’m not sure I can aim straight. Please, Hikifune-san, we need your help. I don’t want Koku running around the streets of Seireitei, but we need to go to Seventh. Something’s happened, and...”

“Seventh?” Kirio looked alarmed, then she shook her head. “But Taichou’s gone there. Ketsui told me so on my way back here... and just now, I felt his sword. If you go... if either of you were to go... interfering in the Captain’s business is...”

“People might die if we *don’t* go,” Mitsuki said seriously, and Kirio bit her lip, casting Koku another glance.

“This has something to do with you?” she asked, and Koku nodded his head.

“I think I can stop it, if I’m there,” he said softly. “Someone will die if I don’t go and try. I don’t want... anyone else to die. *Anyone* else.”

Kirio gazed at him for a moment, then her eyes softened.

“You’re serious,” she realised.

“We’re wasting time,” Mitsuki interjected. “It might sound crazy, Hikifune-san, but I believe Koku. I believe that if we go to Seventh now, we can stop anyone getting hurt. We can diffuse the situation. I’ll take responsibility with Ukitake-taichou — I intend to take full responsibility for it, anyway, whatever the outcome. But we can’t waste any more time here. We need to go. Now.”

Kirio pursed her lips, then she sighed, reaching out to curl her other hand around Koku’s wrist, tightening her hold on Mitsuki’s.

“I guess we’re going, then,” she said resignedly. “If people’s lives

are at stake, I guess I have to just believe you. You're a healer, and Taichou trusts you, so I will too. And I'll just have to hope I survive the fallout later."

Likewise.

Mitsuki's heart flip-flopped as she registered the seriousness of the decision she'd made, but she knew it was too late to go back.

Whoever Katsura really is, I knew about him and protected him without bothering to find out everything about him. Maybe that was a mistake. Even if Koku knows him... no, because Koku knows him and wants to stop him, it makes me think there was something I needed to know and don't. Because of that, I've made naive choices... and if he hurts someone here, it will be partly my fault. Even if it's just a case that his spirit power has overloaded and he can't control it. I have things I need to talk to Juushirou about, clearly — but right now it's Katsura I'm most concerned with. We have to stop this... everything else can go from there.

She nodded her head at Kirio.

"I promise, it will be on my head," she said soberly. "Let's go."

Calling me to that poky little room to sign some dusty documents when there's so much more to be done was not the best use of time ever.

Pushing back the sliding door, Izumi stepped daintily out into the grounds, glancing around her for any sign of Ketsui, but he was nowhere to be seen and she let out her breath in a resigned sigh, picking her way carefully across the grass towards the willow tree, being as careful as she could to avoid the lingering dew that still clung to some of the denser patches. Though she liked the change of having soft earth and living flora underfoot, she had soon learned that damp *tabi* were not considered an acceptable reason to go inside and dry off, and, after a couple of drill sessions with wet feet, she had learned where best to step if she wanted to avoid a chill.

Naoko had been brisk and business-like with the documentation, and though Izumi had had no way to ask, she had got the distinct feeling that there was more than routine paperwork on the officer's mind. Despite her general apathy towards Seireitei's black and white clad military, Izumi had a certain amount of respect for this young woman, who, in a world that was still overtly masculine, held such sway and respect over all those around her. For that reason, she had listened obediently and followed instructions quickly and concisely, and as a result she had been finished quickly, hurrying from the office to rendezvous with the younger Kotetsu boy. Her scientific theories

were still buzzing around her brain, and she was impatient to make sure that he had reported everything to Juushirou in clear, coherent detail. The shinigami chain of command was another mystery to her, but she had realised quickly that, whilst she was here, it would be better to adhere to it if she wanted to get anything done at all.

It's a pain, though. Shinigami have such odd rules. They care so much about such little things, and pay no attention at all to such huge ones. I suppose Oniisama knew what he was doing when he sent me here, but... Oniisama?

Izumi frowned, resting her hand against the trunk of the tree as she tried to pick out the very faintest of presences on the wind. Had she imagined it, or was that Joumei's reiatsu?

But why would he be here? Ukitake-dono said he wouldn't come, not so long as it was dangerous. It's surely still dangerous and Ketsui-dono and I have only just come to the proper conclusions about our enemy... why would you come here again so soon, Nii-sama?

She closed her eyes, reaching out her senses to try and latch on to that brief, familiar aura, but it was gone, swallowed beneath the waves of another, and Izumi could not be sure it had ever been there in the first place. She opened her eyes with a sigh, turning away from the direction of the Seventh, and sinking back against the trunk of the tree, reaching out to brush the delicate fronds of the willow with her fingers.

Imagination? Maybe. I didn't realise how much I would miss him, if I was so far away from home. Now I can't go back, and Hiko is dead, and... I suppose it makes me miss him all the more. He wouldn't come back here, though. He's not foolish. He'd stay away.

"It's just for a while, and for the sake of getting Keitarou's neck in a noose," she could hear his voice now, and see him darting from this chamber to that, gathering up whatever he thought she might need and pausing only to impart information at her in fits and starts. "I know you won't like it, and I'm sorry, but it's all I can do. This place will be attacked... I don't know when, but it's bound to be, now he's come so close. Juushirou-dono is honourable and he'll look after you. In return, do what you can for them."

Oniisama, you really do know how to hand out the most irritating jobs.

Izumi twisted the green leaves absently over her finger and thumb, bending but not breaking the delicate branch from which they hung.

I do like the fresh air, though, and sunlight is more and more appealing the longer I'm here. I suppose... I could've been landed with a worse

mentor, too. He's not a Kitsune, but even though he's an Urahara, he doesn't seem like one tied up with the hate laws of that Clan. He has brains, and fortunately he seems to know how to use them.

A faint smile touched her lips.

I might actually consider liking him, if he didn't have such military manners, and if I didn't have to be here, running around at the shinigami's beck and call all the time. All this rank business is so silly. They're so stupid and frustrating and dense. It's mortifying to consider, but it's only the fact Ketsui-dono's allowed me to work on what I should be working on and has covered for me over sword drill that my life here is bearable. Why would I ever want to wave a sword around? It's ugly and ungainly and forces and kinetic energy are infant studies. Still...

The smile faded.

If what we worked out last night is true, things are going to get very, very dangerous here quite soon. Not just for me, but for a lot more people. Ketsui-dono might need to persuade Ukitake-dono that Keitarou is coming, but I know the probability is high. The evidence all points to that one hypothesis... I'm certain we're not wrong.

"We meet again."

The voice was soft, and at the sound of it Izumi opened her eyes wide, wheeling around to face the speaker with an expression of dismay on her young features. Tenichi was lounging up against the far gate of the garden, blocking her path between the grounds and the outer barracks. Though she had neither heard or seen him approach, he had clearly been there for a moment or two, for his sword was already drawn from his sheath and he was swinging it lazily back and forth in front of his face. At her clear distress he grinned, moving into a more upright position, and taking a casual step or two towards her.

"I didn't expect to see you here, all alone." Tenichi's tones were conversational, but Izumi was immediately on her guard, taking a step back as she read the fluctuations in his spiritual aura and understood his true reasons for singling her out were less than benign. "It must be fate that I get sent with a message and just happen to find you, loitering with intent like this in the Division gardens. Ukitake-taichou and Houjou-fukutaichou aren't around, Naoko-san is apparently busy, locked as far away from here as can be in a mound of paperwork, and half the rest of the division are on patrol. If my reiatsu reading is right, Kirio and Edogawa-san just left here too, and Ukitake-taichou thinks I'm reporting to Naoko-san, so he won't care if I don't follow him right away. My timing couldn't have been more fortunate — I must remember to thank Kikyue-dono later for sending me here like

this.”

He offered her another smile.

“I thought you people only lived underground, but it looks like you’ve made a change in your usual living conditions of late,” he observed. “An interesting coincidence of timing — you appear at Thirteenth right after you and your companions found me in District Seven.”

Izumi glared at him, rallying her *reiryoku* to use her defensive hypnosis, but to her dismay the bright glare of the sun made it a struggle to hold his gaze without blinking or looking away, and Tenichi nodded in satisfaction.

“Now you know why I came into the garden this way,” he said conversationally. ‘With the sun behind me like this, you can’t stare me out like you did before. Oh, I know you did,’ as Izumi flinched back in surprise and consternation. “Twice, I think. I remember, just before I blacked out, and again, when I heard your name. I worried how best to counter something like that, and then it dawned on me.”

He gestured to himself nonchalantly.

“I don’t look like them, but there’s some Urahara blood knocking around inside of me, you know,” he added. “My father was apparently a pretty good scientist, and I can cobble together theories and draw conclusions from them enough to get by when it comes to strategy. In the darkness, you had power... but in the daylight, it’s not so effective, is it? You’re not used to the light... this is my environment, not yours. If you can’t stare into the sun, you can’t lay me out on the ground. I’m not as stupid as you think I am. I graduated top of my class at the Academy, and even if that means nothing to you, in these parts it’s considered quite a feat of achievement. You might’ve fooled everyone else into believing you’re a Gotei recruit, but I know better. I know you’re not.”

He took a step towards her, swinging his sword all the way round in a sweeping arc before taking it more firmly in his grip, and to Izumi’s dismay, the blade began to glitter with a dull reddish energy.

“I know who you are,” All levity had gone from Tenichi’s tones now, and, backed by the sun’s glare, the red haze reflected in his green eyes seemed all the more sinister. “You’re Izumi, you’re from that cursed silver haired tribe, and you shouldn’t be here. More, you shouldn’t be lurking around my brother. I don’t trust you, and I don’t want you anywhere near him. You don’t belong in Inner Seireitei.”

He raised the sword, and Izumi's heart skipped a beat as the glow of energy around the weapon grew denser still.

"I would ask you to leave, but I know you will just come back," he said softly. "I don't know what lies you've told Ukitake-taichou, nor what story you've fed my brother, but it's too dangerous to leave you be. It's time to begin sweeping up the loose ends, beginning with you. *Kiba o muke, Reihahen!*"

As the naginata began to take shape, Izumi took a step back against the tree, understanding the real raw edge to the other's reiatsu, and the genuine flare of killing intent that underpinned it. The gleam in the other's eyes had not been present when he had been their prisoner, his confusion and faltering answers making him simply suspicious, not someone she considered a potential threat. Yet now she knew that Tenichi was dangerous, and more, he had put together the information he knew about her in order to track her down.

Not a fool then. The younger brother, the older brother... I've underestimated both, but in completely different ways, and now...

She took a shaky breath into her lungs, trying to calm her rising panic. Tenichi flexed his fingers, gripping hold of the staff as the branches of the tree began to tremble and shake under the influence of his aura. In dismay she hurriedly stepped away from it, but Tenichi merely laughed, shaking his head..

"Ketsui needs to educate you better. You clearly don't know that a naginata is a range weapon, and a *zanpakutou* like mine can reach you wherever you think to hide," he said acidly. "This is the end of our short acquaintance, Izumi-san. *Kobahashi!*"

Author's Note: Kaisoushu

So when I think of Kikyue, I have this image in my mind of her, reiatsu flaring, with this spectral kestrel wheeling above her head, ready to take down her foes. Unfortunately I can't draw, so it stays in my head. I hope I conveyed some part of it in this chapter. Though up till now all of the Endou have had specifically elemental abilities, somehow this seemed to fit Kikyue's nature, as well as the fact her spirit power was high at an extremely early age. This is, of course, a shikai release. Kikyue doesn't have Bankai, though I would say she had potential to do so in the future. If it isn't already obvious, Kikyue is the most spiritually powerful of Hirata's three children. Souja was strong, and gifted in many respects, particularly the forming of Hell Butterflies, and he was a far more natural leader than his sister. But Kikyue's spirit potential is much higher. Souja's age, gender

and position in the Clan put him in the Vice Captain's position, and he was not weaker than other Vice Captains in this regard — but Kikyue's weaknesses are her impetuosity and inexperience, rather than the ability of her weapon. The fact she can withstand Katsura's assault also shows this — where Joumei and her squadmates are thrown back, it is only when Katsura uses Souja's death to break down her mental barriers and starts reading her thoughts that he is able to put her on the back foot. I think it fair to say that Katsura's abilities put him at the very least at Vice Captain level.

The kestrel shikigami comes from the broken tip of Kikyue's blade, hence why the sword name means "Broken Talon Hunter", as referenced in the previous AN. It is formed from her own reiryoku, so when she weakens, so does the bird. It is capable of physical attacks, and also of acting as a medium for Kikyue's kidou, as witnessed in this encounter with Katsura.

For anyone who doesn't know what a shikigami is, it's a kami (literally, god, but really a more minor spirit) summoned and utilised on the behalf of its master or wielder, a person of spiritual prominence, eg Onmyouji. These can take the forms of animals, birds or other things, and are manipulated by someone with the spiritual knowhow to control them — but doing so also carries risk. This is why Kikyue had to begin her training at such an early age, so that she was able to gain control of her shikigami, rather than it gaining control of her!

And Tenichi. Well, what to say about him. Sigh.

49. Kin

Chapter Forty Eight: Kin

In the moments following the surge of reiatsu around Sougyo no Kotowari's blades, Joumei felt certain he must have lost full consciousness. Caught up in the swell of another shinigami's powerful reiatsu, he had been vaguely aware of his legs buckling beneath him, the reassuringly solid surface of the wall suddenly not so reliable as he began to slip towards the ground. Colours and lights had flickered and flashed through overloaded senses, as though someone had taken his body and spun him round and round several times before dropping him like an unwanted pebble onto a rocky shore, and then, as soon as it had come, the sensation was gone and he found himself lying on the ground, heart racing in his chest and the burning sensation of bile at the back of his throat. A desperate sense of self-preservation made him scramble into a more upright position, fearful of what the unexpected lull had meant.

For a terrible instant he thought that Juushirou must have been defeated, yet as he blinked and brought the world back into clearer focus, he saw the Captain, haori still flapping around his slender body, standing tall and proud with his released swords still gripped in both hands. As he struggled to relocate the wall which had been his firm anchor up until moments before, he caught Juushirou's eye, and a jolt of understanding, followed by one of humiliation washed over him.

It had been only a passing glance, but Joumei had seen concern in the hazel eyes, and he knew that Juushirou had toned down his reiatsu for his benefit.

Yet again people protect me, when my life is already worthless. I don't want more lives sacrificed here, especially not for my sake.

He opened his mouth to speak, but no words came out. Even if he had managed to form sounds, though, he knew that nobody would hear or heed them. Juushirou's attention had returned fully to the matter in hand and the invader, momentarily put off guard by the rebounding of his own psychic wave back towards him, was recovering his composure. Energy prickled around his fingers, more explosive than psychic this time, and Joumei's eyes flitted to Juushirou's left hand blade.

My judgement is skewed, so maybe I understood it wrong, but it looked

as though Juushirou-dono took in Katsura's energy through that sword then fired it back from the other. If he'd done that, surely it would've rushed through his body too? He doesn't seem to have taken any harm from it, though. Father never talked to me about Juushirou-dono's sword, and I don't know if he ever saw it... but if it's really capable of absorbing and returning that level of condensed, savage reiryoku without taking damage himself, it must be a pretty fearful weapon. No wonder my senses were scrambled. No wonder Hirata-sama puts faith in him... if I'm right, it's possible this sword is more powerful than even the Wind Hawk.

"I would advise against firing any kind of Kidou in such a closely confined area," Juushirou was speaking now, his words calm and matter-of-fact, yet still lacking in any of his usual warmth. "If you weren't paying attention the first time, let me advise you before there's a second that burns this whole place to the ground. My sword has the power to return anything you fire at me. Anything at all. Your weapon becomes my weapon, and I have barely begun to release my sword. Your most sensible course of action is to surrender and be taken into custody, before anyone has to get hurt."

"Surrender?" Katsura's aura glimmered ominously, then he snorted, shaking his head derisively. He jabbed his finger in Joumei's direction once more, and though no attack came swirling through the air this time, Joumei's heart felt suddenly cold at the killer intent in the other's blue eyes.

"I came here to kill *that*," he said blackly. '*That* killed my sister, and I want its blood in return. I don't care about you or any of the other shinigami. I'll kill any of you who get in my way. If you give me *that*,' he jabbed his hand at Joumei again, "then I'll leave this place intact. But I'm not going to just turn tail and disappear. If it costs me my life, I intend on avenging my sister's murder."

"Your sister murdered my brother first!" Kikyue's words broke through Juushirou's momentary stunned silence, and Joumei swallowed the huge lump rising in his throat, seeing first shock then horrified comprehension sweep through the hazel gaze.

"Your... sister?" he murmured, followed by, "Kikyue, you know who this lad is?"

"He's Keitarou's son, Juushirou-dono," Kikyue's voice shook — with hatred or emotion, Joumei couldn't tell. "Joumei came here to report to Father that he'd killed the bitch who took my brother. Then *he* appeared," she thrust her sword in the direction of the intruder, and Joumei was struck by the similar resentment in her gesture and in Katsura's own. It was the Endou features, he realised with dismay,

twisting into a mask of hatred, and glancing at Juushirou, he realised that the Captain had realised the same, for Juushirou looked as though he had seen a long dead ghost.

“Eiraki-hime,” he murmured, then his eyes darkened, and Joumei saw the pale fingers tighten around the hilts of both weapons.

“I don’t know what happened between Joumei and your sister,” he spoke in matter-of-fact tones that belied the troubled expression on his face. “Nor does it matter that I find out. I want to know, though, whether Kikyue’s words are true. Are you truly Aizen Keitarou’s son?”

“Why would I tell that to someone protecting someone I hate?” Katsura countered, and Joumei felt the faint ripple of frustrated energy tease its way through Juushirou’s lean form. Somehow he kept his hold on his temper, however, and the silver swords remained silent, however much they hummed with suppressed energy.

“Are you Kohaku?” At length Juushirou’s question came, and Katsura laughed, shaking his head.

“You wish,” he said softly. “My name is Katsura. Aizen Katsura. There. Does that make you happy, shinigami?”

“Kat... su... ra?” Now there was no mistaking the stricken expression on Juushirou’s features, and Joumei frowned, surmising that his earlier supposition had been right.

Seireitei didn’t know about this one. Nor did I.

“That’s right. Katsura,” there was a level of swagger in the other’s tones now, a sort of hedonistic giddiness in his stance, and Joumei chewed on his lip, understanding Katsura’s lack of fear in the face of such a dominant *zanpakutou*.

Keitarou told him to hold back, but he came anyway. Probably he knows his life is forfeit both here and there, but his resolve is firm nonetheless. He came to avenge Sakaki, and that’s all that’s on his mind. To avenge his sister’s death... by killing me. I brought a volatile explosive into the heart of Shinigami territory without even realising it. Ichimaru Joumei, what a careless fool you’ve become.

“Now you know my name, are you content to either die or step aside?”

“On the contrary,” Juushirou seemed to gather himself, his reiatsu settling and pooling once more into the weapons’ gleaming blades. “If you’re Keitarou’s son, then it’s my duty to kill you.”

“Do you think you can?” Katsura mocked, and, to the watching Joumei, the flinty smile Juushirou gave in return was truly terrifying.

“It’s not in my nature or usual practice to kill those who, spiritually, are no more than babes in arms,” he said disparagingly. “I would prefer you to surrender, so I can hand you over to people better suited to dealing with complicated prisoners and difficult political circumstances. I am still a shinigami Captain, though, and the kill-on-sight order does extend to me. Whatever your provocation, you are considered a felon and an outlaw and as such, expendable. I’m not inclined to kill someone who hasn’t shown themselves to be a danger... but from the manner of your approach here in Seventh, clearly you’re a threat and it’s my duty to stop you.”

He raised his weapons, and Joumei felt the swirl of dizzying reiatsu begin to rise once more.

“Your last chance to surrender,” he said softly, “or I will be forced to enact the Council’s decision without mercy.”

“Juushirou! No!”

What happened next, Joumei did not really know, for one minute Juushirou had been preparing to activate his sword, and the next three more figures had appeared in the Seventh courtyard — two dressed as shinigami, and one in little more than night robes, the loose fabric giving away the fact that his torso was heavily bandaged underneath. One of the shinigami had darted forwards, grabbing Juushirou’s right arm with little attention to her own safety, and Juushirou cursed, pulling back his weapon in a hurry and casting the newcomer a startled look.

“Mitsuki? What are you...?”

“Please, don’t kill anyone,” the girl called Mitsuki begged, not loosing her hold on Juushirou’s white-haori sleeve, and to Joumei’s surprise the Captain lowered his weapons completely, passing his left blade into his right hand before moving to pry her free from his robe. She held firm, however, despite his best attempts, and Joumei was struck by her persistence.

“Why did you come here?” the Captain demanded, followed by, “Hikifune?! What is Koku doing here? I thought you of all people had better sense than to...”

“I ordered her to,” Mitsuki cut across what had appeared to be the start of a scolding, and Joumei’s gaze fell once more on the straggly third member of the party. He was thin and clearly weak, for he had sunk down onto the cobbles the moment they had dropped from shunpo, yet the moment Joumei met the boy’s brown gaze, he felt a sense of cold foreboding swallow him up inside. There was something

closed in Koku's expression, an odd tension in his body, and Joumei's eyes flitted across the courtyard to where he felt sure Katsura must be rallying his power to launch a new attack.

Keitarou sent another ally into the fray to distract Juushirou-dono, so that Katsura could kill me and escape. I should've known better than to assume I'd thought out all of the layers of his plan... but I hadn't realised that the poison was so deeply ingrained into the roots of the tree.

To his surprise, however, Katsura had lowered his hands, a stricken expression on his own features. He was no longer looking at Juushirou, nor at Joumei, but instead his gaze was fixed on the shabby newcomer, and Joumei saw him shake his head slightly, as though something had been said that troubled him.

"I can read your mind,"

With an inward gasp, Joumei remembered Katsura's own words to Kikyue what seemed like an eternity earlier, and his eyes snapped back towards Koku, alarm flooding through his sluggish body.

He's giving him new orders. He's transmitting on a frequency the shinigami can't hear... so they won't be able to prepare. I need to warn them... need to make them understand... what... he...

The next moment the brown eyes met his and the thought died in his throat, colours lurching and swimming before his gaze. He struggled to pull the fragments of thought back together, but they drifted tantalisingly away from him, swamped and distorted by unwelcome images of the underground tunnels and the bloodsoaked bodies of his Kitsune kinsfolk. He buried his head in his hands, but covering his eyes could not remove the pictures from his brain.

"Let go of me, Mitsuki!" Finally Juushirou shook himself free, shooting his companion an unreadable look, and Joumei could tell just by hearing his voice that tension was coursing through every single inch of the Captain's body. "I know you don't like it, but this is the Council's order. I told him to surrender, and he refused. He's hurt members of Seventh and threatened lives. Do you expect me to just stand back and let him do as he pleases?"

Mitsuki did not answer, and when he raised his gaze, Joumei saw her shoot the Captain a pained expression. She reluctantly took a step back, turning to glance in the direction of the intruder. He seemed to sense her gaze on him, for he turned, and Joumei drew breath sharply as he saw horror and dismay flood the young man's features.

"Stop this," Mitsuki's words were soft, but they carried across the silence of the Seventh's barracks. "It isn't right. Please. Stop it."

Katsura hesitated, the killing aura around his body completely dispelled by the unexpected intrusion, and he glanced from Mitsuki to Koku, clearly uncertain about what to do. Juushirou took a step forward, and Joumei could see what was clearly the beginnings of a Bakudou spell glistening around his fingertips. So despite his earlier resolve to kill, Joumei reflected, the District shinigami was going to take a prisoner anyway. Was this Mitsuki such an influential figure that she could change a Captain's mind? Or... no. Joumei frowned, berating himself for being so slow. It wasn't that she was important or influential — but that Juushirou did not want her to get hurt in the fall-out of his sword's attack.

He cares for her. Keitarou's been smarter than I thought, bringing Juushirou-dono's Achilles heel into the heart of battle so that his loose cannon son can escape unscathed.

"For God's sake, run!"

Before Juushirou could fire the Bakudou spell, a bloodcurdling scream erupted from Koku's lips, making Joumei jump at its sudden shrillness, and causing the shinigami who had been crouched at his side to start, staring at him in dismay. Across the courtyard of the Seventh, the dazed and fallen figures of Kikyue's subordinate officers were beginning to recover themselves, and Kikyue too had taken hold of her weapon once more, clearly ready to release the kestrel in pursuit of the foe should he put up a fight. Yet something had changed in the intruder's entire demeanour. Juushirou darted forward, spreading his fingers into the Bakudou, and Katsura brought his hands together for a final pulse of powerful spiritual energy, disintegrating the binding spell in a haze of blinding light. As the dust and glare cleared, Kikyue let out an exclamation of dismay, for where the boy had stood a moment before, there was now no sign.

"He's escaped!" The officer who had kept his footing for the longest uttered a stream of ungentleman-like curses, turning to glance at the two officers behind him, who were picking themselves up off the ground, rubbing dazed heads and fumbling for lost swords. "Kikyue-hime, permission to chase after him! Given that amount of energy expended, he can't have shunpo'ed far!"

"I'm coming too," Kikyue said frankly. "Juushirou-dono, I'm sorry I brought you into our problem. Clearly this is an Endou matter and the interloper is an Endou's life to take. My men and I will take care of it from here."

She bowed to him curtly, then was gone, her companions following her shunpo with staggered steps of their own, and Juushirou sighed,

sealing and sheathing his sword. He rubbed his temples, clearly troubled, turning towards Joumei.

“Was what he said true?” he asked softly, and Joumei nodded.

“I killed Sakaki,” he said grimly. “I came here to confess to her murder, and be judged accordingly. My life has no worth to protect it, Juushirou-dono. Please, don’t trouble about me. Go after the enemy... I was foolish to come here and bring such danger to Seireitei, but I didn’t understand...”

“Taichou!” Kirio’s words broke through his sentence, and at the urgency in it, Juushirou turned to glance at his Sixth Seated officer, faint censure in his gaze.

“I hope you have an explanation, Hikifune,” he said quietly, and Joumei could hear the disapproval in his tones. “Removing a patient from the secure custody of the division and bringing him into a battle situation is a serious matter. Edogawa-san has no authority to give you orders and you know that. You should have remained in Thirteenth. You and Koku both. In the meantime...”

He turned, words failing him as he glanced around him, and Joumei’s eyes widened in surprise as he realised the healer who had clung on to Juushirou’s arm so desperately a few moments earlier was now nowhere to be seen.

“Mitsuki?” Juushirou’s lips moved almost subconsciously, a moment of panic in his gaze, and Joumei knew his suspicions had been right.

Juushirou-dono is in love with that girl. Even though it looks like she’s an agent of the enemy... Keitarou’s arsenal always has dug deep roots.

“I’m sorry, Taichou,” Kirio was penitent, and she bowed her head low before her superior officer. “I know it was foolish, and I realise I shouldn’t have done it, but Edogawa-san was adamant. She said there was danger and that people were going to die. The reiatsu was upsetting Koku, and... we weren’t to leave him alone... so...”

“So you brought him into the field of battle,” Juushirou cut across her, and Kirio flinched, nodding her head.

“I’m sorry,” she repeated. “It was a stupid thing to do. I just got caught up in Edogawa-san’s urgency, but I didn’t... it’s no excuse. I just had to... she wanted me to help, and I... felt that I...”

“You felt you *had* to do something about it?” Juushirou’s gaze flitted to Koku, a thoughtful expression on his face, and Joumei

wondered if the Captain knew more than he was letting on. “I think that’s something we’ll need to talk about in more detail, but for the time being, I want you to take Koku to... Koku? What are you doing?”

For the young invalid had pulled himself unsteadily to his feet, half stumbling, half walking across the broken barracks towards where Joumei sat huddled against the wall. At the sight of him, the Kitsune instinctively flinched back, but Koku was not repulsed by his reaction, merely sinking down on his knees a foot or so away from the other man.

“I’m sorry, Ukitake-dono,” he said contritely. “It’s my fault we came here. All of it is my fault, not Edo-gawa-san’s and not Kirio-san’s. I asked them to bring me here. I wanted to stop... people getting hurt.”

“I see,” Juushirou’s lips pressed together for a moment, then, “and did you think that, by coming here, interrupting my battle and letting someone who had attacked and threatened the members of this division go free, you had prevented people getting hurt? Their lives are all still now in danger, because we failed to take that young man into custody.”

“But the fox is hurt,” Koku’s words were only half-focused, his brown eyes slightly dreamy as he reached thin, grimy fingers out to touch the edges of Joumei’s torn *hakamashita*, and he twitched back, wrapping his arms protectively around his body.

“Get away from me!” he spat out. “I know what you are and if you think I’m going to let you touch me...”

“Kirio, take Koku back to Thirteenth,” Juushirou said frankly. “Clearly he’s confused and upset by the environment, and when he calms down, I’ll have things to say to him — and to you — but for the meantime...”

“If you take me back now, the fox will die.” Koku’s words were sing-songy and melodic, yet there was an edge to them that made Juushirou stop mid-sentence, eying the youngster anew.

“Koku?”

“There’s poison inside of him. You can’t break it. He can’t, either, but I can. I can break it.”

Koku’s hazy brown eyes bored into Joumei’s silvery ones, and the Kitsune suddenly felt as though he were drowning. He was falling over the edge of that cliff, sinking deep beneath the earth, chased into the tunnels... the roof was coming down over Hiko’s bloodied body once again, then he saw the corpses of his kin, overlaid with that final

glimpse of Sakaki with her heart burned out. He felt the ice cold fingers press against his sword-torn torso, sending judders of pain and energy through him as his spirit power and the young boy's made contact, but he found himself unable to pull away. He coughed, choking, as something dark and cloying suddenly wanted to erupt from within him, the pain in his heart so excruciating he felt it was about to burst and then, with the next heartbeat, he was enveloped in a delirious, glorious freedom, as though tight restraints had been removed from his chest. He choked again, vaguely aware that something dark had begun to break forth from his mouth and his ears, drifting like smoke into the air before disappearing like harmless ash on the wind. Koku's touch was gone from his body, and so was the pain, and, as he blinked the world back into focus, he saw the young boy on his hands and knees, face grey and breaths coming in ragged, heaving gasps. He looked on the verge of passing out, yet as Joumei stared at him, he managed a faint smile.

"It's gone," he said faintly, and Joumei's fingers went to his chest, eyes widening as he realised the implication in the boy's words. "It was harder this time, but it... it's gone."

Keitarou's hold over me. He... did he just break it? But why?

"I don't understand," he murmured. "I killed the girl... why would you..?"

Koku's smile widened slightly, but it was a detached smile, making his whole expression somehow surreal.

"I don't like people dying," he said simply, and Joumei paused, processing this for a moment.

"You called me a fox... you know... who I am?"

"I saw you before, in the tunnels," Koku agreed. "I wanted to help you then, but I was... I was too late. People... died. But a fox escaped. It was you, wasn't it? The silver fox who escaped the hunter and lived to tell the tale?"

Numbly Joumei nodded his head, remembering again Hiko's death, and the subsequent conversations with Juushirou and his companions over Keitarou's intent.

I should've seen that link before. The one who gave the warning to Juushirou-dono about the attack on the Kitsune... who else could it have been but you? But then that means I'm wrong. I've understood nothing... nothing at all.

"Joumei? Are you all right?" The next moment Juushirou himself

was at the Kitsune's other side, preventing further conversation, and Koku wobbled, almost falling headlong onto the cobbles. Instinctively Joumei reached out a blood-stained arm to catch him, and Koku cast him a startled look, receiving a rueful grin in return.

One good turn deserves another. Maybe Keitarou is wrong, too. Perhaps the apple falls further from the tree than I'd understood. I need more information before I create further ructions and risk further lives. Whatever I don't know, I'm now in this boy's debt. I need to know whether that kindness has a price... or was given freely.

"What did you do to him?" Kirio was at Koku's other side, supporting his body now with her own arms, turning an accusing expression on her charge, but Koku had moved beyond words now, and it was Joumei who answered.

"He didn't hurt me," he assured her. "On the contrary... I think he... healed something within me."

"Healed you?" Juushirou was taken aback, and Joumei nodded.

"Keitarou's hold over me is gone," he said softly. "I don't know how, but I can tell that it is. That kid broke it. Somehow, when he touched me, it unravelled and just... fell apart."

"Koku did?" Juushirou's gaze flitted towards the young invalid, who, his energy apparently spent, had slumped into a semi-conscious stupor in Kirio's arms. "Then is that why he wanted to come here? To help you? At first you sounded like you recognised him, but then..."

"I don't know why he came here," Joumei said truthfully. "I've never met him before. I thought I knew... but I realise now that I don't know anything about him at all. I jumped to the wrong conclusions, but I don't suppose I understand why he did what he did. I just know it's true. He broke Keitarou's hold over me. He called me a fox that survived the hunter and lived."

"Koku is an idiot, but he really doesn't like people dying. And apparently he doesn't like them dying to the point he'll put everyone in silly danger to make sure it doesn't happen," Kirio muttered. "I'm really sorry, Taichou. I should've known a whole lot better."

She glanced at Joumei.

"I don't know who you are, but you look a lot like our recruit, Ichimaru-san, so I'm guessing you're family of hers?" she hazarded, and Joumei nodded. "Perhaps that's why Koku was aware of you... maybe Ichimaru-san said something to him, or... not that I can think of when she'd have managed to do that... but... maybe it was you

Koku wanted to run away. Because otherwise...”

“Otherwise it was the young lad called Katsura,” Juushirou looked troubled. “We will have to investigate this more thoroughly when he’s more able to talk... and Mitsuki is still not back. Perhaps she’s gone to Fourth, or returned to Thirteenth, but I can’t pick up her reiatsu.”

He sighed, getting to his feet and hauling Joumei to his.

“I would ask her to look at your own wounds, but for now, it seems picking up the pieces of this Division before the Captain returns will have to suffice,” he added. “Kirio, I want you to take Koku back and ensure he does not leave his room this time under *any* circumstances. Carry him back, please — I don’t want to put him through another shunpo when the last one clearly affected him and he looks so grey. In the meantime, I’ll see to settling things here and then return myself. Kikyue’s made it clear that she considers this an Endou matter and honestly, I’m not sure I feel like overruling her until I understand more about what happened here today. In the meantime, Joumei, I think it best you stay close to shinigami territory and don’t venture too far afield. If everything said in that confrontation is true, this is not an enemy you should face alone, and Hirata would be cross if we let you. At the very least, your evidence must be heard... so I think it’s best you come back to Thirteenth with us.”

“I don’t want to bring trouble on your Division too,” Joumei protested, and as though he had heard the man’s words, Koku raised weak, clumsy fingers, reaching out to brush Joumei’s arm. At the contact, a prickle of something like electricity rushed through his body, and he gasped, his chest constricting.

“Koku? Are you still with us?” Kirio gazed down at her burden, concern in her eyes, and Joumei saw the heavy lashes lift, blurry eyes seeking his out.

“You can’t stop it,” he murmured, his words so faint and slurred together Joumei could only just make them out, “but you should go there. Please, go there. To Thirteenth. It’s... not his fault...”

With that his energy seemed to desert him, but just before Koku’s fingers slid away from Joumei’s skin, an image flashed into the Kitsune’s mind, and his eyes widened in horror.

“Izumi!” he exclaimed. “Izumi’s in danger at Thirteenth!”

The heavy tree branch juddered and shattered into a thousand wooden splinters, and Izumi dropped instinctively to the ground, her

heart pounding in her chest as she felt the whoosh of them passing over her head. She could sense Tenichi's reiatsu all around her now, for it had tainted every broken fragment and they scattered like rain around her prone body, scraping against her hands as she tried to cover her eyes and face. How much control he had over the tiny shrapnel she did not know, and though her brain feverishly struggled to calculate the force and range of the weapon she had seen for only the briefest of moments, her panic jolted her rationale apart, making it impossible for her to come to a clear conclusion. Her scientific theories were no protection against the immediacy of facing weaponry, she realised with a sickening sense of foreboding. This was why the shinigami practiced so long and hard with blades — for the times where nothing but brute force could protect them from harm.

Other people hold swords, and other people don't have any scruples about killing. If you can't fight back, you die. It's no different being a shinigami from being a Kitsune. Niisama thought I was safe here, but clearly, I'm not.

"Is that the best you can manage?" Tenichi's voice had shifted slightly, indicating he had moved his position, and Izumi snuck a glimpse between the strands of her silvery fringe, watching as he picked his way over the shattered remains of the tree branch. He positioned himself directly before the garden's white boundary fence, swinging his weapon around in an experimentary wheel before readying for his next attack. He had not moved enough for her to use her hypnosis, she realised with consternation, but the thin panels of wood would provide much more devastating ammunition than the unwieldy, stubborn branch of an aging tree, and she instinctively tensed, wishing she had run for more protective ground but now knowing she could not risk getting to her feet.

"I had expected more fight," Tenichi moved closer to her, prodding her prone body with the tip of his weapon, and causing her to flinch, but he laughed, taking a step back. "No, I'm not going to slice your pretty throat just yet. I want information from you first. I want you to tell me who you're working for... and why you're here. I want to know precisely what you intend for my brother."

Izumi raised her head defiantly, glaring at him, and Tenichi swung his weapon between them, allowing the sunlight to glint off the silver tip. The glare caused Izumi to blink, shielding her gaze once more, and Tenichi nodded.

"Don't look at me," he commanded. "Answer my questions, and then I'll decide what's best to be done with you."

His eyes narrowed.

“You might think I’m not geared to kill women,” he murmured, “but if its Ketsui who’s at risk, there’s very little I won’t do. I have far too much to lose to just stand back and let you run around on whatever nefarious ends brought you here. I’m not fooled, even if everyone else is — so talk.”

Izumi pulled her body into a sitting position, still shielding her eyes from the sun’s glare with her left hand, and with her right she rubbed her throat, opening and closing her mouth and then shaking her head. Tenichi pressed his lips together pensively.

“Are you trying to convince me that your mute act in the tunnels wasn’t an act?” he demanded, and Izumi could hear scepticism in his tones. “Do you believe I’m simple? Whatever you did there, there’s nobody here who can speak in signs. To communicate with anyone here, you must have a voice — so prove it. Use it. Tell me where you came from and who you’re working for. Do it quickly... else I’ll take the risk and kill you anyway. It’s no bones to me. It would actually suit me better that way — but I want to know what errand you were sent here on first.”

Izumi clamped her mouth shut obstinately, lowering her hand from her throat, and Tenichi’s grasp on his *naginata* tightened as he waved it in her direction.

“You think I’m bluffing?” he challenged her. “You think I won’t dare hurt you, here, in my old Division lands? But there’s nobody to come to your rescue. The only person on site who could seriously challenge me is Naoko-san, and she’s as far from here as she can get, locked away with all the division paperwork. Do you think I’m careless enough to let my spirit power flare so much it can be felt from across the other side of the division?”

He grinned, and Izumi caught a side-glimpse of the expression, chilled by the lack of emotion in the other’s eyes.

“Ukitake-taichou sent me to report to Naoko-san,” he said softly. “I didn’t obey that order, but I *did* go towards the office. I was *going* to report, but I saw you leave, and I took my opportunity to follow you instead. But before I did...”

He held up his left hand, and Izumi saw a glitter of kidou pass briefly across the palm.

“I cast a barrier spell around the Vice Captain’s office,” he continued evenly. “I’m quite good at Kidou. I’m only ranked at Eighth Seat within Seventh Division, but that’s because I transferred and had to rank up again in a Clan squad from a lower start position. If I’d

stayed here, I'd have outranked Kirio and Atsudane. I'd have been Thirteenth's Fourth Seat by now, only I chose to leave. Everyone here knew it, and I knew it too. Rank is deceptive when you come from the Districts, as are power levels. Everyone at the Academy tipped me as a future officer of rank and position, and that's my ultimate target. I want to leave behind the Kotetsu family past, and build a new name — for me and for Ketsui, here and in Seventh. I don't intend to let you — or Keitarou — or anyone else get in my way."

He lowered his hand back to the pole of the naginata.

"I know my Vice Captain's death is something to do with you people," he said coldly. "I know you're cursed, and you're dangerous. Whatever lies you told Ukitake-taichou, you won't fool me with them. Souja-dono's death happened because he met with you — the night you found me, and the night he died. The Onmitsukidou told me it was all your fault, and he was right about everything else he told me, so I believe he was right about you too. Endou-taichou might believe you're his people, but I don't. I'm sure you're working for the devil and because of it, my Vice Captain died. *You* lured him into visiting Rukongai, so that bitch would see him and cut him down. I've heard the rumours, that someone predicted his death! I bet it was you people, in your dark tunnels and with your shadowy magic, twisting things to your own ends!"

His voice shook with anger, and despite herself, Izumi flinched back, her eyes widening in surprise as she interpreted the meaning in his words.

Predicted...?

"Now you're here, stalking my brother, and I won't have it," Tenichi had still not finished. "*I won't* let Ketsui get hurt! Whatever Father did or didn't believe, that past is past! *I won't let* Ketsui be dragged down into Keitarou's games by creatures like you, and if that means blooding my blade and slitting a few throats, then that's what I'll do. The Endou believe in getting vengeance for their dead. If I can be even a little bit Souja-dono's vengeance, maybe then... maybe then it will finally all be over!"

In her consternation, Izumi's hand had momentarily slipping from its position shielding her gaze, and Tenichi cursed, tilting his weapon to dazzle her a second time.

"Don't try anything," he warned her. "I'm quite serious. I can kill you any time I please, so the quicker you talk, the better it will be for both of us."

He's not working for Keitarou.

The realisation shot through Izumi like a bolt of lightning, followed by,

We thought he was, but he thinks I am. He thinks that the Kitsune are Keitarou's people, which means...

She swallowed hard, waving her hands hastily in front of her face as if to indicate that he'd got the wrong impression, but Tenichi's brows knitted together, his jaw hardening at her lack of forthcoming.

"I don't understand hand twitches," he said darkly. "I told you. Speak to me. I don't believe you can't do it... you're just refusing. You're prevaricating, hoping I'll back off. I guess that I will just have to show you that I'm serious."

But we're not enemies!

Izumi's frustration bubbled over inside of her, and she opened her mouth, but although she could mouth the words, no sound came out. Tenichi snorted, and Izumi felt his reiatsu swell again, as he prepared to launch another attack. Panic surged inside her, rooting her to the spot, and everything seemed to go into sudden slow motion, with only the racing beat of her heart growing quicker and louder within her skull. The pulse was so loud it deafened her to the splintering of the wood fence, softening their whistling flight through the air, yet this time she could not duck or dive in her own defence. Her own mistake, coupled with Tenichi's paranoid assumptions kept rattling round and round within her head.

He's Daisuke-sama's son. He's not our enemy. I'm not his enemy. We were wrong. He was wrong. Everything was wrong...

She screwed up her eyes, expecting to feel the stabbing pain of wood shards burrowing deep into her pale flesh, piercing her organs and stilling her life, but, instead of rushing agony and death, she felt the flare of something else, alien and strange, yet unmistakeably real. From somewhere outside the dark, deafening world of her panicked heart she thought she heard language, and she opened one eye cautiously, the other snapping open the next second as she registered the scene before her.

A thin sheet of what Izumi could only describe as glass had sprung up between her and her attacker, and the broken pieces of fence wood had glanced harmlessly off it. Despite how delicate the crystalline barrier appeared, it had stood firm, for the sharp edges of the projectiles had been physically blunted on impact, some of them splitting in two as they fell to the ground.

It was the figure standing to her right, however, almost concealed from view by the remains of the broken tree that really took her breath away. Sword drawn, and with a look unlike any she had ever seen cross the gentle, half-dreamy features stood Ketsui, his entire body rigid and his gaze fixed not on Izumi herself, but on Tenichi. Izumi's gaze darted between the two brothers, her brain digesting slowly what had occurred. The barrier was Ketsui's, and he had clearly come to her defence — but in that split-second, the entire dynamic of the situation had changed. Tenichi's expression had lost its killing gleam, distress and confusion marring his features, whereas Ketsui, by contrast, had no hint of emotion or hesitation in his entire demeanour. Instead, Izumi realised, he had become the shinigami Juushirou had charged him to be — her protector, no matter what.

There was an uncomfortable silence, then Tenichi's lips moved, his words muffled slightly by the barrier of glass.

“Ke..tsui?”

There was complete disbelief in his tones, as though he had not anticipated this turn of events, not even in his wildest imaginings, and Ketsui's eyes narrowed slightly at the sound of his name. Instead, however, he turned to glance at Izumi, running his eyes over her body in a cursitory manner. He was looking for injuries, Izumi realised, but something in the intensity of the gaze made her uncomfortable and her face flooded red with indignation and embarrassment, longing for him to look away. Being rescued by Ketsui ought to be more mortifying than it was pleasing, yet there was a certain rush of pleasure in the knowledge that he had come to her aid anyway. Whilst her *hime's* pride rejected the dominant way he had glanced her over, she realised for the first time how pathetic she must look, her hands trembling now that the immediate risk of death had abated.

I am just a child, still, as Niisama likes to tell me. I don't understand anything about shinigami, but believe myself superior to them anyway.

“Explain,” Ketsui's gaze had returned to Tenichi now, and the barrier of glass fragmented and shattered into tiny shards of reiatsu, absorbed into the already heavy atmosphere. “Taichou sent you to report to Shikibu-san. Why are you here, with your weapon released? Why are you attacking my recruit?”

Izumi flinched, again humiliated by the possessiveness in Ketsui's voice, but at the sound of it, Tenichi seemed to come back to life, anger and frustration animating his handsome features.

“Is this *your* doing, too?” he demanded, jabbing his *naginata* in the Kitsune's direction. “Did you corrupt him to believe your lies?”

Hypnotise him with your demon magic? Does he know what or who you really are?"

"Answer my question," Ketsui had stepped forward now, putting him physically between Izumi and Tenichi and blocking the glare of the sun as he did so. "Releasing a *zanpakutou* without due cause is an infraction. Attacking a foreign division's recruit is a serious incursion. Putting the life of my comrade in danger is something that, as a member of Thirteenth Division, I find unforgivable. I've asked you to explain yourself, Kotetsu Tenichi. Answer me, or I *will* make my sword do the asking."

"What are you talking about?" Tenichi's expression went through the widest range of emotions Izumi had ever seen, his hands gripping Reihahen's pole so tightly that his knuckles had turned white. "She's a spy. A spy for the enemy. Don't you understand? She's here to hurt you. She's probably put you under some demon spell... she'll be the death of both of us!"

"Ichimaru-san... is a spy?" Ketsui arched an eyebrow, then he snorted, shaking his head. "Do you think Ukitake-taichou would allow that? Don't be foolish. Nii-chan, what's wrong with you? This is crazy, and not like you at all. Tell me what you mean by it... you have to know that nobody's going to look on this lightly."

"I told you," Tenichi's composure had been completely shattered by Ketsui's appearance, Izumi realised, and the sudden switch of approach from indignant shinigami protector to anxious younger brother had only served to shake him further. "She's an enemy's spy. Keitarou's spy. She was there, when he brought me back to Seireitei. She and her people, all of them... lurking, waiting, in the shadows. She used her magic on me... and then her people got Souja-dono killed, all for Keitarou's sake. It's all because of him, and if they connect it to us... don't you understand what this will do to us? Father was Keitarou's cousin — I don't want anything to happen to you because of..."

"Ten-nii?" Ketsui's brow twitched with consternation as he tried to follow this convoluted and incoherent explanation. "Are you saying you *met* with Keitarou? That he *was* the one who kidnapped you... and you *knew* that all along?"

Tenichi bit his lip, apparently realising for the first time he had let something slip he ought not have, then he sighed.

"The Onmitsukidou said it," he whispered. 'If *I* cause problems, or prove useless, then there's always you. And then... *she* appeared,' he

jerked a clumsy finger in Izumi's direction. "One of the cursed fox people, pretending to be a recruit, using her dark arts on you, convincing you she's your ally, trying to..."

"Ichimaru-san is my ally," Ketsui cut across his brother firmly. "She's my subordinate officer and my recruit. I have direct orders to protect her and help her, orders which were reaffirmed this morning. I don't want to fight you, Nii-chan, but you're not giving me a lot of choice. If you're going to keep saying these crazy things, and if you're going to threaten her safety, I have to stop you. Ukitake-taichou has given me that instruction — find my recruit and stick with her. I'm here, and I'm not going to let her be hurt — not even if the person attacking happens to be you."

"You have no clue what kind of creature you're protecting," Tenichi spat out, his reiatsu fluctuating as though considering a new attack, and Izumi sensed Ketsui's own reiatsu rise and settle, ready to respond in kind.

"I know she's somebody worth my protecting," was his response. "I don't need to know where she came from, but I know enough to know she's not Keitarou's spy. I don't know what's driven you on this wild goose chase, and I'm sorry I didn't realise everything in Seventh had made you this upset, but this is insane. I *don't want to fight you*, Tennai. Of all the swords in Seireitei, I *never* wanted to cross weapons with yours in circumstances like this! It's not something brothers ought to do — Mother would have cried, if she had seen us like this!"

"Don't bring Mother into it!" Tenichi snapped back, and despite his calm, Izumi saw Ketsui flinch at the sudden venom in the older boy's tones. "Mother's dead, and she left me to protect you! She told me, and I promised, and I'll do as I swore to her I would!"

"I *don't need* you to protect me, if it means you do something like this!" Ketsui lashed back, and Tenichi's grip on Reihahen tightened yet further, a trickle of blood running unchecked over his clenched fist where the nails had driven into the palm beneath. "You *left* Thirteenth so that I could become my own shinigami, and I have! I'm making *my* own decision to obey my Captain's instructions, and if you were in your right mind, you'd never even dream of questioning Ukitake-taichou's orders! Mother wouldn't sanction you using her as a reason to hurt someone who's innocent, and..."

"She's *not* innocent!" Tenichi interrupted his brother mid-flow, the pitch of his voice rising with the overspill of his emotions. "If you can't see that, you do need my protection, so don't *you* use Mother to justify protecting that creature from my blade!"

"I won't let Ichimaru-san be killed," the moment of hesitation had passed, because there was steel now in both the eyes and the voice of the younger Kotetsu. "I know what she's capable of, and I know *who she is*. I don't need to know her past... I know who she is *right now*, and that's someone of benefit to me and to Soul Society. I trust her, as my division-mate and my comrade, and I *will not let her get hurt*! If you don't lower Reihahen, I'll have to use my weapon as more than just a barrier. It's your last chance. Seal your sword and submit it. We'll work everything out, somehow... but put your weapon down."

"She's bewitched you," Tenichi whispered, his eyes glittering with a mixture of desperation and what Izumi could only consider madness. He was unstable, she realised with a jolt, and no matter how calmly or rationally Ketsui spoke to him, there would be no getting through. It would become a fight, brother on brother, and then...

"Izumi!"

Joumei's eruption onto the scene caused both the brothers to jump, Tenichi almost releasing his hold on his weapon in his dismay, and Izumi's heart flip-flopped in her chest, taking in her brother's pale complexion and blood-stained clothing. Despite the fact he was obviously in a bad way, his fingers were already glittering with kidou energy, as though ready to launch an attack, and before she knew what she was doing, Izumi had found her legs, scrambling to her feet and stumbling across the grass to grab him by the arm.

"So you summoned your allies to back you up?" Tenichi had clearly passed into the world of hysterics now, his eyes glittering with instability. "Fine, then I'll kill you both, both of you, here and now. Then your curse... you won't be able to curse me any more. You won't be there... you won't... won't hurt Ketsui... you won't..."

"Not if I don't kill you first, Kotetsu Tenichi," Joumei's gaze was pure ice, and he put a protective arm around his sister's shoulder. "I told Souja-dono to be careful of you. I guess I was right. If only he'd been able to act on it. Maybe you'd be where you belonged, like the traitor you are."

He extended his hand, Kidou forming into a flare inches from the tips of his fingers, but Izumi could tell it was ragged and incomplete, and her brother was pushing himself. She tugged on his other arm, a pleading look in her eyes, but before she could convey her thoughts in hurried signs, Ketsui swung his sword towards the pair of them, putting a glass barrier between them and Tenichi. The kidou glanced as harmlessly off the blockade as the wood splinters had done moments earlier, fragmenting into its component parts, and Joumei

glared at Ketsui in indignant rage.

“You...”

Niisama, no!

Izumi's fingers moved before she even realised it.

Ketsui is protecting me. Please, don't hurt him. Please, don't do anything to hurt him, he's on our side! We've been wrong... everything is wrong!

“Wrong?” Joumei stared at her blankly, and Ketsui took another step or two towards his brother, meeting the other's gaze gravely. Joumei's impassioned entrance had apparently brought him back to the calm and reason of a shinigami on duty and, though the expression in his pale eyes was still a pained one, the rage and indignation was now nowhere to be seen. Instead he held out his free left hand, beckoning for the older man to submit his sword.

“Surrender your sword, Kotetsu Tenichi,” he said softly. “I'm arresting you for the attempted murder of Ichimaru Izumi, and it will be worse if you continue to fight.”

“Arresting... *me?*” Tenichi could barely do more than mouth the words, and Ketsui lowered his head in a heavy, yet determined nod, casting Izumi a sidelong glance.

“Ichimaru-san, go fetch Shikibu-san from the office. Bring her here at once.” he instructed, and Izumi faltered for a moment, then bowed her head in acceptance of the instruction. A brief, harried smile of gratitude touched Ketsui's lips for the most fleeting of instants, then it was gone, and his attention returned to his brother, who, shaken to the very core of his being, had begun to shed silent tears.

“Surrender your weapon,” Ketsui repeated quietly, and as she squeezed her brother by the hand and hurried off to do her mentor's bidding, Izumi could hear the weight of his grief in every syllable he spoke. “This is your last chance. If you do not, I will be forced to subdue you in the name of Thirteenth Division. Ukitake-taichou gave me strict orders. I intend to follow them, even against you. If in any part of your mind right now you think you are protecting me, then please, at least listen to my voice and do as I tell you. If you don't want to hurt me, don't make me fight you. Please don't make it harder for me than it has to be... give up Reihahen and submit.”

It was turning out to be a costly mistake.

Keitarou stood high above the valley, leaning against the dead trunk of a hollow birch tree as he gazed down at the landscape below.

Beneath him, he could both sense and see the fleeing form of his oldest child, the spurts of ragged reiatsu like a beacon across the unfamiliar terrain. Despite his anger and his frustration at his son's disobedience, Keitarou found that it was grief, not rage, which was at the forefront of his mind.

“That’s what a proper older brother should do — protect his siblings from harm. You have to be strong and unafraid, in order to set them an example. Maybe I can see that you’re ready to be their oniichan, more than I’d realised before.”

His own words, spoken so long ago, returned to haunt him, and, just as clear, the reedy tones of the eight year old Katsura, as he had solemnly given his word.

“I will. I’ll be their nii-chan, Father. I promise.”

I didn’t imagine how deep or dark that promise would turn out to be, all those years ago.

Keitarou reached his free hand up to push the stray wisps of his sandy brown hair out of his eyes, letting out a sigh of regret and resignation.

Having children was the first mistake. Keeping them with me was the second. Coming to love them was the third. You were right all along, Chudokuga. It was foolish of me to think I could balance my family and my goals and come out of it unscathed. Eiraki’s reaction when I returned Sakaki’s body to the village is one I will never forget... and now I have to return and tell her that her eldest, her pride and joy...

You became a fool when you met that girl, and decided to make her more than just your pawn.

Chudokuga’s words were unsympathetic.

The damage began when you first decided you loved her — once you love one person, you can’t turn back from loving more. It’s an unattractive trait in someone like you — and eternally frustrating for a zanpakutou like me.

Maybe that’s always been my weakness.

Keitarou pressed his lips together sadly.

Daisuke was the first, not Eiraki. I considered him like a brother, and buried him myself. I murdered Endou Shouichi as much to avenge my cousin as I did to satisfy that spoiled Seimaru’s greedy whims. I have often acted rashly from love, Chudokuga. It has just eroded me more and more with time — like a creeping senility, fudging my wits and clouding my judgement. Maybe the fox is right — it’s no longer my world and I have ceased to understand.

So you’re giving up?

Chudokuga was derisive.

Why are we here, anyway, Keitarou? You told your son if he chose to avenge Sakaki that you would not take him back. You disowned him — so why the need to come and see his end for yourself? The shinigami will catch him, and kill him, and you want no part of that. He has betrayed himself through his weakness and his naivety. Let him go.

Keitarou did not answer, turning his gaze back towards the ground below, and there was a restless rustle as the spider's silhouette shifted across his psyche.

The fox has gone, by the way.

Gone?

Keitarou's brow wrinkled in consternation, his attention momentarily drawn from the hunt below, and Chudokuga snorted.

You didn't notice? You are distracted. Perhaps it is senility.

Remember who your master is, and don't be impertinent. Explain yourself — what do you mean, gone?

What I said.

Chudokuga spoke evenly.

I can no longer sense his pulse alongside yours. Either his heart has been stilled by the shinigami, or... somehow, he's broken your curse.

Impossible.

Keitarou's eyes became slits.

Nobody can do that, except me. Death is the only release from Chudokuga's Bankai — isn't that what you told me? Ukitake Juushirou was an aberration -Shikiki's quick intervention saved his life — but surely now, in your current form...

There was another rustle, then Chudokuga sighed.

To my knowledge, there is no way to break that spell, short of you undoing it yourself.

It replied at length.

You are my master, and I have not chosen to withdraw it. He must have died... perhaps your son was responsible.

Do you really believe that?

Keitarou was sceptical.

Katsura's been fleeing from the shinigami all the time we've been here. If the bond has only just been broken, that means it wasn't at his hand.

I know.

Chudokuga's voice was little more than a hiss.

I don't believe I suggested that pathetic, over-emotional wastrel had done anything at all.

Keitarou froze, his eyes widening with alarm.

"What are you saying?" he demanded out loud, and there was the sensation of the spider scuttling back into the alcoves of his mind.

The shinigami are drawing closer. Unless you want to see your son ripped apart like a fox before the hounds, I suggest we leave. You were heading to the Real World. The formula you carry needs to be conveyed to Haruya and his companions tonight, or they'll be of no further use to you. The speed at which their cells were decaying — this emotional prevarication is unnecessary, and will compromise your plan.

"I know," Keitarou rubbed his brow. "Very well. Chudokuga, indulge me in one last favour, then we'll go. I haven't forgotten our aims, and I believe in them just as I did before. If your insinuations are what I think they are, then the sooner we act the better. The shinigami will leave Seireitei and go hunting Haruya and the others in less than a week, now. We will strike then, and hope and pray to whatever Gods are listening that it's not too late.

You believed the fox's words, then?

I know they were true. I felt it from him... I saw it inside of him. He didn't give me enough to tell me how or where, but I know there are others, and that we don't have much time left.

You no longer believe he's the one we need to kill? Even though you felt it from the moment you saw him that this was right?

The images only penetrated my consciousness superficially, and it was a long time ago.

Keitarou sighed.

I thought it was right, at the time. I saw it and I felt that this was the one... but... maybe not.

Your indecisiveness is making me ill.

Chudokuga's words were cutting.

Ask your favour and then let's go.

Mm.

Keitarou turned his gaze back on the pursuit below, pulling the tantou from his obi and running his finger over the silvery blade.

I won't take Katsura back. He has no place with me, if he cannot obey

my instructions. But nor can I return to my wife and tell her I let her favourite son be killed. Therefore...

He trailed off, unable to form the words, even in his thoughts, but he felt the swell of Chudokuga's resignation, and knew the spider had understood.

I am a fool, too, for letting you convince me to be a part of this, but if it will get you back on track, I suppose it won't hurt. Very well. Consider it a test run for when we storm Seireitei proper.

50. Call of Duty

Chapter Forty Nine: Call of Duty

It all happened when the Captain was out.

Naoko suppressed the urge to groan, tugging absently at her thick tail of chestnutty red hair as she stood before the desk of the Vice Captain's office. She had been buried deep in paperwork when Izumi had arrived, the girl unusually flustered and out of breath. The silver-haired Kitsune had abandoned any pretence of manners, bursting into the chamber and grabbing Naoko by the arm, but at the urgency in the girl's eyes, Naoko had bitten back her objections, the hairs pricking on the back of her neck as she realised something was properly wrong. As soon as she had left the office compound, she had felt the threads of released *zanpakutou* reiatsu drifting on the wind, her brows knitting together as she had identified both that of Reihahen and Ketsui's *zanpakutou*, Reihashou, rising in obvious confrontation. Her worst fears had been confirmed when she had arrived at the scene, however, to find Ketsui, Reihashou still released in his right hand, taking the sealing Reihahen from his brother's grasp. Tenichi had sunk to his knees, apparently not able to stand or to speak, and as Naoko had drawn closer, she had seen that he'd begun crying, the tears rolling silent and unchecked from eyes that were pools of distress. Ketsui, by contrast, had been completely impassive, but Naoko had trained the boy herself, and she had known that it was no more than an act.

In the shadows of the damaged willow tree, Izumi's enigmatic brother, himself bloody and tattered, had been standing silent watch over the Kotetsu brothers, and, at Naoko's appearance, he had lowered his head in a gesture of respect. Izumi had hurried over to join him, her own anxious gaze pulled in Ketsui's direction, and Naoko had drawn a deep breath into her lungs to steady her own composure, before clapping her hands together and demanding in her usual, crisp manner, what exactly had taken place. Tenichi had been beyond words, and it had been Ketsui who had explained, in calm, almost mechanical tones, his reasons for arresting his brother. Tenichi had not resisted the arrest, nor spoken a word in his own defence and as a result, Naoko had seen no alternative but to have him taken to one of Thirteenth's own holding cells, to await the return of her Captain. She had just sent the recruit Kayashima to fetch Juushirou from the

Seventh when Enishi and his patrol had marched briskly into the compound, and for the first time in her twenty five years as an officer of the Thirteenth Division, Naoko had been overwhelmed with relief that, now, she could pass the matter up the chain of command.

Enishi had listened to the whole story with a grave expression on his broad features. He had spoken to Ketsui briefly, then sent the boy away to calm down and clean up. Finding Tenichi unable to speak for himself, he had instead instructed the two Kitsune, along with Naoko herself to assemble in his office to await Juushirou's return, and there, ten minutes later, they remained.

"Of course, if the Taichou were back, he'd probably have sent for the Onmitsukidou," Naoko spoke now, twisting the ends of her hair absently around her finger in her agitation. "I don't want to do that, Fukutaichou, but I don't see what else we can do. This is... beyond us."

"I can't believe it of the lad," Enishi sat back in his seat, rubbing his chin pensively. 'I've known Tenichi a good long while, trained with him and always thought him a solid soldier, not the kind to descend into hysterical overreactions. I suppose you don't have anything to add to this?' this last to Joumei. "I have to confess, I was damn surprised to see you here in the thick of the fray. I'd understood your sister's coming here was an undercover matter... yet people seem to be talking about foxes freely and, well, here you are."

"I was at Seventh," Joumei shook his head. "I went to report to Hirata-sama, about a matter I thought important, but he was away. I spoke to Kikyue-hime, and then the division was attacked. Kikyue-hime sent for Juushirou-dono, and he came and helped defend the Seventh's territory. Then there was an interruption..."

He paused, pursing his lips as though debating what else to say, and Naoko's eyes narrowed slightly at his hesitation.

"An interruption?"

"Not relating to this," Joumei dismissed the question with a flick of his cut hand, now crudely bandaged in the coarse linen bandages that comprised the First Aid supplies in Enishi's office. "I sensed that Izumi was in trouble, and came here. They were already facing off when I arrived."

"And Tenichi threatened your life, Ichimaru?" Enishi's gaze rested on Izumi, who nodded her head.

"The evidence indicates Reihahen was used in an offensive

manner,” Naoko said heavily. “The fence and part of the tree are ripped up. Ketsui said it too, Houjou-kun. He had to release Reihashou to deflect Tenichi’s attacks. Tenichi seems to think that Ichimaru-san and her brother are in league with Keitarou somehow... probably because he’s not party to the information we are about your origins,” she glanced at Joumei, “but even so, it’s out of character. He’s never acted that way before. Never, and certainly not to the point where he’d induce Ketsui to draw his own weapon in response.”

“Ketsui’s acted damn smartly,” Enishi said frankly. “Whatever the reasons, well, I’m going to let the Taichou and those in the know pry those apart. To me it looks like all the business at Seventh has pushed Tenichi to breaking point, and Ketsui got involved to prevent him doing something they’d all regret. It’s rough on the lad, but I’m sure it’ll be soon patched up. Nobody is dead, so that makes it easier.”

He glanced at Naoko.

“But I agree with you, Shikibu. Shihouin ought to be notified. He was cross when Taichou didn’t let him infiltrate this place the last time, but this time, we’re none of us in an objective position to deal with it and since the name Keitarou’s come up, I think we have no choice.”

He gestured towards her.

“Your spirit power is better than mine for delicate matters, so I’ll ask you to send him a Hell Butterfly. Word it as you see fit — but tell him as briefly as possible. Details can wait till he’s here — just tell him to come himself, else I’ll be ripped to shreds by Ukitake for letting the Onmitsukidou run riot around his barracks without supervision.”

“Yes, sir,” Naoko let out a heavy sigh at the thought of contacting the Shihouin’s second in command, but she nodded, pressing her hands together then parting them to reveal a delicate blue-black butterfly. It fluttered its wings a couple of times before launching into flight, disappearing through the open window into the world beyond, and Enishi watched it go with an approving nod.

“Good, then we’ve done all we can do, till either they or the Captain gets here,” he said with a gusty sigh. “I don’t like this business one bit. Shikibu, why didn’t you realise they were fighting? I’d have thought you’d have stopped it sooner.”

“I knew nothing about it,” Naoko shook her head, and Izumi’s fingers fluttered into life, causing Joumei to frown.

“Izumi said that Tenichi told her he’d put a barrier around the

office, so as not to be disturbed,” he translated, and Naoko’s expression became stricken. “He told Izumi that the only person on premises who could realistically challenge his sword was you, Shikibusan... and as a result, he made sure you weren’t able to by using a spell. Probably Kyoumon, I imagine, but I don’t know.”

Enishi let out a low whistle, and Joumei nodded.

“Tenichi-dono intended to kill my sister, Houjou-san,” he said quietly. “The only reason he did not was because Kotetsu Ketsui put his duty to his Captain over his loyalty to his brother. I am eternally indebted to that sense of duty, but it doesn’t change the severity of the crime. Tenichi was mistaken in his belief that either Izumi or I have any connection to Keitarou, but in normal circumstances, he ought, surely, to have reported his concerns to a superior officer? The fact is that he did not.”

“Ketsui said he believed his brother thought he was protecting him,” Naoko remembered. “I suppose we’ll talk to him more later, and Taichou will too, but Joumei-dono is right. If Tenichi was troubled about something, he ought to have reported it to either his superior officer — who is Kikyue-hime, or Endou-taichou himself — or, if he felt the problem was here, he could’ve spoken to any one of us. The circumstances of this are unpleasant. We will get to the bottom of it, but its the intent that bothers me. That and the complete loss of sanity. How he could have thought he’d manage to commit a murder using his *zanpakutou* without anyone realising it was him... it’s like I’m talking about a complete stranger, not a man I once had under my command.”

“Well, all of that will doubtless fall into place when the Captain returns, and when we’ve had a chance to calm down and look at all of it properly,” Enishi said comfortably, getting to his feet and slipping his sheathed sword back through his wide-banded *obi*. “For now, there’s no point in sitting around in here when there are other jobs to be done and officers to be seen to. They’ll sense the reiatsu, too, and we don’t want a mass panic. I’d rather everyone was at their assigned post when the Onmitsukidou arrive.”

“You’ll handle Shihouin when he appears, I trust?” Naoko cast Enishi a quizzical glance, and received a rueful grin in return.

“If you like. It’s my job,” he agreed easily. “Joumei-dono, it would be better you stayed here too, for now. If you don’t want to meet with the Onmitsukidou, then we’ll try and arrange it that way, but in the circs...”

“No, I’ll talk to them. Izumi and I both will, in a manner of speaking,” Joumei glanced at his sister, who nodded. “I have a lot of questions, too, and now this has come to a head, the Kitsune are running out of safe boltholes. Here seems as good as anywhere... we’ve not much choice but to put our faith in the shinigami, since there is nobody else to help us now. We share an enemy, so this is where we should be... at least, until I can speak to Hirata-sama and discharge my original duty.”

“Then it’s decided. In fact, I’ll let you into Ugendou, and you can wait there,” Enishi decided, reaching up to pull a key down from a hook beside the door. “It’s easier there. Nobody will go to Ugendou unless Taichou is back.”

“Ugendou is Taichou’s private office and quarters, Houjou-kun,” Naoko was doubtful, but Enishi shrugged.

“Protecting witnesses comes before namby-pamby niceties about private space and such like,” he said matter-of-factly. “This is a war situation, Shikibu — or if it isn’t yet, it very soon will be. Thirteenth’s integrity has been breached and one of it’s members attacked. Taichou would tell us to do what was necessary to calm the troops and ensure that everyone was safe. Tenichi didn’t fight back, and is safely locked up in the cells. I have the key on my belt, so nobody will be letting him out by mistake. In the meantime... I think the fewer strangers the rest see running around the better. Especially bloody, tatty ones.”

He clamped a wide paw down on Joumei’s uninjured shoulder.

“I’ll try and see about finding you something clean to wear, but in the meantime, let’s see to getting you hidden,” he added. “Your sister can stay with you — I’ll excuse her duties for the day.”

“What about Ketsui?” Naoko asked, and Enishi frowned.

“I doubt he’ll want to talk to anyone much about this,” he said wisely. “Let him have some time to calm his head and come to terms with the whole business. We’ll deal with him again later. In the meantime... meeting dismissed.”

As Hajime had surmised, it was not difficult tracking Katsura’s fleeing reiatsu over and across the terrain of District Seven. Though he was still using shunpo, Kikyue could feel the rough edge to each one of his steps, the tiny flare of energy which gave away his presence and her eyes narrowed in determination, inwardly promising herself that she would not let this one escape. Joumei had taken her brother’s killer, but here was a felon on which she could exact both her

frustration and her longing for revenge, and so she would show him no mercy, not once she had him in her sights.

“Kikyue-hime!” Hajime was at her left hand, his steps keeping even with hers, and as she glanced to her right, the young Endou was aware of both Nakata and Ohara in her slipstream. Both men looked a little dazed, Nakata’s usual swagger somewhat dampened by Katsura’s psychic attack, and Ohara’s features pale and shadowy, his eyes like smudges against his skin, but they were both there at her side, swords ready and the sight of them boosted her confidence yet again. Katsura’s killing impulse had been oppressive and his ability to discompose her would have been costly if not for Juushirou’s intervention — she was not foolish enough to realise that the enemy was probably possessed of a similar level of spirit power to her own. The difference was, she mused darkly, tightening her grip on her zanpakutou’s hilt, that she had been rigorously trained in all the arts of a shinigami warrior, and the attacker had not.

“He hasn’t gone far,” she spoke now, flicking her finger in the direction from which she had sensed the young man’s last shunpo step, and without a word of complaint her companions also adjusted their path to bring themselves back in line with her own. “Juushirou-dono’s right — he’s powerful, but no more than a spiritual baby. He has no particular art to his technique, and as such, probably can’t control it. He flared so much of it at Seventh — he must be beginning to tire. I doubt he’ll put up much of a fight when we find him.”

“What are your orders, *hime*?” Ohara asked gruffly, and Kikyue’s pale eyes became slits of predatorial intent.

“Do you need to ask that?” she snapped. “He desecrated our division barracks, attacked our recruits and insulted the Endou. Even if that wasn’t the case, his very life is offensive. He is Eiraki-basama’s spawn, and as such, an outlaw by Council Law. You know full well the dictum decided by the Council of Elders, as the Taichou reported on it to us in full. We have full release rights, and in this case, no need to play the mercy card.”

Her lips thinned.

“His whole existence invites our reprisals,” she said darkly, “but his sister murdered Souja-nii. I intend to find him, cut him down and take him back a corpse, Ohara. He is a felon and should be treated with no greater respect.”

“Understood,” Hajime spoke briskly, his usual professionalism in his calm tones. “Then our orders are kill on sight, as the Council

decreed. Nakata, Ohara, you heard Kikyue-hime. This is not a combat situation. We need not wait for him to face us fairly, nor treat him with compassion should he beg for it. He is an animal and we are hunting him down. No more questions. Take your sword and be prepared to kill.”

“I asked Kikyue-hime, not you, Hajime-dono,” Ohara was put out at the matter-of-fact authority with which the older man had phrased his orders. “I am perfectly capable and willing to raise my sword in my Lord’s name, and for the honour of the Endou. I merely asked whether it was Kikyue-hime’s will we take and interrogate a prisoner, that is all. It hardly requires you to affirm such a command, given by an officer of higher birth and blood.”

“I suggest you mind your rank and put your mind to the task at hand,” was Hajime’s blunt rejoinder. “Your peacock pride has no place in this battle, Ohara. We’re hunting an enemy of Soul Society. This isn’t an excuse for you to flaunt your skills to impress the lady.”

“Hajime-dono!” Ohara was scandalised, and Nakata chuckled, clearly amused.

“We understand the drill, Hajime-dono,” he said comfortably. “There are four of us, and it’s clear that the attacker’s spirit is broken. It will barely be sport for one of us to cut him down — nobody views this as any more than a clean-up mission.”

“If only we had not had to rely on the help of that District Captain,” Ohara opened his mouth to continue his protestations but, after catching Kikyue’s gaze, decided against it, shifting his angle instead to the subject of Juushirou’s involvement. “It looks bad for the Endou, hime, if we are constantly running to one of such inferior birth for help.”

“We’d’ve probably all been splattered into the ground without his help,” Nakata observed tactlessly, before Kikyue could say anything. “I can’t say I knew too much about what he did, but I found the cobbles coming to meet me before I could take much more’n a step, and you seemed to be pretty much the same. Maybe that’s been broken now, but whatever power it was...”

He shook his head.

“Not normal, this one. Sooner we put an end to him the better. Most like he’s one of that exiled Urahara’s experiments, and who knows what’s been done to him to make him capable of such unnatural attacks.”

“He said he could read our minds,” Hajime remembered. “Hime, do you think that was true?”

“Yes,” Kikyue agreed reluctantly. “I think he could, and reacted accordingly. I’ve never come across it either, so maybe Nakata’s right. As for Juushirou-dono, Ohara, we’re indebted to him in this case, but from hereon in it’s an Endou matter and he’ll understand to keep out of it.”

“District Captain or otherwise, any sword that can stand up to Taichou’s Wind Hawk is worth having on your side,” Hajime agreed. “Ukitake-taichou probably turned the scale in our favour.”

“He should’ve killed the lad, then,” Ohara sniffed, clearly not persuaded. “I don’t understand anything about today’s events, *hime*. First that straggly, rag-bound vagabond, covered in blood, then this heathen with his psychic witchcraft... and that’s another thing! Where was *Kotetsu* during all of this, pray? My recruit sent him to Thirteenth as you ordered, but Ukitake came and no sign of that layabout District wretch! Where was he when we needed him? His ranged sword would’ve been an advantage in such a battle, yet where was he? You should discipline him thoroughly for his tardiness on our return, *hime* — in fact, with your permission, I shall see to it myself. He has developed quite an attitude in recent weeks.”

“Ohara has a point, Kikyue-hime,” Hajime frowned, casting his companion a sidelong glance, and Kikyue bit her lip.

“I don’t know where he was,” she admitted. “I hadn’t thought of it till now, but he didn’t return to the Seventh. I will find out when we get back, and if he has no good reason for it, then you may do with him as you see fit, Ohara — just leave him alive, as the division and Father have use for him.”

“Yes, *hime*. With pleasure,” A smug, slightly mollified look touched Ohara’s features, and Kikyue sighed.

“*Hime*, he’s changed paths again!” Nakata let out an exclamation at that point, thrusting his free left hand out towards the west, and Kikyue turned her head, a thoughtful look crossing her gaze.

“He’s trying to evade settlements,” she realised. “He’s going to end up with no place to go. If we continue through the valley at this pace, we’ll reach a point where we can take a short-cut through the undergrowth and round him off before he gets to the river. I can’t imagine he’s going any other way — if he thinks he has a chance of escape, he has to lose our trail somehow, and the river is the only viable way in which he might manage to do that. We need to nail him

before he...”

“*Kikyue-hime!*”

Anything Kikyue might have been going to say was lost for the next minute Hajime let out a yell of dismay, charging at the young princess and throwing her bodily to the ground, causing the both of them to roll over a couple of times in the dirt. Angry and indignant, Kikyue was about to fire an impulsive Bakudou into her fellow officer to get him to move when she heard the clatter of metal on metal and, as Hajime pulled back from her line of sight, she caught sight of Nakata, his blade trembling with effort as he fought to hold back the swing of another.

But it was not the man they pursued who had attacked her, nor was it another ally of Keitarou’s, but her own officer and subordinate, the aloof, noble-blooded Ohara Masayuki.

“Ohara?” the word escaped more as an unconscious breath of surprise, and Hajime got to his feet, dusting himself down cursitorily before holding out a hand to pull the hime to her feet.

“Beg pardon for the roughness, *hime*,” he said softly, and wordlessly, Kikyue allowed herself to be helped, noticing as she did so that a drop of blood was dripping down Nakata’s cheek from a cut above his left eye, and that the swing of the sword he now held back had been not the first, but the second. In the split-second Kikyue had turned her attention away, Nakata had thrown himself into the line of the blade, whilst Hajime had pinned her to the ground... otherwise, she realised with a jolt, Ohara’s weapon would most likely have injured her, and badly.

“What the hell is going on?” she demanded, and as the words left her lips, she caught sight of Ohara’s eyes and the look she saw there chilled her to the very bone, for, though his body was in perfect battle stance, his features sculpted into a look of resolute aggression, his eyes were pools of utter terror.

“Ohara, what are you playing at?” Hajime had put himself between the Fifth Seated officer and the Endou princess, and Kikyue struggled to assert herself, trying to piece together what was going on and how the situation had been so quickly changed. Ohara took a step back, disappearing into shunpo and re-appearing a foot or so away from Kikyue’s left side and it was all she could do to raise her own weapon, the blade of Ohara’s slicing through the sleeve of her *hakamashita* before she could push the offending weapon back.

As she did so, she saw tears of fear and frustrating glittering in

Ohara's eyes, and his lips moved slightly, their movement soundless but enough for Kikyue to make out the word "*hime*."

"He's not in his wits," she realised. "Someone's *making* him do this."

She swung her *zanpakuto* more firmly, forcing Ohara to skip back to avoid being cut open, and turned to Hajime.

"Someone doesn't want us chasing that boy," she said grimly. "Someone's here, somewhere. I don't know where, or how it's been done, but I know it's the truth. I've heard the stories of Keitarou and what he can do, and this is how he works. He makes puppets of people, and causes them to do terrible things to cover his tracks. We should've expected it... there had to be someone somewhere, waiting to protect the Katsura boy."

"But what can we do?" Nakata had also moved to block Ohara's path to Kikyue, asking his question over his shoulder as he dove in to deflect a fresh swing. "Damn it, Ohara! Don't you have any Endou pride? At least fight against it. That's your *hime* you're waving that thing at — imagine what Hirata-sama would say if you drew blood from his daughter after already losing his son?"

At this, Ohara's expression became even more pained, and for a moment his swing faltered, his entire body becoming tense as he fought against whatever spirit had free reign within him. His lips moved again, but no words came out, and Kikyue knew he could not even reclaim sovereignty over his vocal chords, let alone prevent himself from launching another attack.

"It doesn't matter," she spoke in low tones. "Don't you remember what happened to Great Grandfather? He jumped to his own death because of Keitarou's sword. Shouichi-sama was a legend among Endou warriors — if Keitarou was able to make a man like that kill himself, then there's nothing Ohara can do against it. Like it or not, we have to deal with this and quickly, before it becomes a bigger incident."

"You mean kill him?" Hajime had already raised his weapon, but Kikyue held up her hand.

"I'll deal with Ohara. Nakata is here to help me," she said firmly. "Yougo after the felon. We're not going to let Keitarou's messing around deprive us of our prey. That boy's life is forfeit to the Endou. Go make sure you take it."

"But *hime*!"

"For Souja-nii's sake, do as I tell you!" Kikyue snapped. "You know

what order my brother would've given, and I'm giving it in his place! Go find and kill that boy. We'll manage Ohara. Do your duty to the Endou, Kitabata... unless you think that, as a woman, I'm too feeble to act in my own defence?"

"Of all the things I know of you, *hime*, I have never thought you feeble," Hajime spoke softly. "Very well. I will hunt him down and show him no mercy."

With that he was gone, just as, with a tremendous yell, Ohara launched a fresh attack at the young hime, sword slicing through the air on a collision course with her jugular. Again she parried the swing, shifting immediately from defensive to the offensive as she fought to get her fifth seated officer onto the back foot. Hajime's quick and clinical suggestion of killing the officer lingered in her mind, but she knew that, if she could, she wanted to avoid taking this path. Seventh had lost enough, she reasoned bitterly, and if another officer died because of Keitarou's machinations, it would only be more shame and grief for her Clan. Besides, as she pushed and slashed against Ohara's determined blade, she could feel the fear and despair resonating from his body. In all the time she had commanded him, never had she seen him look so miserable or broken, his arms and legs moving in perfect battle formation, but his soul willing with every spiritual inch for it to stop. He had not released his *zanpakutou*, she realised with a jolt. He had clamped his lips shut, and from the blood starting to trickle out from the corner of his mouth, she felt certain he was forcibly holding them closed with his teeth to prevent himself from uttering the words that would release his sleeping blade.

He doesn't want to hurt me.

Kikyue ducked another swing, putting a couple of paces space between them as she considered her options.

I don't know how to stop Keitarou's influence, though. I don't think there is a cure, short of killing him.

"*Hime*, Hajime-dono is right," Nakata was at her right hand, his own voice tense and full of consternation as he gauged the situation. "There's no cure for this. If it's what happened to Shouichi-sama, I know full well there's no way of beating or curing it. I knew your Great Grandfather. So did Hajime-dono. We both know what kind of a man he was, and we both remember the day he died. Anyone with the power to topple that kind of shinigami will eat Masayuki-dono alive from the inside out. He knows it too."

Kikyue returned her gaze to Ohara, seeing his lips twitch slightly, and he once more fought to keep them shut. His sword shook slightly

in his hands, and Kikyue saw the blade edge turn minutely back towards its wielder as though making an attempt to slash his own body, before the pressure of the controlling impulse proved too much, and the sword drove down once more in Kikyue's direction. Taken off-guard by the suddenness of this thrust, Kikyue stumbled, falling back onto the ground, but as Ohara's weapon drove down towards her, Nakata was once more in his way, Ohara's weapon slicing cleanly through his upper right arm and running almost the full length from shoulder to elbow. Nakata winced, his hold on his weapon loosening, but he did not try to pull out of the way, and Kikyue realised with a jolt that, unless she acted, it would not just be Ohara but Nakata too who would probably lose his life.

I've sent Hajime-dono on to deal with Endou vengeance. What's wrong with me?

She pulled herself to her feet, inwardly berating her hesitation.

Has losing Oniisama made me so aware of grief and pain that I dread inflicting it on another family? Am I so haunted by what happened then that I've forgotten how an Endou hunts and kills? Nakata and Hajime-dono are both right. This is not a battle that can be won through reason or reserve. It can be handled in only one way, and I'm the senior officer on duty.

She grabbed Nakata by the shoulder, pulling him forcibly out of the way of Ohara's weapon, and Kaisoushu's blade began to glitter with an eerie light. As she glanced at it, Kikyue was struck by the sudden hope and relief that flared in Ohara's eyes, and his bloody lips twitched into a faint smile, as though accepting her decision.

So at the end, and despite all your prancing and flouncing, you are an Endou too, Ohara Masayuki.

Kikyue felt indignant spirit power flaring up inside of her as she prepared for Kaisoushu's release.

You prefer to die by Kaisoushu's claws than to taint your honour by shedding the blood of your Clan leader's line.

"Mezame, Kaisoushu,"

The release was barely more than a whisper, but as her blade lengthened, the sky blue aura of light engulfing it, she felt a resolve and defiance of her own forming deep within her heart.

I won't be defeated by Aizen Keitarou. Oniisama, you always said that I was too impulsive and I didn't think things through — but since you died, I've done nothing but think. I'm an Endou and that's my nature and my pride... but that pride isn't just here inside of me. It's a part of who we are as Seventh Division — the Division you died for, and the Division I intend to protect.

The kestrel shimmered for a moment over her head, its wings flapping silently as it awaited her command, and, as Ohara drove forward for the final time, she lowered her left hand, spreading her fingers to indicate her target area was the other man's heart. The kestrel uttered its soundless cry, before diving down, down, down like a bullet towards the other shinigami's upper body. Ohara swung his sword at it, but the kestrel's purpose was Kikyue's own and it was not to be swayed, ducking and weaving around the swings to drive the possessed officer off balance. As he stumbled, the kestrel gave a flick of its wings, plunging its beak deep into Ohara's upper chest. At the contact he let out a gasp of pain and surprise, his bloodied lips parting for the first time, and all colour drained from his face. He fell to the ground, a mix of emotions flooding his normally aloof gaze. There were tears on his lashes, Kikyue realised, though whether they were of relief or of pain, she could not tell. The kestrel's spirit disappeared into Ohara's body, surrounding it for a moment in blue light, and then, as the weapon slipped free from the other shinigami's fingers, the glow of light was gone.

"Kikyue-hime?" Nakata was already wrapping up his damaged arm with a length of his obi, casting a glance between his commanding officer and the still figure on the ground, then, "is he dead?"

Kikyue raised her blade to glance at the broken tip, and a faint, sad smile touched her features. Gently she pressed her fingers to the end of her sword's hilt.

"*Bakudou no Kyuu. Geki*," she murmured, and Ohara's body jerked and twitched against the ground, as snaking tendrils of reddish light began to push their way through the man's skin and clothing from within, strengthening until his entire aura was bathed in crimson. Nakata let out an exclamation, but Kikyue ignored him, instead moving over towards where Ohara lay and bending down to touch her index finger against his throat.

As she felt the gentle pulse of his heart, she knew her gamble had paid off, and she shook her head.

"We're going back to Seventh," she said simply.

"But *hime*... Ohara..?"

"He's alive," Kikyue got to her feet, holding Kaisoushu over Ohara's body as the fragments of sky blue light that had once been her kestrel returned in slithers to reform the end of her blade. She gave the sword a shake as if to reseal it before returning it to its sheath with a sigh. "I'm *not* going to let Keitarou dictate the life and death of anyone else

in Seventh Division, Nakata — not my kin, not my subordinates, not anyone else. He's had his way with us enough, and I won't do it. Sacrificing anyone else — whether it be Ohara, a recruit, or Father himself — is not on. I *won't* have it. Ohara might've been his puppet, but I'm not and he can't make me be. I'm *not* going to be made to kill my own men."

"But if it happens again?" Nakata knotted the torn length of the *obi*bandage, tearing the end free with his teeth before moving to stand beside her, and Kikyue shrugged.

"I sent Kaisoushu's kestrel deep into his heart," she explained. "I can't reach there with my Bakudou, but Kaisoushu's shikigami is a spirit and can get places I can't go. It was a gamble — I've never tried to use Kidou like that before, but I thought, if I cast the spell from *within* Ohara's body, I could render him motionless and keep him that way. I remembered from the story of my Great Grandfather and others that it's the heart that Keitarou's power controls. Piercing the heart breaks the spell but kills the victim — so enveloping it in Bakudou would probably work to stop him attacking — whilst we tried to work out a way of saving his life. Whatever it is, it's still spirit power, and so Bakudou ought to be able to hold it... at least for now."

She cast Nakata a glance.

"Go find Hajime-dono," she said briskly. "I'm fine here, and I'll wait."

"But what about the boy..?"

"Haven't you realised yet? Hajime-dono's released his sword," Kikyue replied simply. "It will be over soon, if it isn't already. Go fetch him. With your arm like that, you're no use carrying Ohara, and he's too heavy for me to manage. The boy's body can stay and rot where it is for now — Ohara is more important and we can come and claim the rebel corpse later, when things are a little more calm. We need Hajime-dono — so don't delay. It's an order, Nakata — we're returning to base."

Nakata met her gaze for a moment, then sighed, bowing his head in acknowledgement.

"As you wish, Kikyue-hime," he said softly. "Message understood."

It was not normally a long walk from the Seventh to the Thirteenth, but with the added burden of the half-conscious Koku to take into consideration, Kirio had made slow process along the cobbles towards

her home division. Koku had insisted on trying to walk, unwilling to let himself be carried, and though at first Kirio thought he was pushing himself to avoid the humiliation of being carried by a woman, from the pained look on his features, she had quickly realised that physical contact with her was causing him some discomfort. He had not attempted to speak at all since they had left the Seventh, but had surprised her by being able to shuffle one foot shakily in front of the other, and at the sight of his determination, Kirio felt her frustration with his obstinacy fading into a reluctant respect.

Had he really wanted to leave Thirteenth in order to save the silver-haired stranger's life? The man had been a kinsman of Thirteenth's recruit, Kirio remembered, yet even knowing that didn't make his request make sense. As far as she knew, Koku and Izumi had never met, and even if they had, it did not explain how he had known to interrupt the fight, nor why Mitsuki had been so persuaded to give him his way. She had wanted to ask more questions, but with her Captain clearly displeased and on edge at Mitsuki's impulsive behaviour, she had decided it was wiser to hold her tongue. The silver-haired stranger had been concerned for his sister's safety, and had disappeared into a shunpo Kirio privately felt sure he could not maintain for long, and Juushirou had quickly reiterated his orders to her, a sharp note in his words that she was unused to hearing from her Captain. She did not know whether Juushirou was concerned for Izumi, or for Mitsuki, or the devastated Seventh... nor whether it was the blooded, silver-haired stranger roaming at whim around the Gotei that had got the older man's attention. Whichever was the truth, though, Koku was her responsibility and, even though the young stray had clearly done something to help, Kirio felt certain that she would receive a firm scolding later on.

At the very least, I need to get Koku back home. If I can do that, and it turns out he's fine, maybe Taichou will let me off. Maybe.

She cast her companion a sidelong glance, taking in the glazed look in the brown eyes, shadowed beneath hooded lids. Koku's complexion was greyer than she had seen it before, but the lack of anything in his eyes concerned her more than if he had been moaning and complaining of pain. He seemed there but not there, as though the encounter at Seventh had sapped away half of his life energy, and now it was all he could do to press forward, one slow, agonising step at a time.

"We're almost there," she reassured him, but there was no response, and Kirio sighed, tightening her hold around his upper body and feeling his flinch and sudden tensing at their further contact.

"I promise, as soon as we get back to your room, I'll let go," she said softly. "I'll tuck you in and you can rest. I have to stay with you, but I'm sorry about the man-handling. Just, Taichou is cross... and... I am going to make sure I do what he tells me, so he doesn't get more cross. Clearly you're not well enough to be out of bed, and if that's the case..."

"I'm all right," Koku spoke absently, as though he was only half listening, but the sound of his voice reassured his companion.

"You're not," she told him firmly, "but if you're arguing with me, you're starting to feel better. I don't know what you did to the man at Seventh, nor who he is, except Ichimaru-san's kinsman, but you probably shouldn't have pushed yourself so far. It's a lot, and you're still recovering. You're barely eating — no wonder you have no strength to move about."

"I'm fine," Koku raised his gaze slightly, his eyes focusing on the dotted clouds speckled above their heads, and Kirio saw sadness touch his eyes. "He would have died. And now I can't hear... it's like... my mind is silent again."

"Your mind?" Kirio cast him a confused look, and Koku shrugged impatiently.

"It's nothing to do with you," he told her frankly, then lapsed back into silence, and Kirio let out a heavy sigh of frustration.

"It will be, if I end up on morning and midnight chores for a month because of taking you out of Thirteenth's territory," she retorted. "I don't understand much about what happened today — who the person was who attacked Seventh, why that happened, what Ichimaru-san's kinsman had done, or anything else. At the very least, if I'm going to get punished on your behalf, you should explain to me what I'm being punished for."

"I didn't ask you to come. Edogawa-san did," Koku closed up, turning his gaze away, and Kirio bit back the report burning on her tongue, realising that despite his ill-tempered responses, Koku's body was trembling from the shock and exertion of the morning's events. Fortunately, they reached the gate of the Thirteenth at that moment, and as they approached, Kirio's brow creased in consternation, for standing at the main gate was an officer she did not know, robed all in black. From the man's impassive gaze, she quickly realised that he was one of the Second's Onmitsukidou officers, though from the lack of adornment on his uniform, he was not one of significant rank. He was standing to attention, but as she approached, he moved to bar her

path, a quizzical look surfacing in the depths of those hollow eyes.

“State your name and business,” he demanded, his words gruff and entirely lacking in honorifics, and Kirio cast him an indignant glare.

“State yours!” she retorted. “This is my division, and I belong here. I don’t have to answer to the authority of an unranked secret operative!”

“Kai-dono ordered me not to let anyone into the division bar Ukitake-taichou, when he returns,” the man was unmoved, his gaze flitting briefly to Koku, before returning to Kirio herself. “State your name and business, and be quick. Your friend looks about to fall down, and I’m not going to help you drag him off the cobbles.”

Kirio bristled, but realised that Koku had indeed begun to lose his footing, and she sighed, casting the officer the filthiest look she could muster.

“Hikifune Kirio. Thirteenth Division, Sixth Seat,” she snapped, and the man held out his hand.

“Your sword, please.”

“You are not taking my *zanpakutou*!” Kirio was incredulous, but the man shook his head.

“I need to verify it. That’s all,” he said flatly. “Your sword, please.”

Kirio pressed her lips together in displeasure, slipping her hand down towards her *obi* and drawing her gleaming katana from its sheath, pointing the blade at the officer’s torso.

“If you want to verify it, I can release it into you,” she said darkly. “As you observed, I have an injured... an injured *recruit* who is sick and in need of medical attention. He can’t get that out here on the street. I am not obliged to take orders from you, or from Kai-dono, not when I have instructions that supersede his authority from my Captain, Ukitake Juushirou. I am ordered to return here and attend to my comrade’s injury. Step aside, or I will make you.”

“Kirio-san?” Koku stirred slightly at this, casting her a look of consternation, but Kirio paid him no heed, tapping the exposed tip of her sword against the Onmitsukidou’s black uniform.

“Move, please,” she said softly. For the first time the Onmitsukidou appeared discomfited, for he hesitated for a moment, then stepped reluctantly aside, allowing her to pass through the gate. She nodded at him curtly, resheathing her weapon before carefully guiding Koku into the Thirteenth Division conclave. Other members of the black-clad

secret ops were dotted around the inner perimeter, making her decidedly uneasy, but Koku's legs buckled under him at that point, and it was all she could do to catch him before he fell headlong.

"I'll carry you inside," she said briskly. "It will be quicker, and Taichou said not to use shunpo. If I did, you'd probably be sick, so bear with me touching you a while longer."

Koku seemed to be beyond answering, and Kirio managed to support his slim body in her arms, carrying him the short distance back towards the small sick room. Though she received many glances from the Onmitsukidou officers, none of them questioned her presence, and before long she had lain Koku down on the bed, covering him with the worn blankets and putting the back of her hand against his brow to check for fever. He was cold and clammy, rather than burning up, and she sighed, lifting the jug of water from the bedside shelf and pouring an amount of it into the nearby mug, pressing it to his lips.

"Drink," she said gently. "You can sleep, then, but you've exhausted yourself, and it will help."

To her surprise, Koku did not fight her, obediently taking the cool liquid into his mouth, and once the vessel was drained, she set it aside.

"I guess it's my fault as much as anyone's, for bringing you to Seventh," she reflected. "I don't know all your reasons, and maybe I should have asked them before I agreed. I don't know why I was so quick to react... but..."

"Because I wanted you to," Koku's voice was barely above a whisper, but there was no mistaking the bitterness in his tones, and Kirio shot him a confused look.

"Koku?"

"Sometimes, it happens," Koku's features twitched into a grimace of disgust. "I don't mean it to... just... sometimes it does. If I know something is wrong... people around me... they feel it too. It makes them act... carelessly. Or... worse. I'm sorry, Kirio-san. I will tell Ukitake-dono that it was my fault."

"I don't know what you're talking about, but it's fine," Despite herself, Kirio grinned, bending to ruffle the tousled brown hair. "I'll take responsibility for my own actions. You didn't do anything to me, and I was silly. I should know better. Don't worry so much about it. Taichou will probably just give me some horrible duties for a while..."

since nobody died, and you helped Ichimaru-san's kinsman somehow, he'll probably forgive me. Probably."

Koku was silent for a moment, then,

"The fox... I... him too."

"The fox?" Kirio frowned, eying her companion in confusion. "Ichimaru-san's kinsman? Him?"

"Yes."

"Why do you call him a fox?"

"He is a fox. A silver fox," Koku said simply. "He came here. I knew... I touched him, and he... saw too. Then he felt... he came here... and..."

"You're not making sense," Kirio scolded. "I don't know what you're talking about. If you can't finish your sentences, close your eyes and get some rest. We'll talk about it when you wake up, and..."

"Too late. Already over," Koku murmured, though his lashes were becoming heavier as he began to lose his battle against the lure of sleep. "Tenichi-dono... is in trouble. It's not his fault... Kirio-san."

"Tenichi?" Kirio, who had been on the verge of dismissing Koku's words as meaningless babble, froze, staring at him in consternation. "What about Tenichi? What does he have to do with anything?"

"Because of the foxes... but its wrong. It's all wrong..." Koku's eyes closed, opening briefly for a second, then closing properly. "Stop him... before... it is his fault."

Pale fingers brushed against Kirio's arm, then fell limp against the bedcovers, and Kirio gazed at her companion in consternation, watching as his breathing evened out into that of deep sleep.

Tenichi?

Her gaze flitted to the window, remembering the Onmitsukidou, and her brow creased.

No, that doesn't make sense. Why would...

She got to her feet, moving to the window, and her heart caught in her throat as she made out the lone figure of Ketsui standing across the division gardens, his hands resting against the fence. He wasn't looking in her direction, but Kirio could tell just from that glance that something was wrong with him. His body was rigid with tension, and as her gaze drifted further across the grounds, Kirio's own heart stilled in her chest. The barrier fence that normally stood so white and

straight was ripped apart, the ground covered with wooden shrapnel, as though it had been raining splinters.

Reihahen.

Kirio cast Koku a troubled glance, then back out at the debris. *Tenichi was here. Tenichi released Reihahen, and now the Onmitsukidou are here. Someone must've sent for them. Not Taichou, he's still at Seventh, but... maybe Naoko-san or Fukutaichou. Which means whatever happened here... its serious.*

She glanced at Koku again, bending to listen to his breathing for a moment.

He's fast asleep. If I left him, nobody would know. With all these people around, nobody is likely to break in... and I can't just leave it like this. I can't leave Ketsui looking like that. Besides, Koku told me... he said that I should...

She faltered, her brows knitting together.

If I know something is wrong... people around me... they feel it too. It makes them act... carelessly. Or... worse.

Koku... Is this what you meant? Taichou would be cross, if he knew I'd left you alone. Edogawa-san isn't back yet, and there's only me to help you if you wake. But... but...

She turned back towards the window.

Tenichi is my friend. Whatever happened here, I need to know. I don't know how Koku knew about it, or what else he knows about anything, but I can't just ignore it. I need to find out exactly what happened at Thirteenth this morning, and why it resulted in Reihahen tearing apart Thirteenth's grounds.

Ketsui's Zanpakutou.

I didn't give the name last chapter, but this I did. It's name is Reihashou, 霊玻璃哨, which means, roughly, "Glass Spirit Sentinel". I decided it would be neat to have the two Kotetsu brothers with similar sounding sword names, though the second 'ha' kanji is different in both. Technically the kanji order means spirit-glass-sentinel, but I wanted to preserve that sibling similarity, so please, allow me a bit of artistic licence ;) The idea for Ketsui's zanpakutou to be glass was suggested by a friend of mine back when I was figuring out Tenichi's zanpakutou, and it just seemed to be fitting in so many ways. Finding a kanji character for glass was hard, though, as the Japanese generally use "gurasu" in katakana ;), so I think I ended up with a pretty outdated one.

For anyone wondering why Izumi's hypnosis doesn't work on Ketsui, it's because of Reihashou. Izumi's hypnosis is her spirit power — it's an ability to influence another's spiritual aura with hers, and sink it into sleep. Because Reihashou's innate power allows the construction of spiritual barriers, Izumi's hypnosis cannot penetrate Ketsui's aura, therefore making him entirely immune to its effects.

Bleach 520

The first time I read this chapter, this week, I was actually quite upset by it. Not because anything unexpected or unpleasant happened in it, but because of the general atmosphere surrounding a certain individual on receipt of a certain message. And the highly notable absence of a certain other individual in relation to that message. I shall say no more, but those who have read will surely understand my meaning. The last part was epic though. Even though it screws up Meifu's timeline vs the manga again, I love that final twist. It's one in the eye for every idiot who's ever dared to doubt or underestimate the (in my view) undisputed Queen of Seireitei... but I never expected it to be so beautiful when it happened.

It's also making me want to write the scene Kubo has not yet written. I am holding off for now, because I'd rather he wrote it, but if he doesn't... watch this space ..

And in other news:)

Today I got my university results and found I passed my MA degree with distinction. I'm goin' to graduation in July =D.

51. Justice

Chapter Fifty: Justice

The shinigami was gaining on him.

Katsura paused momentarily beneath the shade of an overhanging willow tree, grasping the trunk desperately as he struggled to drag breath into shattered lungs. The after effects of the fierce battle in Seventh's compound had taken its toll on his *reiryoku* and, with the collapse of his rage had come the gradual erosion of his spiritual abilities, till even shunpo was more than he could manage. To begin with, he had been able to evade the persistent pursuit of the four seated officers, ducking and diving into holes and gulleys and using what was left of his *reiryokuto* push himself just that bit ahead. A short time before, something had happened to reduce the number of pursuers from four to one, but if he had thought it would be easier to avoid one individual than four, he had soon realised how wrong he was.

He had Endou blood, but so did they. And as he had come to hunt his sister's killer, now the remaining predator was seeking his life.

He did not know which one was still on his tail. It wasn't the young woman who had challenged him, with the spiritual bird that had swooped and dived towards him, but one of the men, his *reiryoku* older and more settled, yet somehow darker and edged with blood. It was the *reiryoku* of someone who had killed before, and was not afraid of killing again, and though Katsura felt certain that, if he had been at full strength, he would've been able to counter, in his current state, he was at a significant disadvantage. He could not read the man's thoughts, but he was sensitive enough to auras to know that it was tinged not with hate or rage but simply focused intent. There would be no using this one's emotions against him, Katsura told himself grimly. He was not like the young *hime*— his approach would not be swayed by mention of the dead Souja.

And he was getting closer.

Katsura rasped another breath into his already burning lungs, pulling himself over the exposed tree roots and taking off once more, this time in the direction that he knew from past visits led towards the river. If he could get there, he thought feverishly, he could use the water as a barrier to separate him from his pursuer, maybe even use

the current to take him further away from the man's range. It would be a gamble, since he had never been much of a swimmer, and Rukongai had afforded him little opportunity to practice. But it was the only chance he had.

Though why am I running, really?

He gritted his teeth, pushing through the ever longer blades of grass and plunging headlong down a steep bank, ignoring the mud and gunge he had trampled through as he reached the fork in the path, taking the left arm that wound down towards the river.

I have no place to go back to. I told Father I would avenge Sakaki, and I failed. I'm on the run, and I have nowhere to run to. This whole world belongs to shinigami, but the other one belongs to Father. This time he will kill me, and there's no reason to expect the shinigami to do any less. That white haired guy made it clear they'd had orders.

He grimaced, reaching to push his long, messy hair out of his eyes. *Of course, I hadn't thought that far ahead. I didn't care if I got killed, it wasn't really a big issue, so long as I avenged Sakaki. I couldn't protect her as her brother, and so the least I could do was avenge her murder. It's all I could think of... impulsive and hot-headed as ever. I didn't expect to see Koku... I didn't expect... him to be there.*

He swallowed hard, remembering the sudden flurry of reiatsu and then the younger boy's appearance onto the scene, flanked by a shinigami he did not know and another, one whose face and whose stricken expression haunted him almost as much as his young ally's had done. In that moment, he had dropped his mental barriers, and Koku's forcefulness had broken through. His screech had been inaudible to anyone else at Seventh but, to Katsura, it had been as deafening as thunder, stopping him in his tracks.

"Please, Katsura, don't do this," the younger boy had begged. "Please, don't hurt anyone. I don't want you to kill anyone else."

"That one killed Sakaki," Katsura had protested, but Koku had held firm, resolution in his troubled gaze.

"I don't care. It's not for you to blood your hands over," he had responded, his words wavering slightly as Katsura's spiritual focus had loosened the link between them. "This is a fight you can't have. You can't win it. All that can happen is that you're killed, and I don't want anyone else to die. Vengeance only brings more vengeance and more death, and I don't want that to happen to you. Please, Katsura, stop this."

At first Katsura had not known how to respond, but then he had

seen Mitsuki's expression, and, for the first time, the hint of bandages trailing out from beneath Koku's rough robes. The realisation had hit him like a splash of cold water, waking him suddenly from his fit of rage and making him starkly aware of the peril he was in.

Koku is with the shinigami. Koku is here, but he's safe. He's with Mitsuki-san, and she's been treating him with her healer magic. Father isn't worried about him, because he's not in any danger right now. But my coming here, it might have put him in danger. Was that what Father meant... why he tried to keep me from acting? Koku couldn't sit back and let me die, and because of that, he's put himself in danger to come stop me. I came to avenge Sakaki, but instead, maybe...

He shook his head, pushing the thoughts impatiently away.

Enough. Whatever the truth, I can't go back. If Koku is there, I won't go back. Not even for Sakaki's sake. What I'll do, I don't know... but I won't do anything to hurt Koku.

He turned, cutting through a copse as he wound and weaved his way towards the river's edge, extending his senses once more for any trace of the shinigami. At first he could not feel anything but the gentle breeze, but then, with a sudden chill he realised that the presence he was seeking had read his moves far more clearly than he had realised. As he crossed into a more open stretch of land, glittering silver barbs shot out from the shadows, piercing him in the chest and abdomen and causing him to fly back against the trunk of a nearby tree. He slid down against it, coughing and choking as blood invaded his perforated lungs and began to soak through his clothing, pooling onto the ground around him. He blinked, his vision already blurring from the shock of the impact, just about able to make out the four or five long silver barbs which, like needles through cloth had burrowed mercilessly through his ribs to the soft tissue beneath, paring the flesh and splitting the bone as though they were little more than butter. He coughed again, struggling to bring his fingers up to touch the barbs, but as he lifted his hand a few inches from the ground, his entire body juddered, and, one by one, the projectiles withdrew themselves, each movement sending fresh pain searing through his whole body. With nothing to hold back the flow, the blood gushed from the gaping wounds, and he gasped, a sudden sense of cold washing over him as for the first time he made out the silhouette of his assailant.

It was the older man, the one who had managed for a time to keep his footing in the face of Katsura's own psychic onslaught. He was standing a foot or two away, blooded sword in hand, watching him impassively. There was nothing angry or impetuous in the man's gaze, just that same predatorial intensity he had felt in the pursuing aura,

and Katsura's breath escaped in a rush as he realised he had been well and truly hunted down.

For a moment the man just stood there, then he raised his sword a second time, and Katsura gazed at him helplessly, knowing that this would be the final blow.

"Hajime-dono!"

A fresh voice broke onto the scene, causing the shinigami to pause and turn to acknowledge the sound. His name was Hajime, Katsura noted dully, but already the edges of his vision were becoming blurred and he could barely draw his thoughts together.

Well, at least he knew that. At the end, he knew the name of the man who had killed him. Wasn't that a mark of a warrior?

He smiled, a silly, bittersweet smile, remembering the stories his mother had told him when he had been tiny, of soldiers and brave deeds on the field of battle.

Maybe, if he ended his life here... then maybe...

"...orders of Kikyue-dono," the new shinigami was still speaking, but Katsura could no longer make clear sense of the words. There was a murmur of something in response, then a whoosh of reiatsu, as both he and then, at length, the one called Hajime slipped into shunpo, moving with speed away from the scene.

Katsura blinked, struggling to draw air into savaged lungs.

So the hunter had not considered him worthy of a final blow.

He closed his eyes.

For a bastard Endou, perhaps this is the only ending they see as fit. Tomorrow they'll come for my corpse, and doubtless, they'll string it up. Tomorrow they'll triumph over me. Tomorrow... I hope... Koku can't... see me. I hope... he never has to know.

A shudder ran through his body as it struggled to take in the air needed to keep breathing.

Shut off... my connection... when... left... Seventh. Maybe... he... won't see me. Maybe... I hope...

Tears glittered on his lashes.

I'm sorry. Koku-kun. Couldn't keep... promise. Sakaki-chan... couldn't avenge you. Both of you, please, forgive me. Forgive... me.

With that the last of the tension slipped out of his body, and the world of darkness swept in, dragging him down into the depths.

“...and that’s everyone.”

Juushirou wiped the dust from his hands, glancing again at the list of Seventh Division members in his hand, and then back out at the rear courtyard, taking in the expressions of the younger members with a troubled sigh. Several of them were in tears, others biting their lips to prevent a complete and humiliating emotional breakdown, and Juushirou was aware that the most junior members were still in their teens — little older than Hirata himself had been when they had first met. They lacked training and combat practice, completely unprepared for the rigours of squad life even before the murder of their Vice Captain and subsequent events had thrown the whole of the Endou domain into complete confusion, and, as he watched a young boy attempt to conceal his trembling lip behind the sleeve of his *hakamashita*, it was all he could do to resist the urge to hug him.

His mind and his heart were both far from the Seventh, but as a Captain, he knew that his duty was to remain with those who could not protect themselves until a senior officer returned. What had begun by his attempt to check all the recruits were in one piece had ended up in a full division examination and evacuation, for as he had marshalled the dazed and dizzy youngsters into the main building, he had discovered the damage wrought within by the Clan emblem’s missile-like flight through the roof of the central hall. Several lower ranked members had taken splinters, one or two others suffering from concussion or other minor injuries, and Juushirou had quickly ascertained that the highest ranking officer on the premises was Hirata’s Tenth Seated officer, who, despite his best attempts to keep order, was being run ragged by his panicked subordinates. There had been nothing to do but help, and so, what seemed like an age later, the entire rest of the division had been neatly assembled in ranks outside the rear of the building whilst he made sure that nobody had been crushed or otherwise badly hurt.

Fortunately, everyone had turned out to be present and more or less intact and, though there had been some tears, Juushirou’s presence had reassured many of the more scared young ones that they were not about to die.

But till Kikyue comes back, I can’t do much but stay here. Even though there are other things I ought to be doing.

His gaze flitted in the direction of Thirteenth Division, and he frowned.

Joumei said Izumi’s name, then disappeared. I hope it wasn’t remiss of me not to go with him. I promised his sister protection, but with a threat like that Katsura still roaming loose, leaving Seventh to its own devices without

a competent officer in charge would be like signing the death warrants of these kids. I didn't realise how many junior officers Hirata was trying to handle... no wonder he's been so harried lately. And speaking of Katsura...

He pressed his lips together, not liking the direction in which his thoughts were heading.

Mitsuki told me she was saved by someone with dark hair and blue eyes. Then Keitarou's son appears, with Eiraki's features, and suddenly I knew who that someone was. More, Mitsuki's reaction and his — they'd clearly met before. I thought it when I saw him and the kind of power he used... raw, untrained power that would've been able to rip apart a Hollow — and then she appeared and her expression confirmed my worst suspicions. It's too much of a coincidence for this not to be the same person. But now I don't know where she is, either. Her reiatsu is completely gone from my senses, and I couldn't follow her even if I wanted to. I have so many questions, for her and for Koku — in particular, why they came into danger to interrupt the confrontation — but for now I have to do what's right in front of me and trust in others to hold things together in my absence. Naoko is still at Thirteenth, and Enishi should've returned there by now. If there's any danger there, I'll have to trust them to take care of it for me, because I can't just abandon Seventh like this.

He cast the gathered shinigami a glance, pursing his lips thoughtfully. Turnover in the Endou division went through periods of highs and lows, based on squabbles and insurrections at home which, despite Hirata's careful leadership and his father's wise counsel, still erupted between more power-hungry branches of the Clan. Hirata had always tried to build his division based on ability, rather than Clan connection, and, certainly with his senior officers, he had more or less had his way, but as older officers had retired or chosen to resign from the division in order to inherit territory and begin dynastic expansion, so young and inexperienced juniors had been sent in their place.

His gaze rested on the red, dusty face of the Tenth seat, a man in his middle forties, with a portly middle and a stubby sword thrust through the substantial obi at his side. Despite his apparent appearance of fine living, he had proven surprisingly levelheaded when faced with a crisis, and Juushirou decided that he could be trusted to report with accuracy, despite the immediate chaos.

"Masaoka, when did your Captain leave the division?" he asked, and the man immediately saluted, bowing his head.

"Early this morning, sir. Before dawn, sir. The Lady Ai sent a summons, sir, and he was gone before Kikyue-hime assigned patrols for drill."

“I see,” Juushirou clicked his tongue against his teeth. “And he gave no indication when he’d come back?”

“Not to me, sir,” Masaoka bowed again, clearly both awed and relieved by Juushirou’s presence. “Maybe to Kikyue-hime, but she just said to continue with our tasks as normal.”

“Well, it will be difficult to do that with this place in such a mess,” Juushirou turned to glance thoughtfully back at the building. “Masaoka, are you usually in command of a sub-patrol?”

“Yes, sir. Within Souja-dono... I mean, within the first patrol, sir, I sometimes lead scout missions,” Masaoka’s red face became impossibly redder as he stumbled over the name of his deceased Vice Captain, and Juushirou’s eyes softened at this obvious attempt to cover his grief. He nodded.

“Then I want you to take the men you normally lead and begin to clear the debris from the main hall,” he said. “Any recruits who were unaffected by this morning’s incident should join you. Don’t try to move the insignia itself — that can wait — but at the very least the damaged area ought to be made safe.”

“Yes, sir,” Masaoka saluted again, then wheeled on the assembled officers.

“You heard Captain Ukitake! Follow me!” he barked out, and then, without waiting for a response, he huffed and puffed his way inside, followed by a gaggle of hesitant but relieved juniors. It reminded Juushirou a little of a mother duck and her ducklings, and he stifled the inappropriate smile at this image, turning back to the rest of the gathered officers.

“All the recruits knocked out by the attack in the courtyard should retire to their quarters,” he said softly. “Anyone else, I want you to take brooms and other tools and sweep the outer courtyards clear of debris. If Hir... Endou-taichou returns to see his division in a shambles, he’ll be cross... which is something none of us wants. In the absence of Kikyue-dono or any other senior officers, I think it best that all hands move to clear the mess.”

There was an exchange of glances between some of the younger ones, but, and Juushirou wondered if he had pushed his position too far by trying to give orders to Clan children clearly fresh out of the Endou nest, but one of them, a tall, gangly boy offered a clumsy salute, grabbing his neighbour by the arm and giving him a tug as he headed off to obey the command. One by one the others followed, and, as the handful of recruits Katsura had dazed trailed slowly off

towards the sleeping quarters, Juushirou leaned back against the wall of the building, letting out a sigh of relief.

Thank goodness for Hirata's discipline. They might be scared, and not up to much yet, but they're still learning to respect authority and in a crisis situation, that's the most important thing of all.

He frowned, glancing around him.

That reminds me, Tenichi should've been back by now. I hope Naoko didn't keep him... I told him to come back here, and right now, he'd be a help in dealing with the juniors. Masaoka is surprisingly helpful and authoritative, but I know Kikyue and Hirata consider Tenichi's authority above his rank, sometimes, and he knows these kids better than I do.

He ran his fingers through his lank blond hair.

What a day for you to choose to go to District Eight, Shunsui. I can't even send a kid next door to summon the Eighth, since Sora will be trying to manage things all by herself. It's already proving to be a complicated and particularly unpleasant day... especially if Joumei is right and that Katsura boy really is Keitarou's son. It means Shunsui's right — again — and there really are more than just two of them. Maybe there are more than three... but even if Joumei did kill the girl — and I've no reason to doubt that he did — it's pretty clear that Keitarou has other weapons he can unleash on us, and that they can be used to devastating effect. If I hadn't come when I did... who knows what would've transpired here.

Still, all I can do now is send an urgent message to District Seven, and hope that Hirata gets back here as quick as is possible. Kikyue's working hard and doing her best, but she can't manage everything on her own, and right at the moment, leaving the Division unattended is only asking for trouble.

He pushed open the door of the main building, picking his way carefully around debris and industrious recruits who, fired up by the occasional sharp order from Masaoka, were putting their all into the clean-up operation.

For a Tenth Seat, he has a good amount of presence. Perhaps Hirata should consider him for promotion — he can certainly keep his head in a crisis.

He nodded his head in the officer's direction, receiving another stiffly formal salute for his trouble, then he was past the scene and stepping out into the front courtyard. Though the folorn sounds of the sign's severed chains dangling in the wind created an eerie, lonely sound, the front of the Division was really not that badly damaged and, as he paused beneath the archway, eying the chains critically, he realised that it would probably be possible to reattach the insignia

with relatively little trouble.

A good chain maker might be needed, but probably all it will take is some work on the links in the middle. They weren't broken, just ripped open... I think that someone will be able to do something about that.

“Juushirou?!”

So lost in his contemplations was he that Juushirou had not heard the approach of his friend, nor sensed his familiar reiatsu, and he visibly jumped, turning around with a mixture of dismay and relief to see Hirata standing on the other side of the pathway, staring at him with a look of clear incredulity in his pale eyes. His gaze flitted up to the gap where the sign had been, and his eyebrows raised slightly, a questioning expression touching his features.

“Dare I ask what occurred here in my absence, and why you’re here on my doorstep, examining broken chains like a metal worker?”

The question was voiced softly, but Juushirou picked up on the edge in the words, and the sharp nip that now touched the summer breeze. He frowned, coming to rest a hand on his friend’s shoulder.

“I don’t fully understand myself,” he said honestly. “Seventh was attacked in your absence. Kikyue sent Tenichi to me for help, and so I came.”

“To you? Not Eighth or Sixth?” Hirata was startled, and Juushirou shook his head.

“Shunsui is away with Tokutarou-sama till tomorrow,” he said gravely, “and Kikyue sent for me, I think, because Joumei was here... and she thought it better that way.”

“Joumei?” Now Hirata’s expression was a mask of shock. “But why would he be here? And Kikyue... she knows nothing about Joumei, so why would she suddenly make assumptions... what went on here this morning, Juushirou? Tell me everything, and tell me now. Every bit of it — where is my daughter, and why is my division’s sign missing?”

“It’s not missing, it’s nicely adorning the middle of your central hall, but I have Masaoka and his patrol dealing with the problem,” Juushirou told him succinctly. “He’s a good officer, Masaoka. Listens well and has a presence with the young ones, most of whom are scared out of their wits. As for Kikyue, she took some of the senior officers on a pursuit mission. It seems Joumei made himself unpopular somewhere, and brought an unwelcome follower... who is the one who laid waste to your division. He fled, and Kikyue took up the chase.”

"I see," Hirata removed his spectacles, rubbing the bridge of his nose. "Clearly I chose a bad day to go visiting my wife."

"I don't think any day to leave Inner Seireitei is a good one at the moment," Juushirou said honestly. "How is Ai-hime? I heard she'd summoned you, so I assumed she was once more unwell."

"Yes..." Hirata's expression became shadowed, then he shrugged his shoulders. "She has dreams, and hysterics, and believes I've been killed like Souja. Sometimes the only way to calm her is for me to go home and show her that I'm in one piece. Then she calms, and the doctors can get her to sleep, but it's some hours round trip. If my doing so is going to create problems, I will have to send a message to Father and tell them to keep Ai sedated, at least until things here are more peaceful. She hasn't reacted to Souja's death at all well — understandably."

"Ai-hime isn't a warrior, nor does she understand the price of bearing arms," Juushirou spoke soberly. "I'm sorry, Hirata. I wish I could be of more help."

"You clearly have been," Hirata gestured to the Division. "If you're here, you're obviously neglecting your own squad on my behalf. I should be the one apologising... but for the time being, I'd like to beg your company a little longer. A full report on the day's events is overdue, and I'm missing a lot of the pieces of this puzzle. What did Joumei do? Why did he come here? Who was the attacker? What business had they with my Seventh, and does it connect to Souja?"

"I can't answer all of those things," Juushirou admitted. "I only know a very little, coming into the battle mid-way myself. I can't even tell you where Joumei is, currently. I think he went to Thirteenth... but not having been back there myself..."

Hirata eyed his friend for a moment, then,

"You're worried about something there?"

"I am," Juushirou confessed. Slowly he outlined the morning's events in proper detail, and Hirata's eyes narrowed.

"Keitarou's... son?" he murmured, and Juushirou nodded.

"Then Joumei said something about Izumi, and vanished," he agreed. "I sent Kirio and Koku back to Thirteenth, but I don't know where Mitsuki went and I haven't been back to check. I'm trusting that Naoko and Enishi are both there and able to deal with whatever it is... but it's hard to be a Captain and not manage to be in two places at once."

“You should go back now, then,” Hirata said decidedly. “I’m here, and I can deal with my squad myself. Kikyue will probably return soon, and then we’ll get everything in order and I’ll have her report to me in full. Your duty here is over, Juushirou — your own people probably are waiting for you.”

“Are you sure?” Juushirou looked doubtful, but Hirata nodded.

“I’m grateful to you, as always, for being such a good and loyal friend,” he said, offering a tired smile. “In this world, sometimes it’s the only thing that keeps me going — knowing that whatever shadows I have to face, I have people there to face them with me. But Thirteenth has plenty to deal with too, and I can’t keep you from your own duties. I can handle my own Division, believe me. It’s all right. You can go.”

“Then...”

“Ukitake-taichou! Ukitake-taichou!”

A breathless cry broke across Juushirou’s response, and the white haired Captain swung around in consternation, seeing a slim figure haring across the street towards him.

“Kayashima?”

At the sight of Hirata, Kayashima faltered, then bowed very properly, before turning to his Captain.

“Taichou, Shikibu-san sent me to fetch you back to Thirteenth at once!” he exclaimed.

“At Thirteenth? Why? What’s happened?” Juushirou grabbed the youngster by the shoulders, giving him a little shake. “Calm down and report, Kayashima — what message did she give?”

“Yes sir,” Kayashima’s eyes were bright with urgency, but he obediently moderated his tones, eying his companion earnestly.

“Kotetsu Tenichi tried to kill Ichimaru Izumi and Ketsui-san arrested him, but now he’s locked in Thirteenth’s cells and nobody knows what to do and Shikibu-san wants you to go back at once, please!”

“Tenichi did *what*?” Juushirou’s fingers slipped away from Kayashima’s shoulders, horror flooding his features. He glanced at Hirata, seeing the same floored expression mirrored on his friend’s features, and a cold chill ran down his spine.

“There’s no mistake in the message?” Hirata found his voice,

casting Kayashima a sharp look, and Kayashima shook his head.

“No, sir. That’s the exact report, sir. I saw it, too. Shikibu-san and Ketsui-san taking him to the cells, I mean,” he reported fervently. “Because I was there, Shikibu-san told me to come report to the Captain and not to start any rumours about it, so I figured it was really important and I didn’t forget a single word of what she said. She said to make sure that Taichou came back with me, and so I ran all the way here.”

Juushirou was silent for a moment, digesting this. Then he let out a heavy sigh.

“Then I’ll go back,” he said sadly, meeting Hirata’s blank gaze with a troubled one of his own. “I guess the day is getting even longer and less pleasant as the hours roll on.”

“I’ll come with you,” Hirata suggested, but Juushirou shook his head.

“Kikyue will come back and need to report, and your juniors shouldn’t be left alone. A lot of them were very scared, and some of them got hurt,” he said quietly. “You need to stay here. I’ll send word as soon as I know what’s happened — and what Tenichi’s role in it is — but for now, your duty is with Seventh. And mine... it seems that mine is back at Thirteenth.”

As Kirio stepped out into the Division gardens, the true scale of what had occurred there hit her, and she faltered, gazing in dismay at the shattered remains of fence and tree branch that littered the ground. She bent to pick up one of the smashed splinters, blunted and split in two from some kind of impact, and as she ran her fingers over its surface, she could feel not one but two sword presences — that of the aggressor, Tenichi, and of a defender.

Ketsui.

She raised her gaze to where her young squad mate was still standing, silent and motionless alongside a broken stretch of fence, and she sighed, setting the broken wood down and getting to her feet. At her approach, he turned, apparently detecting her presence for the first time, and at the look in his eyes, Kirio knew that her suspicions were true. Her heart lurched in her chest.

“Ketsui...” she murmured, and Ketsui let out his breath in a rush, turning to lean up against the surviving wooden post support. He folded his arms across his chest, then, at length, he spoke.

“You’ve heard, then? I can see it in your eyes that you have.”

His words were cold and flat, lacking any of their usual emotion, and Kirio’s heart clenched once more. Slowly she shook her head.

“I haven’t been told anything,” she said softly. “I just happened to see the mess in the garden, and when I stepped out, I sensed Reihahen. The Onmitsukidou are everywhere, though... did someone get hurt?”

“No... nobody got hurt,” Ketsui rubbed his palm against his brow, shaking his head. “Not unless you count the kind of hurt that isn’t measured in blood and bandages... in which case, I’m still trying to get my head around it.”

Slowly and haltingly he recounted the events of the fight, and Kirio felt her worst fears realised.

“I don’t understand,” she whispered. “If Tenichi was so worried... if he felt things were so wrong... why didn’t he talk to us?”

“I don’t know,” Ketsui turned his gaze towards the savaged tree, shrugging his shoulders. “He wasn’t like my brother. He was like someone else. It was as though something had possessed him — but that’s the worst part of it, Kirio-nee. I knew nothing had. It was all his own — his *reiryoku*, his intent — his drive to fight. It was twisted and strange, that’s all. I can’t explain... like all the pressure on him had finally snapped something inside of him, and he’d lost a grip on what did and didn’t make sense. But the worst part of it was that he attacked her because he thought she was a threat to me. He tried to hurt her because of me. If I hadn’t released Reihashou... if he had succeeded, Ichimaru-san would’ve died because of me.”

There were tears in his eyes at this admission, and Kirio sighed, hugging the younger boy instinctively.

“Whatever Tenichi did, he did it, not you,” she murmured. “I don’t get it either, but I don’t suppose anyone considers it your fault. You did the right thing in stopping him, and, probably, when he calms down he’ll think so too. He’s been carrying so many burdens lately... probably they just rushed over him and he snapped. He’ll calm down, and it’ll be resolved. It’s a misunderstanding, right? I’m sure Taichou will find a way to work it through.”

“No... not this time,” Ketsui shook his head. “Kirio-nee, this is serious. Ten-nii said that he’d seen Keitarou. He said so and both Ichimaru-san and I heard him clearly. He said something about that Onmitsukidou, too — the one he attacked outside of Seventh. When

you told me about the aftermath of that, you told me he'd said it was all all right and he wasn't in any trouble. But when he came here to report to Taichou, before any of this happened, he told me he'd got a good scolding for it. More than that, he asked me about Ichimaru-san. The way he asked... made me uncomfortable. I thought it was just because so much was going on, then — but now I'm starting to wonder. I don't think it's just a case of him seeing Ichimaru-san and snapping. I think he knew who she was — maybe things even I don't know — and had planned to kill her. He just needed to make sure people were out of the way, first... which this morning, they were."

"Me included, thanks to Koku's little adventure," Kirio chewed on her lip. "I'm sorry, Ketsui-kun. If I'd realised..."

"You can't see the future," Ketsui shook his head. "You didn't know what would happen — nobody did. I just think, looking back on it, that this was something Ten-nii meant to do. And I... I don't like thinking of it like that. It means my brother and I are at crossed purposes for the first time in our lives... and I don't know how to put things back. I don't know if I can go back. What he did today... at the moment, I don't think I can forgive."

"Ketsui?" Kirio stared at him blankly, and Ketsui offered a wan, hollow smile.

"I love my brother more than anyone in the world," he said sadly, "That's never going to change. He's the only family I have, and I don't want anything bad to happen to him. For that reason, I haven't told anyone but you what he said, yet, about Keitarou. But thinking on it, I know it's important that I report in full, when Taichou comes back and sends for me. Ichimaru-san and I have been working on something that connects to the Third's investigations and we've found evidence of other things to come — if I start concealing evidence now, I might make things worse. Nii-chan didn't fight arrest, and didn't refute the accusations, so it's not as though I can tell if he's angry with me now, but even if it makes him angry, I have to tell the truth. I've come this far — there's nothing else I can do."

"Do you think Tenichi was working with Keitarou?" Kirio asked the question she feared the most, and Ketsui shook his head.

"No, from how he spoke, it sounded more like Keitarou had bullied and backed him into a virtual corner, and it began with his abduction," he said gravely. "Ten-nii said something about Keitarou maybe coming for me if he caused problems or was useless or... I don't know what. He wasn't entirely coherent. His arguments didn't make sense. And I had to protect Ichimaru-san... so I was more

focused on that.”

He buried his head in his hands.

“The truth is, I didn’t protect her because Taichou told me to,” he added reluctantly. “I ought to have done, but I know, deep down, that I didn’t. In normal circumstances, I wouldn’t have ever fought against Ten-nii. I would’ve tried to reason with him, and I certainly wouldn’t have arrested him. I wouldn’t have felt this angry or this determined... but I really... was prepared to release all of Reihashou’s power and fight against him properly if he persisted in attacking Ichimaru-san. It’s silly, isn’t it?”

He shrugged his shoulders.

“I’ve known her such a short time... Ten-nii’s been there all my life. I don’t know anything about Ichimaru-san. Her brother appeared in the middle of our confrontation, yet I didn’t even know she had a brother, not till then. Ten-nii knew him, though, and he knew Ten-nii. There’s so much in this I really don’t understand. Those gaps would normally make me hesitate, but this time they just... didn’t seem to matter. I didn’t care if I didn’t have all the answers. I knew I trusted Ichimaru-san, and so that was all I needed to protect her.”

Kirio eyed him for a moment, then,

“Trusted her, or something else?” she asked gently, resting a hand on the younger man’s shoulder.

“Kirio-nee?”

“Neither you nor I questioned Tenichi as much as we ought to have done,” Kirio leaned back on the broken fence alongside him, a troubled look crossing her features. “We believed he was all right because he said he was, because we trusted in him to talk to us if he was upset. He chose not to, and we don’t know yet, why — but what you said about Ichimaru-san then made me wonder whether the same applies for her, too.”

“I don’t understand.” Ketsui looked blank, and Kirio offered him a pensive glance.

“We didn’t understand Tenichi was in so much distress. We assumed we knew, so didn’t bother to find out,” she said matter-of-factly. “We love him, and because we do, we never thought to doubt him. We didn’t try to understand, because we thought we already did. Maybe the same is true for you with Ichimaru-san. Maybe you didn’t need to know all the details about her that Tenichi knows or anyone else because you’d already assumed you knew her. And maybe that

happened because she's become more than just your duty. She's become your friend... no, perhaps, she's become something even more."

Kirio-nee?! "Dismay flooded Ketsui's expression, colour pooling in his cheeks, and Kirio shrugged.

"I'm just suggesting," she said quietly. "You said it wasn't Taichou's orders that made you raise your sword. What was it, then, that made you want to make sure nobody took that girl's life?"

"I know she's my ally," Ketsui pursed his lips, recovering his composure. "I don't think it's anything other than that, but it is true that I do trust her. I suppose I didn't know I trusted her enough to fight my own brother to keep her safe, but I wouldn't go back and do anything different. Ten-nii was in the wrong, not me. I did what needed to be done and it was right. But it hurts, Kirio-nee. Choosing sides between a brother and a trusted ally... hurts."

"So does being betrayed, huh?" Kirio squeezed his arm reassuringly. "I'm sorry, Ketsui. It was a bad day for me to go gallivanting off on my own whims. I should've been here — maybe I could've done something to help."

"No..." Ketsui slowly shook his head. "No, I don't think you could. I'm glad you didn't see Ten-nii the way he was today. It will stick with me a long time... the stranger that was my brother."

"I really find it hard to believe."

Juushirou rested his hand against the wood of the cell door, a troubled expression in his hazel eyes as he gazed through the slats at the prisoner huddled inside. He was curled up in one of the corners of the chamber, his head buried in his hands, and though Juushirou's officers had not restrained him with spirit cuffs, it was clear from his general demeanour that escape or uprising were the last things on his mind. Though Juushirou was sure that his former squad member could sense his reiatsu outside the door, he did not flinch or look up, and the Captain wondered whether Tenichi was afraid to meet his gaze.

He turned to cast Naoko a quizzical glance.

"Reihahen?"

"Fukutaichou's office, sir," Naoko's voice was unusually grim. "He thought it would be safest there, whilst all the chaos calmed down. The cupboard is locked, and he has the key. Nobody will be able to

retrieve it without your authorisation.”

“I see.”

There was a long silence, then Juushirou sighed.

“Tell me again exactly what you believe happened, Naoko. I’m afraid it hasn’t quite sunk in. I can’t imagine under any circumstances why an officer like Tenichi would do something so outrageous, and with so little provocation.”

“I didn’t see the fight,” Naoko sounded regretful. “Tenichi apparently thought to put a kidou barrier around Houjou-kun’s office, so that I wouldn’t detect what he was about.”

“A barrier?” Ukitake’s brow creased in distress. “You’re sure?”

“According to Izumi, he told her so,” Naoko agreed. “I think she’s right, too. I thought I sensed something as I left the office, after she came to fetch me... but I was distracted by Reihahen and Reihashou and so didn’t give it any more thought till we were talking in the office afterwards.”

“And what has Tenichi said?”

“Not a word,” Naoko admitted. ‘He gave Ketsui his sword, and pretty much crumpled on the spot. He didn’t deny anything, or resist us, so we put him in here and I sent Kayashima to get you. You were longer than I thought you’d be,’ she added. “Did something happen at Seventh, too?”

“Tenichi was meant to report to you, but I suppose he didn’t do that, either,” Juushirou leaned up against the wall of the hallway, letting out his breath in a rush. “Yes, there was an incident, but Hirata has returned now and can handle it himself for the time being. I’m more concerned by this... and now the division is crawling with Onmitsukidou, which will hardly calm things down.”

“Were we wrong to send for Shihouin?” Naoko looked anxious, and Juushirou shook his head.

“No. It was right and it needed doing,” he assured her. “Sending for Kai himself was a smart decision — as was sending the Kitsune to Ugendou, so as not to cause more alarm than necessary. A lot of inexplicable things have happened today and my mind is still reeling, but for the time being I’ll deal with what’s right in front of me. You spoke to Ketsui, by the way?”

“Yes,” Naoko agreed. “Houjou-kun and I both did. He was clearly very upset too, Taichou, but in a way I haven’t seen him before. He

was... angry. Not at us, or anything like that, but just... angry. Angry at his brother maybe — but it was a strange, simmering kind of anger that I've never known from him before. He answered all our questions civilly enough, but they were brief and to the point. Houjou-kun decided to send him to change and cool off, but told him not to leave the barracks, because we'd talk to him again later on. All he really said was the bare bones of what happened — he came across his brother with his sword released, he prevented him from hurting Izumi and he took his sword and arrested him as a result. Nothing more. Just that."

"And Izumi isn't hurt?"

"No, thanks to Ketsui, she's fine," Naoko agreed.

"Well, there's something to be said for small mercies," Juushirou groaned. "Very well, I understand as much as I'm going to. Kai's already made it clear he intends to take Tenichi into Onmitsukidou custody, and I think it might be for the best that that happens. I know he'll treat the boy as fairly as he can, and it's a more neutral territory than either here or the Seventh could be. While he's with Enishi in the office, talking the formalities of the matter through, though, I want to see if Tenichi will talk to me about it at all. He might not... but it's worth a try."

"I'll leave you to it, then, and go find Ketsui," Naoko suggested, and Juushirou nodded.

"Please," he agreed. "Tell him to come to the office... no, better to Ugendou. I'll deal with all of it there. If you can let Enishi and Kai both know that too — it's more private and further from prying eyes. Tell Makoto and Kirio to take charge of the usual chores and routines, and also that there will be no afternoon or evening patrols, on account of the Onmitsukidou manning the gates. We don't want any unfortunate accidents. Kira and Tsunemori can help them, if they like — which reminds me, Naoko, has Mitsuki come back here?"

"Mitsuki?" Naoko blinked, then shook her head, looking alarmed. "Why would Mitsuki have left here? She's with the injured boy — isn't she?"

"She was," Juushirou's lips thinned, as he fought to cover the panic that surged inside him at his companion's surprise. "I saw her at Seventh, earlier, but I thought she had come back here. Maybe she went to see Unohana-taichou, though. It's not important — I just wanted her to look at Joumei's injuries. They don't seem severe, but he was very grey and worn out when last I saw him."

“Oh,” Naoko’s expression cleared, though there was lingering doubt in the clever greenish eyes. “Well, it’s all right. We patched him up more or less with the emergency supplies in Fukutaichou’s office, and Fukutaichou found him something new to wear. He seems all right... a bit pale, maybe, but he wasn’t complaining.”

“Then I suppose it’s all right,” Juushirou managed a smile. “I’m sorry to have kept you, Naoko — and grateful for your quick actions this afternoon.”

“Well, I’d prefer it if you didn’t go babysitting another division the next time there’s an assassination attempt,” Naoko said drolly, “but all things being equal, and no corpses being reported, I think it could’ve been a lot worse.”

She cast Tenichi a glance, and her humour faded.

“He’s not right, Taichou,” she said softly. “I can’t explain it, but I know he’s not right.”

With that she was gone, hurrying back up the steps to the main division courtyard, and Juushirou swallowed his misgivings, turning the key in the lock of the cell door, and pushing the divide back. At the sound, Tenichi glanced up, and Juushirou could see from the puffy, swollen tissue around his eyes that he had indeed been crying. In all the years he had known the older Kotetsu boy, he had never seen him look so completely pitiful, and he steeled himself, remembering that he was facing a man suspected of attempted murder, not a victim in need of his support.

“Tenichi-kun?” he spoke softly, and at the sound of his name, Tenichi flinched, hanging his head once more. At his clear shame, Juushirou sighed, stepping into the cell and pushing the door shut behind him. He turned the lock with a soft click, and Tenichi shuffled back against the wall.

“I won’t try to escape, Taichou,” he said softly, his voice muffled somewhat by his hands. “I don’t want to be... out there. Even if you opened the door, I wouldn’t try to go.”

“What happened today?” Juushirou softened his tones, eying the younger man in consternation.

“I’m sure Naoko-san has explained it to you already.”

“I want to know it from your side, though,” Juushirou persisted. “I don’t understand it, Tenichi. I’ve worked with you — we all have — and we’re all confused and reeling from what happened here today. None of us can think why a rational, well-trained and intelligent

officer like yourself would launch an unprovoked attack on an unarmed recruit, much less here, within the grounds of your old division, a place where you have so many friends!”

“She’s not a recruit,” Tenichi’s voice was flat, and Juushirou frowned.

“Yes, she is,” he replied evenly, and Tenichi shook his head, frustration clear in his eyes.

“She’s not,” he insisted. “She’s a fox. One of the silver haired people. Cursed people. People who cursed my Vice Captain, and people who cursed me. The Onmitsukidou said it... if I was no good, then there was Ketsui... and the silver haired people were cursed. Traitors. Evil people. They said it themselves! And then they were there, around Ketsui, and I couldn’t... I didn’t want... I didn’t want him to get hurt.”

The incoherent tirade ended in a pitiful whisper, and Juushirou only just managed to resist the urge to put his arm around the other man’s shoulders.

“Ichimaru Izumi is a recruit of the Thirteenth Division,” he said gravely. “True, she did not enter Thirteenth through the normal channels. I had forgotten that her people were the ones to retrieve you following your abduction... but I thought you understood they were Hirata’s people, and therefore, allies of your Captain and your Vice Captain, not ones who wanted to hurt them?”

“Fukutaichou went to see them, and he never came back,” Tenichi murmured, and Juushirou could see the glitter of desperation in the man’s gaze. “I couldn’t... do anything about that. I didn’t want Fukutaichou to die, and then...”

“Izumi was sent to my care as a refugee,” Juushirou made up his mind, and Tenichi stared at him blankly, floored by this sudden and unexpected announcement. Juushirou nodded.

“Their home, where Souja went to fetch you, was attacked and everyone in it killed,” he continued softly. “The man who killed them was Aizen Keitarou, and it’s believed that he took and deposited you in that location in order to discover their hiding place.”

“But...”

“Izumi’s brother was the only survivor from that raid, but he was also hurt in the attack,” Juushirou continued as though the younger man had not spoken, though the stricken look in the other’s gaze had not escaped his notice. “Joumei’s foresight in sending Izumi to me

protected her... and I promised to keep her safe. Today you broke my promise to him and to her to keep her from harm. I find that hard to understand, Tenichi... especially since Thirteenth was a sanctuary for you and your brother, too, when first you left the Academy. Or had you forgotten the talk we had then, about your background and how you wanted to rise above it?"

Tenichi's complexion turned a sickly pale colour, and he sank back against the wall, shaking his head. If he had had the capacity, Juushirou thought, he would have begun to cry once more, but it was clear that his earlier efforts had exhausted his tears.

"It was Aizen Keitarou who took you hostage, wasn't it?"

Juushirou had not wanted to voice the question, yet he knew he needed more now than ever to know the answer. Tenichi flinched, but didn't respond, and Juushirou frowned, coming to kneel on the cold stone before his prisoner. Gently he rested his hands on the other man's slumped shoulders, meeting Tenichi's hopeless gaze.

"Tenichi?"

Slowly, Tenichi jerked his head forward in a nod, and Juushirou sighed.

"You lied to Kai, then, when you told him you did not remember your abduction?"

Another nod.

"Did he do anything to you during that time? Did he use his sword? Anything like that?"

"His sword?" Tenichi's head jerked up at this, and he let out a slight, hollow little laugh, shaking his head. "No, sir. He did not. He didn't manipulate me to do anything. I see what you're thinking, but it's not like that. He did nothing to me. He treated me... like family. Like he had... when we were small. And I was... I was stupid. I let my guard down and I didn't think..."

He buried his head in his hands again, scrubbing his poor, abused eyes with his palms, then,

"I'm not working for Keitarou," he whispered. "I know how bad it must look, but I never was. I never did. It wasn't like that, sir, I swear it wasn't. But everything is so muddled in my mind, now. He told me that he wanted to help people... people in Rukongai, people others had forgotten... starving people that made me remember being a refugee. And so I thought... I said... I would try to find a way to... to

get food and supplies to the Rukon, for them. That's all I promised, I swear! I know it sounds foolish and naive, but it's the truth. In return he took me to Father's grave. That's where those silver people found me. They locked me up and prodded and poked me until Fukutaichou came to get me. Then Fukutaichou went to see them alone... and that night he went to Rukongai and was killed. I knew if anyone knew I'd seen Keitarou, let alone spoken to him, that my background... and Ketsui's... everyone would make connections and then... then it would be the end. But the longer I concealed it, the worse it became, and I couldn't... get out."

He took a shaky breath into his lungs, and Juushirou said nothing, waiting for him to find his voice again.

"It doesn't matter now, any of it," he said at length. "The Onmitsukidou — Kurotsuchi, or Suzuki, whatever he called himself — he kept coming after me. He told me where Souja-dono had gone, when everyone else was searching for him, and that I should be glad if he came back a corpse, because if people knew my secret, both Ketsui and I would fall. I wanted to help Fukutaichou, but I was also... afraid. If I had said something... but I didn't, and Fukutaichou died, and I... I felt like it was my fault."

"Nobody considers you to blame for Souja's death, Tenichi," Juushirou assured him gently. "Not even Hirata, and certainly not me. The night he went missing, he went to Rukongai, on an errand of his own choosing. He told his father and I as much, before he died. He broke rules and paid a high cost for acting without Hirata's permission. Maybe he did go to investigate your abduction, but you could not have prevented what happened. You could not open a gate to the Rukon, even if you had wanted to... and it was in the Rukon that Souja was hurt."

"But the Onmitsukidou kept saying things... threats... about the fox people, about Ketsui..." Tenichi swallowed hard, clearly wanting to bare his soul now that the first, horrible truths had begun to slip out. Conflicted, Juushirou realised that, just as he had done when a recruit, Tenichi was reaching out to the one person he had trusted in to accept and understand his point of view, despite the shadows in his past, and his heart began to ache as he realised that, here, in the Thirteenth Division's cell, Tenichi's dream of rising beyond the curse of his father's Urahara past was fading into dust. It would be hard to fight the suspicions and the disciplinary charges that were sure to come, but harder still to overcome the mental demons, and though Juushirou did not want to admit it, he understood all too clearly what Naoko had meant when she had said Tenichi was 'not right'. Though he was

mostly coherent, and un confrontational, Juushirou could sense the wavering in the other man's aura, and he knew that the promising young shinigami he had recruited some several years earlier had begun to shred and fragment.

Another victim of Keitarou.

Juushirou's thoughts surged with anger.

If Tenichi isn't able to fight through this, it will be yet another reason that Keitarou can never be forgiven. I know from personal experience how good he is at messing with minds. He doesn't just destroy people by killing them — he can destroy them alive, too, till they no longer know which way is up and which is down.

"He told me that if I said anything about Keitarou to anyone," Tenichi was still speaking, and Juushirou forced his rage to calm, turning his attention back to the matter at hand. "If I mentioned seeing Keitarou, then Ketsui... if I was useless, maybe he'd go after Ketsui. I couldn't... let that happen. Ketsui is... is my brother. I promised... Mother..."

That was as far as he got before the words failed him, and Juushirou sighed, getting to his feet.

"Clearly this is deeper than it first appears," he said sadly. "You realise that I have no choice but to hand you over to Kai and let him deal with you from this point on. Keeping you here at Thirteenth isn't possible. We don't have the means to confine a prisoner of your spiritual calibre, and I'm afraid that, in your current state of mind, that concerns me. Right now, you are calm, but I can't be certain that you'll remain that way. Izumi is my responsibility, too, as is Ketsui. Both are members of my Division, and I have to protect them first and foremost."

"And I am not," Tenichi sounded pained. "I should never have left here, Taichou. I'm afraid of myself, lately. I don't know who I am, or why I'm thinking the way I do. Since I came back to Seireitei... no, since Fukutaichou died, I've not known which way to turn. When he told me that Fukutaichou wasn't killed on Keitarou's orders, I thought of the fox people, and I thought... it was because he went to see them that night, and then... and now I don't know what's right or wrong any more. I should be locked up. I'm losing my mind, and I don't... want to hurt anyone else."

"Who told you Souja wasn't killed on Keitarou's orders?" Juushirou demanded sharply, and Tenichi looked stricken, a moment of clarity piercing the muddled green eyes.

“Sir?”

“You just said ‘he’ told you Souja wasn’t killed on Keitarou’s orders,” Juushirou’s words were urgent now. “Who told you that? The Onmitsukidou? Suzuki Naoto? Did he tell you that, in one of these visits you say he made to you? Or was it someone else? Nobody in Seireitei has discussed anything of the kind — who told you it wasn’t in Keitarou’s plan, to kill your Vice Captain that night?”

“I... I...” Tenichi was clearly in distress, as though he’d said something he had sworn not to, but Juushirou was not about to give up, the encounter at Seventh fresh in his mind.

“Someone like a kinsman of Keitarou’s? A *son*, maybe? Someone called Katsura?”

“Katsu... ra?” Tenichi gaped, blinking at the Captain for a moment, then shaking his head. “I don’t know who that is, Taichou. I swear, I don’t. Keitarou did tell me he had children, but I never heard that name before — not ever.”

“You never met anyone — here or in Rukongai, by the name of Katsura?” Juushirou felt suddenly deflated, as Tenichi shook his head.

“I promise,” he said softly. “I didn’t meet anyone by that name.”

“I don’t suppose he always used the same name. A young man of about Souja’s age, with dark hair and blue eyes?”

“No sir, I’m sorry,” Tenichi shook his head again. “I don’t know who that is. I’m sure.”

“Well, it was worth a try,” Juushirou grimaced. “If not Katsura, then, who was it who told you?”

“I... I don’t...”

“You can tell me, or you can tell Kai,” Juushirou warned. “‘I don’t remember’ won’t work as an excuse any more, and it will come out, one way or another. Who told you that it wasn’t Keitarou’s order to kill Souja? I want to know... the truth, please, this time. It may be important. It may mean other people don’t die.”

“I can’t tell you,” Tenichi’s voice shook, but there was resolution in it that had not been there moments before, and Juushirou was taken aback by the conviction that now entered the man’s green eyes. “I’m sorry, sir, but I promised and I can’t do it. Even if it means I get into more trouble, I gave my word. Because he kept his promise to me... I’ll keep my promise to him. He’s the only person I haven’t let down or betrayed yet, and I won’t...”

“If this person is an ally of Keitarou’s, Tenichi, shielding him could cost you your life.”

“I don’t care,” Tenichi shook his head. “And he’s not, sir. At least, the Onmitsukidou wanted him killed, and I don’t think... he knew Keitarou because he wanted to. He said he didn’t have a choice, and I thought he was like me. He’s not an enemy. He won’t hurt anyone. Can’t... hurt anyone. He just happened to see something... and that’s all. He’s not done half the things I’ve done, and he told me, time and time again, to keep out of it, but I didn’t listen. I didn’t, and now today...”

The Onmitsukidou wanted him killed.

Juushirou’s heart skipped a beat as he put the threads of this together.

He happened to see something? Good grief, Koku?

Out loud he asked,

“Did this informant of yours tell you how he could be so sure this was true?”

Tenichi shrugged.

“He said it was a vigilante killing,” he said simply. “I saw the girl in Rukongai myself, sir. She tried to kill me, too, only she was made to stop because Keitarou...”

“Had a use for you,” Juushirou’s eyes became slits, and he nodded his head.

“All right, then for now, that’s all,” he said wearily, moving back towards the door. “The Onmitsukidou are here, and will take you into their custody from here. I will need to get to the bottom of this from all angles, and so will they. Answer their questions, Tenichi. This is a serious matter, and I have no power to pull you out of it, nor can I protect you from your own Captain’s opinion, when he comes to hear the full story. Don’t tell anyone any more lies, you understand? Tell Kai the truth, as you know it... he’s not unfair, but unless you do that, nothing can be resolved.”

Tenichi was silent for a moment, then he sighed.

“I’m losing my mind, anyway,” he repeated. “It’s all right, Taichou. I don’t need you to help me — or anyone else. Honestly, it’s sort of a relief, being shut away like this. Hearing the click of the lock makes me realise I can’t do any more harm. If you say that girl isn’t Keitarou’s ally, then I believe you — but sir, I wanted to kill her and I wanted it with the whole of my being. I wanted it to the point that,

for a moment, I considered releasing Reihahen at Ketsui because he'd chosen to get in my way, and that terrifies me more than anything else. The fact I thought to hurt my own brother... I never felt like that before Souja-dono died. If they took Reihahen from me and locked me up forever... even if they killed me... it probably wouldn't be enough for me to expect forgiveness, or to forgive myself for what I've done."

He shook his head.

"I don't know myself, now," he owned. "I'm dangerous, and unpredictable, and I can bear weapons against my own brother. Attack unarmed recruits. Take the law into my own hands. And I can intend murder. I don't want to be that person any more. I don't care what happens to me... so long... so long as it's finally all going to stop."

Juushirou cast Tenichi a pained glance, but he could not find any words in response, and instead he just inclined his head, letting himself silently out of the cell and fastening the lock once more behind him.

As he walked up the steps towards Ugendou, his heart was heavy.

If only you had told me the truth from the start, Tenichi-kun. If only you'd come to me, knowing that I understood your past and your secrets, and confided in me. But I suppose Souja's death frightened you, and if Keitarou was using Suzuki to intimidate you...

He clenched and unclenched his fists, then,
Unfortunately, with Suzuki still missing, it's a lead we can't corroborate. As for the person you spoke to, I'm sure it was Koku. Koku came from Rukongai, and Tenichi was held in Rukongai, we know that now. Tenichi was at Thirteenth that night, late, after curfew. He said he came to see Ketsui, but what if that was a lie? What if it was Koku he came to check on? Enishi said that when Souja died, Tenichi came to report and he had to drag him out of the room before he disturbed Kirio's refugee. That refugee was Koku, so he'd have known... but he said nothing, so he was... protecting him. Tenichi mentioned a promise — a mutual vow, perhaps, to never speak of what they saw in Rukongai. But that would mean that, despite how close I've kept surveillance on Koku, he and Tenichi were communicating all the time since then without anyone picking up on it? It seems unlikely, but then, what in this is likely? Tenichi said the person happened to 'see' something. Does that mean he knows Koku can see things nobody else can? And if he does, maybe he'll be persuaded to tell Kai...

He rubbed his temples.

I can see that I can't put off dealing with the Koku situation any longer. I'll

have to speak to him — tomorrow, if everything has calmed down by then. And then there's Mitsuki — but right now I can't add that to the pile of things already clogging up my mind. Shunsui will be back tomorrow, too. I'll speak to him, if I can, before I do anything about Koku, and then...

"Taichou!"

As he reached the main building, Kirio came hurrying across the courtyard towards him, an anxious look in her eyes, and Juushirou glanced at her, a pensive expression on his face.

"Is Koku all right?" he asked softly, and Kirio flinched, looking troubled. Slowly she nodded.

"Yes, sir. He's sleeping, sir. I'm going to go back there, I just... I heard from Ketsui, about Tenichi, and..."

"Tenichi will be going with the Onmitsukidou," Juushirou said gently. "He's confessed to the assault on Ichimaru Izumi and he's accepted that it will have consequences. There's nothing for you or I to do here, except our duties. Unfortunately the time for friendly reassurance is long since passed."

"Yes, sir," Kirio looked crestfallen, and Juushirou sighed.

"I need to talk to you about earlier today, too, but it can wait, for now," he said wearily. "Whilst the Onmitsukidou are on the premises, too, I think it unlikely any harm will befall the young lad."

"I locked the door," Kirio assured him. "I was going to go right back, sir, after I spoke to Ketsui."

"I will need to do that, too," Juushirou agreed. "For now, I imagine it won't hurt to let Koku rest and recover himself. For the time being, I want you and Makoto to take care of organising and overseeing afternoon chores. After I've finished speaking with him, though, I suspect Ketsui will need you more than Koku will... so you have leave to abandon your supervisory duties. I will make other arrangements."

"Thank you, sir," Kirio was grateful, but Juushirou knew from the shadows in her eyes that she was far from placated. He patted her gently on the shoulder, then turned back towards the main building, making his way back towards Ugendou.

And now, God help me, I have to deal with this in the way a Captain should... and only hope that out of this day of chaos comes some inch or ounce of good.

52. Sacrifice

Chapter Fifty One: Sacrifice

The hut was dark.

In the shadows, the eight year old Katsura could make out sobbing, a soft, frightened sound like the whimpering of a small child who had become separated from its caretaker in the crowd of people that populated the lower valley. Though he could see no sign of anyone in the dim light that faintly illuminated his surrounds in a greyish haze, he stepped cautiously forward, certain that he was not imagining it and that this time, at least, the voice was not simply in his head.

The floor creaked slightly under his weight, and he paused, tensing, but nothing flew from the shadows to attack him, and the child continued to cry, apparently oblivious to his arrival.

The chamber was cold, and though there were the cooled, blackened embers of a fire in one corner, it had clearly not been lit for some time. Running his fingers against the wall, Katsura's skin brushed against the familiar sensor for one of the spirit lamps his father had taught him how to use and he closed his eyes, screwing up his brow beneath his floppy fringe as he focused his energy on bringing it to life. At first it refused to cooperate, but after a few minutes it fizzled and began to glow, gradually brightening his surroundings and allowing him to see for the first time where he was.

Scraps of paper were scattered across the floor, whether blown by the wind or discarded by some unknown hand, Katsura did not know. He bent to touch the nearest fragment as it skittered along the wooden floor alongside his foot, but despite his best attempts, he could not make out the squiggles that decorated the page. As he released his grasp on it, allowing the sheet to flutter once more to the floor, he caught sight of a fleeting movement in the far corner of the chamber and he turned to see a curtain hung over a portion of the wall, twitching and dancing in the light evening breeze.

No, it was not dancing, but being moved, and a prickle ran up Katsura's spine as he realised the muffled crying was coming from behind this fabric divide. The parchment scraps forgotten, he hurried forward, almost tripping over his own feet in his haste to cross the short few metres, for he knew that the one beyond the curtain was the one who had been calling to him. Grabbing it in grimy fingers, he tossed the worn cloth aside, and then

stopped dead, staring in disbelief and confusion at what lay beyond.

Wooden bars, fashioned from imperfect bamboo sticks separated him from a tiny room that lay like a prison cell beyond, a rumpled blanket on the floor and a yellowed ceramic dish scattered with grains of rice and clumps of congealing soup the only indication of furnishing. It was not the cell itself that caught Katsura's attention, though, but its only occupant, a grimy, miserable specimen of a young boy who was curled up against the wall, tears streaming down his cheeks and his tiny shoulders shuddering with the violence of the sobs. At the sound of the curtain being flung back, he raised his gaze, his melancholy dark eyes meeting Katsura's for the first time, and in that moment, the older boy felt a jolt of something dart through his senses. The child too seemed to flinch, his eyes widening slightly, then, the next moment he was stumbling to his feet, his thin, fragile body pushing forward to the barred divide and his tiny, pale fingers stretching plaintively through the bars as though trying to grasp hold of Katsura's sleeve.

Too startled by the suddenness of the gesture to pull back, Katsura instinctively reached out to brush his fingers against the child's wriggling ones, feeling their cold, clammy surface. The child tried to speak, his lips not coherently forming the word, but, as they touched, Katsura heard the boy's tearful voice echoing through his head.

"Onii... chan."

Katsura froze, staring at the child in disbelief, but the boy's hopeless gaze had been replaced by a sudden flare of hope and determination and he scrambled forward, pressing close against the wood bars as he strengthened his contact with his impromptu visitor.

"Oniichan." This time the word was spoken, the word trembling but somehow certain in its intonation, and Katsura found he could not pull away, not when his young companion had reached out for him so wholeheartedly.

A flicker of broken, fragmented images flashed briefly across his mindscape, slithers of information but in a strange and disjointed order. As the boy's grip on his hand tightened, the pictures grew more vivid and compelling, yet although they were a violent melee of slashes and shadow, Katsura did not feel afraid. Somehow he felt he had come here to find this child — to protect him, maybe — and as he settled himself down against the bamboo cage, he felt the youngster follow his example, leaning up against the bars without releasing his hold on his rescuer for one second.

"Oniichan." The word was steadier this time, a firmness in the piping voice that had not been there before, and Katsura realised with a jolt that

the tears that had stained the boy's cheeks had ceased to fall. Faint, disbelieving hope flooded the youngster's dark gaze, and Katsura was struck by the intensity of the stare. This child, with whom he had never spoken, and whose name he did not even know had been waiting for him, even calling for him, and the fact that this stretch of the village was nominally out of bounds had temporarily slipped his mind. All he could think of was that he had stopped the boy's tears.

Gradually, the youngster's eyes closed, his head lolling trustingly against Katsura's shoulder through the bars, and Katsura tightened his grasp on the tiny fingers, reaching tentatively to brush his other hand through the fine, dark muzz of hair that fell in shaggy, uneven waves to the child's chin. A dull hum of mental energy told him that his companion was sleeping, perhaps for the first time in some while, and a faint smile touched his lips.

I helped. I made him stop crying. Just like in the village, I helped.

"Katsura?"

The voice from the doorway made him start, swinging around guiltily as he registered the shadow of his father in the entrance of the hut. At the sight of him, Keitarou let out a heavy sigh, crossing the floor slowly and sinking down a metre or so away from his eldest son's position. He said nothing to begin with, his gaze flitting from Katsura to the sleeping boy, then he slowly shook his head.

"You shouldn't come here. I thought you understood that this was out of bounds."

"He was crying," Katsura said feebly. "I heard him."

"If you hadn't walked here, you wouldn't have heard anything."

"No, I don't mean like that," Katsura glanced at the sleeping boy, then, "In my head. Last night, I heard him. He was crying and calling to me, Father. I had to come find him and stop him from crying."

"Called to you?" Keitarou's gaze too shot sharply to the younger child. "You had a dream about it?"

"Mm, I think," Katsura frowned, then nodded. "I don't know, really. I just knew he wanted me to come here, so I did. I'm sorry I broke the lock, Father. I didn't mean to do that, only I had to get inside, and it was so stuck... and I pushed it too hard..."

"He's fast asleep," Keitarou pursed his lips together thoughtfully. "I've never seen him sleep like that, not in the whole of... but you're all right? You don't feel strange at all? You're not seeing any odd pictures, or feeling anything unusual?"

“Pictures?” Katsura looked confused, then shrugged. ‘Yeah, I saw some, but they weren’t that strange. I mean ,they were plenty strange, but they were just like,’ he gestured with his free hand. “They were his pictures, not mine. I wasn’t bothered by them. I think they scared him, though.”

He hesitated, then,

“Father, who is he?” he asked softly. “When he saw me, it was like he knew me. He called me ‘oniichan’, but I haven’t met him before, have I? Have I seen him in the village? And why is he here, in this place? It’s cold and scary, and I don’t think he likes it.”

Keitarou looked pained, and for a moment he did not answer. Then, at length, he settled himself more comfortably on the wood, rubbing his weak leg absently.

“Forgive me,” he said sadly. “I’ve concealed it from you, and I’m sorry. I thought it for the best, but maybe... maybe not.”

He patted his son on the arm.

“His name is Kohaku,” he continued softly. “He’s five years old, and he’s been living here since he was a baby. You’ve never met him, but I’m not surprised that he recognised you. You see, Katsu-kun, Kohaku is your little brother. He’s here because he has bad dreams that make him and other people around him feel ill, so he has to be here,by himself like this. I kept you away because I didn’t want you to get sick too — but you don’t seem to be... maybe I was wrong.”

“My... brother?” Katsura reeled, staring at the child as if seeing him for the first time. “But... I don’t understand...”

“Your brother,” Keitarou agreed. “I’m sorry for concealing it from you. I thought it best, but it seems as though you’re able to reach him on a level even I can’t. His dreams and delusions don’t poison my thoughts, and maybe that’s why they don’t hurt you, either — since you’re his and my kin. On the contrary, you’ve calmed him — I don’t know how, and I don’t suppose you do either, but...”

“I heard his voice in my head,” Katsura remembered. “Nobody ever did that before — just spoke into my head without me trying to do it first. I think he was waiting for me, Otousama.”

He ran his finger over the tiny hand, then, “Can’t we take him home? He’s so scared here, and if it’s all right my coming...”

“No... no,” Keitarou shook his head. “Unfortunately, we cannot. You are fine, but I can’t be sure he won’t affect your sister, and she’s far too tiny yet to be able to cope with such a rush of spirit power, especially since

she has none of her own to defend herself with. The people here are vulnerable, too. One person already became very sick and died because of Kohaku's spirit power, and so it's not safe to let him come home."

"Someone died?" Katsura looked stricken, and Keitarou nodded.

"It wasn't his fault," he agreed, reaching across to ruffle Kohaku's hair affectionately. "He didn't mean to hurt anyone, but I can't take the risk of it happening again."

"I see," Katsura frowned, then, "can I come here, then? Maybe, if I came once each day, I could talk to him and we could be friends. I think it would be nice, if I could do that. I'd like to play with him, and he doesn't hurt me."

"I'll talk to your mother, but maybe," Keitarou said cautiously. "For now, though, I'm taking you back home. Kohaku is sleeping, and hopefully he'll stay that way for a while. He's been quite bad recently, but I'm relieved to see him resting. It's hard to make him eat or do anything else when he's at his worst, and it's not nice, seeing him so troubled."

"What does he see, Otousama?"

"Things that nobody else can — things that haven't even happened yet, or things that happened a long, long time ago," Keitarou said matter-of-factly. "He's too young to explain them properly, but being here, like you, I can feel it radiate from him, and see the things he sees. It is a tremendous ability to be born with — a gift like no other, but great gifts carry great burdens, too. Remember that, my boy. Nothing in this world comes for free."

"If it's like that, I don't really want a great gift," Katsura reluctantly released his hold on the sleeping Kohaku's hand, getting to his feet. "I don't s'pose Koku wants it, either, not if it means he can't come home."

"Koku?"

"Mm," Katsura nodded, offering his father a grin. "I think he should be called Koku. Don't you think so? Kohaku is long, and he's only little, and anyway, it's a brother's job to give nicknames and stuff, isn't it? Some of the kids in the village have nicknames, and I think it would be nice, if Koku had one too. That way it's like he really is my brother, because I've given him a special name."

"I see," despite himself, Keitarou laughed. "All right. I suppose he won't mind, if you want to call him that."

He hugged his older son, patting him on the head.

"I'm proud of you, though," he added. "You broke bounds and that was

bad, but you came here of your own accord, no matter how frightening it was, and that was good. You've begun to overcome your own terrors, and that's because you wanted to help Koha... Koku to settle, wasn't it? That's what a proper older brother should do — protect his siblings from harm. You have to be strong and unafraid, in order to set them an example. Both Sakaki and Koku will need that, in different ways — maybe I can see that you're ready to be their oniichan, more than I'd realised before."

"I will," Katsura's dark blue eyes became solemn, and he nodded his head. "I'll be their nii-chan, Father. I promise."

"Good lad," Keitarou grinned, slipping his hand into the other's and squeezing it. "But you also must promise me not to talk about this place or about Koku to anyone, understand? Nobody but your mother or I, never anyone else. It's for his own sake, and for the sake of other people. He wouldn't want to hurt anyone, and that's what might happen, if everyone knew he was here like this. All right?"

"Even from Sakaki?" Katsura asked, and Keitarou nodded.

"Especially from Sakaki, since she's the one most likely of all to be hurt," he agreed. "No, Katsu-kun, you must never speak to your sister about your brother. You might be all right knowing, but she almost certainly would not be. As a big brother — do you understand?"

Katsura was silent for a moment, glancing back at the still slumbering boy. Then, at length, he nodded his head.

"Yes, sir," he said gravely, "I understand."

"Katsura-kun, open your eyes."

Mitsuki's voice broke Katsura from the dreamlike stupor, and he opened his eyes, blinking a couple of times to bring her face into focus. There was something glittering and hazy between them, he realised blurrily, a cloud of energy filling the air and making it hard to see clearly her gentle grey eyes or her delicate complexion. Then, the next moment his awareness returned to him with a jolt, as he saw the young woman tilting something that looked very much like a sword hilt in his direction.

"Mitsuki... san?" the syllables came out jerkily, his hand rising automatically to push hers back, but she was too quick for him, looping her free hand around his wrist and pushing it gently back down onto the ground. The haze of energy dissipated into the ether, and Katsura realised it had been some kind of kidou, for now he could see clearly that, far from moving to hurt him, Mitsuki's sword blade had divided into particles of glittering light which now were

embedding themselves deep inside the wounds Hajime's needles had left across his torso.

He wet his lips, then managed a single word,

"Why?"

"I shouldn't need to explain that," Mitsuki said matter-of-factly. "I'm a healer. I heal people. That's my job. The one who should be asking why is me — why, and how, and a lot of other questions."

Katsura pursed his lips, and Mitsuki's grasp on his wrist tightened.

"There's time," she said softly. "Seventh Division are distracted... and nobody else came out this far to find you. They won't disturb us, and right now, you can't move, let alone try to escape from me. That being the case, while I heal you, you can explain yourself to me. You can tell me what you were trying to do today... what your connection to Koku is... and, most of all... who you really are."

"You'd save a person not knowing all those things?"

"You saved me in the Spiritless Zone," Mitsuki did not falter. "My spirit power is weak yet, but strong enough to knit this kind of wound so you won't die. Besides, that wasn't one of the questions. I'm quite serious, Katsura-kun. I want to know... exactly what is going on."

"Right now... you look... like a Kuchiki," Katsura observed, resignation flooding his handsome features. "I didn't see it before, but that look... that tone of voice... it's there, isn't it? You are a Clan *hime*, Mitsuki-san... one who tends to the injured without discrimination, but a Clan *hime* all the same."

Mitsuki arched an eyebrow, and Katsura sighed.

"All right," he agreed. "Though when I do, you'll probably wish you'd not bothered coming to help me. More, maybe you'll want to hurt me yourself — I don't know. But I suppose... of everyone, I owe you that. I don't care much for Seireitei, but... I always felt that you were different, and I guess you're proving it again now. More... I know you helped Koku, too. I saw how you came with him... and I saw the bandages across his body. He was hurt and you helped him. You might not be my ally... we might be as far as we can possibly be from alliance now, but if you're at least his ally... then I will trust you, and hope... it's the right thing for me to do."

"Koku," Mitsuki's eyes narrowed. "So you really do know him."

"Mm," a sad smile touched Katsura's lips. "Yes. Yes, I do."

“Explain how.”

Katsura eyed Mitsuki pensively for a moment, then nodded.

“I met him when he was five and I was eight,” he said honestly. “He called out to me and I came to him. Like you did, in the forest — when the Hollow was attacking, I picked up your every thought and feeling and I couldn’t stop myself from coming to help you. Koku was... like that. He reached out for help, and I went to him. And I found him.”

He pressed his lips together,

“And then Father found both of us,” he admitted.

“Father?” Mitsuki’s brow creased thoughtfully. “So this was somewhere in Seireitei? Somewhere near here? Somewhere far?”

“I told you when we met I didn’t come from Seireitei,” Katsura shook his head, wincing slightly as the sword’s healing magic began to knit deep into his wound. “I didn’t lie to you then. We met in the Spiritless Zone. That was far from where I grew up, but... not as far as here.”

Mitsuki’s eyes opened wide with dismay, and Katsura nodded.

“I was born in Rukongai,” he said softly, “Twenty five years ago, in a part where the Shinigami no longer go.”

“Oh God...” Mitsuki’s face paled, and Katsura felt sure that if her hands had not been occupied in healing him, she would have clapped one of them over her mouth in her dismay. “But you said... your father. People in Rukongai... they don’t have... family. That doesn’t... but you said... born. You said... that. So...”

“Mm,” Katsura rallied his courage, meeting her gaze with a bittersweet one of his own.

“My full name is Aizen Katsura,” he said slowly, watching the stricken look flicker across the grey eyes. “But you’d already realised, hadn’t you? That when I said Father, I meant...”

“Keitarou,” Mitsuki bit her lip.

“And the reason I was there, in the forest, to save you that day?” Katsura let out a humourless laugh. “Because I was the one who was meant to kill you. I was meant to kill all of you. Only I felt I *knew* you... and I couldn’t do it.”

“Oh God,” Mitsuki’s fingers faltered from the hilt of her blade for a moment, before tightening, and Katsura shifted his body, moving his

arm to touch her sleeve.

“Stop,” he murmured. “You owe me nothing. I killed your friends. The Hollow... I controlled it. I drove it at your companions and made it fight them. I saved you — but I put you in danger. Your friends... their lives... mine is the price owed. You shouldn’t heal me... not when I did such horrible things.”

“Healers don’t choose who to heal based on their deeds,” Mitsuki spoke quietly, but Katsura could see the tears on her lashes and could tell that the truth had shaken her. “We heal because it’s in our nature. Sometimes that puts us in harm’s way. Even if what you said is true, Katsura-kun... I won’t stop. This is my duty. As a healer, I don’t believe in killing. Not even if the person I’m helping hurt those I cared about.”

“But...”

“If you regret it, then you should use your life to atone for it,” the glitter of Kidou strengthened around Katsura’s body once more, and he felt the warm determination in its glow against his skin. “If you don’t, then not even my healing power can really save you. You are already dead, if you can take innocent life and not regret it.”

“Mitsuki-san...” Katsura hesitated, then, “I do regret it. I did it because I was told to, and I had always been raised to believe Shinigami were evil. But because I met you, I know they’re not, all. I can’t take back killing them, but I... am not proud of it. And most of all, not proud that you had to know I did it. I’m sorry... more to you than to them. I betrayed you most of all, yet you heal me all the same. I don’t deserve that.”

Mitsuki chewed on her lip, and for a moment there was silence between them, then she spoke, her words full of sadness.

“Twenty six years ago, I saw your mother in the forests of the Real World,” she said slowly, moving her hand to guide the particles of Yuuyugo’s blade deeper into the wound. “I knew then that she was with child. That child was you, wasn’t it?”

“Probably,” Katsura agreed.

“Then *you’re* Keitarou’s eldest child.” Mitsuki’s brows knitted together. “The Council searched for both Keitarou and Eiraki. They wanted Keitarou for many things, and Eiraki-chan...”

“*Chan?*” Katsura’s eyes widened, and Mitsuki nodded.

“Once, we were friends,” she agreed sadly. “Once, but a million

years ago. The day I saw her in the forest, she tried to kill my cousin, and that I couldn't forgive. I learned then about Ribari, and that she'd been the one to poison him, too. I knew then there was no rescuing her... that Keitarou had destroyed her. But I wondered, sometimes, about the child. The Council — I know the Endou would've taken you and raised you, if only they'd found you, and then..."

She faltered, as the tears began to fall, and Katsura raised a bloody finger to wipe them from her cheek.

"It would've been a lie," he said simply. "I wasn't sent here today, Mitsuki. Even though what happened in Rukongai was because of Father's orders, and a lot happened because of it, I came here today for one reason and one reason only. I came because my sister was murdered — I came to be her vengeance."

"Your sister? Sakaki? The girl who killed Souja-dono?"

"And the others in the Spiritless Zone. Yes," Katsura nodded. "She was bloodthirsty, she was violent, but she was my sister and I loved her. Mother, Father, too. They're my family. If I'd been raised as an Endou, it would have been wrong. I regret hurting your friends, because I didn't understand. But I don't regret coming here today."

"Then I'm glad you didn't manage to kill anyone by doing so," Mitsuki said firmly. "Killing out of vengeance never solves anything. It only gives another family reason to grieve, reason to hurt. Sakaki was probably killed because she murdered Souja-dono. You came to kill because Sakaki was dead. Then someone would come kill you, and so on it goes. It isn't right, Katsura-kun. It's not justice, that way."

"It's the only justice that kid will get," Katsura replied sadly. "I can't expect you to understand, but I never met Souja-dono. I never met any of Sakaki's victims, and even if I had, well, I don't pretend I agree with everything she ever did. Or that we didn't argue. We did. But the most important thing to me has always been my family. and so I chose to come today. Father couldn't stop me. I came of my own free will. I can't go back — he made it clear that if I brought him trouble again, I shouldn't bother returning. I chose to come anyway. I knew I might be killed, but so be it. I had to put my sister's ghost to rest... and, maybe, sate my own feelings."

His eyes glittered slightly, and Mitsuki sighed.

"You're an Endou," she said regretfully. "You said it would have been wrong, if you'd been raised one, but today... I saw it, and just now, it flared up in your eyes again. Earlier... wasn't an accident, was it? Your power didn't just intoxicate you... you really meant to kill."

"I meant it," Katsura agreed regretfully. "I came to avenge Sakaki... and would've killed any who tried to prevent me, or died in the attempt. That was my choice... it was what I came here resolved to do."

"Then I'm the one who's foolish," Mitsuki reflected sadly. "Not all Endou have their claws out all the way when you first meet them, but... that will to protect, to defend, to fight and to kill... I just felt it raise inside of you again, even just talking to me. You can't help it being there, but it's there all the same. The hunting spirit of the Endou Clan brought you to be Sakaki's vengeance. I can heal your wound but I can't take that instinct away... which means... if I help you, you'll come back and try again, won't you?"

Katsura was silent for a moment, then he shook his head.

"I won't," he said pensively. "I won't, because it will make Koku sad. I don't want to do that. I don't want to hurt him, or his chances of finding the life he's never had, here."

"What do you mean?"

"You haven't realised that yet?" Katsura was surprised. "I told you, didn't I? We met when we were children. He was a little boy of five, a wretched sight in rags. Of all the people I've ever trusted, Koku is the one I trust the most. The person I have the strongest connection with is him, and it's been that way since that day."

"Then Koku is also from the Rukon," Mitsuki deduced. Katsura nodded.

"Yes and no," he responded, and Mitsuki looked confused.

"Yes... and no?"

"Well, as much as I am, he is," Katsura offered a hollow smile. "Koku is my brother, Mitsuki-san. I thought that should be obvious. Just like I was, he was born in the Rukon. Just as I did, he grew up there."

"Your..." Mitsuki's eyes became huge for a second time. "You mean... the boy Juushirou's been taking care of at Thirteenth... that boy is Keitarou's son too?"

"As much as I am," Katsura agreed.

"Then that boy is... *Kohaku*?"

'He is,' Katsura confirmed. "Does that shock you?"

"I don't know," Mitsuki bit her lip. "I've heard so many mixed

reports, and I didn't know what to make of them. Stories of a demon, a monster, someone capable of destroying the world. Now you tell me that person is deep within the Division of someone I care about very much. I don't know what to think."

"Someone you care about..." Katsura's eyes became slits, then he sighed, shrugging his shoulders. "I don't know who that is, but you shouldn't worry. Whatever I've done, Koku... he hasn't killed anyone. He hates the idea of killing, and Father has never been able to control him. Only... Koku has... certain things about him that make him valuable to Father, and I'm afraid that it might mean... he's not safe, not even where he is now. I want... I've always wanted to live in Seireitei. I want it for him, too. For most of his childhood, he suffered so badly that he tends to pull away, not trusting people. He trusts me, but I think... nobody else, and if I'm not there..."

"I see," Mitsuki's eyes softened. "When you talk about him like that, I... begin to understand why he's so wary and seems so lonely. He doesn't sound like a demon at all, the way you describe him — and the boy I met, he doesn't seem like one either."

"He's not a demon," Katsura agreed, "but he's not very comfortable around people, and I've always looked out for him. We have a connection... and if I sever it, I need to know that he has others to look out for him. He has the same bad blood as I do — but he's so much more at risk than me."

"In what way?" Mitsuki lowered her sword, setting the hilt aside and reaching out to help her companion into a sitting position, eying the wounds critically. "A little more Kidou, I think. My sword is about spent, but I still have some magic I can use. Tell me about Koku, and I'll try and muster it."

"He acts as though everything is fine," Katsura sighed. "He makes out that he can handle the world, and puts space between it and him, but deep down..." he shook his head. "I've told you before, but I can read people. Their thoughts and things. With Koku, when we first met each other, our connection was telepathic. From then, we've talked that way, through thoughts as much as words and... I guess I've picked up on his feelings because of that."

He looked apprehensive.

"Are Seireitei really convinced Kohaku is a demon? Will it put Koku in danger, if you know his real name?"

"No, not if I can help it," Mitsuki shook her head. "But I don't know... if it's something other people should know yet. Like I said,

there have been stories circulating — rumours about this Kohaku, and that he poses a threat to everyone and everything in Seireitei. If that's really the young boy Juush... Ukitake-taichou has..."

"Koku isn't violent, and he's not as headstrong or as impulsive as I am," Katsura said sadly. "He warned me that following this path was dangerous, and he was right. Just... he's not like other people. Not like any other people. He's just... not."

"I imagine that, in Rukongai, there are few with spirit power like you or he have," Mitsuki pointed out, but Katsura shook his head.

"No... I mean, not just in Rukongai," he responded. "In Seireitei, too. Probably in Inner Seireitei, even among the Gotei. Koku is not the same. That's why people think he's dangerous — but it's not like that. It's not like that at all. He has a lot of spirit power, it's true, and if he was of the mind Father is, he could probably use it to cause a fair amount of damage. But he's... different. He is stronger than I am. Maybe he's stronger than Father is — I'm not sure, but the way Father treats him makes me think that potentially he could be. Potentially. He has the ability to cause great harm, but Mitsuki, the idea of causing other people pain hurts Koku more than anything else. He hates other people's suffering... yet he's had to live with images of it for his whole life. The more he's surrounded by death, the worse it becomes."

"Other people's suffering," Mitsuki's eyes softened. "That makes him sound like a healer. It's the same for us, you know. We feel other people's pain and we have to reach out to help. It's an impulse that's hard to fight, and it can cost our lives."

Katsura's expression became troubled, and he sighed.

"I'm sorry," he murmured. "I didn't understand anything, and now I can't change it."

"No, but you can move forward," Mitsuki told him pragmatically. "That's why healers preserve life. If you have it, you can take action. You can atone for this. If you do, my friends didn't die for no reason."

Katsura touched a finger gingerly to the healing wound. What had seemed such a fatal, gaping hole only a short time earlier had now completely stopped bleeding, the pain dulled to little more than an ache and a thin, glittering haze of energy pulling the edges of the skin together, providing a makeshift scab through which his own body could mend. He drew his hand back, pursing his lips.

"Are you sure, using all this power on someone you know is a

murderer?"

"You might be that," Mitsuki acknowledged gravely, "but right now, you don't sound like it. You sound like... a worried brother, looking out for his kin. Your aura changed completely... and... I like this you better. This is the Katsura-kun who helped me in Rukongai. This is the person I think you should try to be, if I heal your wound. So maybe, I thought, if I did that properly... you could try."

"Mitsuki-san..." Katsura began, but Mitsuki put a finger briefly to his lips.

"Tell me more about Koku," she repeated gently, and Katsura sighed, nodding his head.

"Even though we were both born in Rukongai, I really didn't meet Koku till I was about eight," he said quietly, his voice trembling slightly, and Mitsuki saw the distant look in his eyes as he remembered something she could not see. "Until then, I didn't know I had a brother. Father kept him away from us, and Mother spoiled me, but never spoke about him. It was as though he didn't exist."

"I don't understand," Mitsuki frowned. "Why would he do that?"

"Koku was different," Katsura explained simply. "Father thought it dangerous for him to be too close to us, especially as time went on. It was by accident that I met him at all. I didn't feel his thoughts, not exactly. It was as though something was crying out to be rescued — a frightened child, disturbing my sleep at night and haunting me during the day. Eventually I went looking, and I found the hut Father had locked him away inside."

"Locked...?" Mitsuki's eyes widened, and Katsura nodded.

"Koku... sees things," he said carefully. "I'm not sure how exactly to put it so that it makes sense, since it isn't really easy to understand. He sees things that other people can't see. Things that haven't happened yet. Things that happened long ago. When he was younger, they swallowed him up so he had no way of disseminating reality from delusion and his spirit power was so wild that it infected anyone who came near. One man went mad and died because he got too close, and so Father kept everyone away, just in case. He and Mother decided not to tell me about Koku because I might get into danger if I went near, but I found him all the same. He was just a frightened little boy to me, Mitsuki. I remember him, tears streaming down his cheeks, these pale clawlike hands reaching for me through the bars as though looking for someone to save him. I wasn't frightened. His delusions didn't poison me like they did other people. On the contrary, I was

able to calm him. We bonded then, and when Father found us, we were curled up either side of the bars together, him sleeping peacefully and me holding onto his hand. That's when Father told me who he was and why he was there."

"Juushirou said that Koku had suffered from waking nightmares since he'd been here," Mitsuki remembered. "He asked me to look at him, but Koku wouldn't talk about it and didn't seem to want anyone to examine him properly."

"I guess he doesn't want to be locked away again," Katsura pressed his lips together. "It's only in the last five years or so that he's become rational enough for long periods of time. Father agreed to remove the interdict on his mixing with other people, and only under the condition that he became Koku, not Kohaku. People were afraid of Kohaku, because of the stories about the man's death and the aura of death surrounding the hut, so he had to become a stranger. Even my sister never knew that she had two brothers, and she always spoke to Koku so horribly because of it. I hated that, but he's just accepted it without a murmur of protest. He never called me Oniichan, and he called Father and Mother by their given-names, with honorifics, as though he was another person from the Rukon. He sacrificed his family ties for a taste of freedom, but it's never really been that. His world is still so small, despite the things he sees, and the power he has sets him apart from everyone. He has to hide so much, including his feelings about things. In some ways he's smarter and seems older than I am, but in others he's still not grown up. And even though he has rationality now... it doesn't mean the danger is over."

"Do you think that he could lapse back into a delusive state permanently?" Mitsuki asked softly. Katsura shrugged.

"I don't know," he admitted. "He doesn't talk about it much, not if he can help it, but I don't think he's been so well lately as he was before. Death... upsets him. I don't know for sure what happened when he decided to come here, but I think it's fair to say that he saw your comrade die before it happened, and decided to try and stop it, regardless of the consequences to him or to anything else. He's so frightened of returning to that world of nightmares that I imagine he'd do anything — even try and save the life of someone who posed him a threat — rather than let it take over him again. He's said more than once that he hates Kohaku's existence, and often speaks of him as though Kohaku were a completely separate person. Maybe that's why he accepted being Koku so readily — I don't know. Father would exploit things too, of course — force him to use his abilities to see future and past events and it took its toll. I... I wanted to treat him

normally, like my brother, because I was the only one who could. I tried not to let him dwell on things — but it never goes away completely. I don't know if he can control it more. Back in Rukongai Father worked with him a lot, but that's not happening here. He had techniques, tools... things to help, but here..."

"I see," Mitsuki's lips thinned. "Whatever Keitarou was doing to support his development has broken down because he's been with us and none of us know what we're dealing with. And, on top of that, he's surrounded by people he doesn't know, in a place he knows nothing about... a place full of spiritual stimulants that Rukongai probably doesn't have."

"Yes," Katsura rubbed his chin in agitation. "I'm worried he'll be angry that I've told you, but I want him to be all right. Please, Mitsuki-san, you have to believe me when I say he hasn't killed anyone. Sakaki and I have blood all over our hands, but he has none. I'm sure he tried to save Endou Souja-dono because he believed it was the right thing to do, even though he must've known what would happen if he did. Please help him to find a way to stay here, and a place to belong. I think if he has that... if he has people who accept and understand him as he is... then maybe he'll be all right."

"You really do love him, don't you?" Mitsuki said gently, and Katsura nodded.

"The rescuing wasn't all on my part," he said honestly. "Koku and I have a special bond — like I said, he's the only one I could ever talk to through thoughts as well as words. I don't really know why that is, because people with strong spirit power I can't usually connect with like that, but he... well, like I said, he's not like anyone else."

"I've sensed pain and sadness from Koku's aura when I've been with him, and also, wariness to the world around," Mitsuki admitted. "Now I understand why. He isn't just out of his familiar environment, but dealing with things that most people can't even fathom. I can see why folk fear him — everyone fears the future, in some way or another, and to have someone who can see into it is unnerving and uncanny for most."

"Koku's said himself that he knows too much, and that's his weakness," Katsura agreed. "It makes him very lonely... but I don't want him to be that any more. His hallucinations are usually bad ones, but once he told me about a place he'd dreamed of, a peaceful place near a lake, with flowers and birds and insects, with a blue sky and not a single cloud. He'd never left Rukongai, and never seen those things, but he described it to me perfectly and even showed me his

memory through our psychic link. When I came to Inner Seireitei, I saw it for the first time. It's the garden alongside Thirteenth, where we met that night I came to warn you. In his dream, he said he was sitting there, laughing and talking with people he could not see and whose voices he could not place. It was this place... and so I'm sure he's meant to be here. He might not have seen it yet but... that vision is my one hope for his future, whatever happens to the rest of us."

Mitsuki's eyes softened.

"When you speak like that, I know you're not really a killer. Not at heart," she said, the glow of Kidou fading from her fingers. She got to her feet, reaching to retrieve the hilt of her sword before pulling Katsura carefully to his.

"I don't know about that," Katsura admitted. "But I made my choice. I chose my family over my chance to make peace with you and your people. That was my decision."

"A sacrifice for war," Mitsuki murmured sadly, and Katsura shrugged.

"Perhaps," he agreed pensively. "But we all have to have faith in something. My colours are nailed to a different mast than Koku's. I understood that today, but it makes me believe all the more that he should stay with you people. You... are not my enemy. I don't know if Seireitei is, either. The one who killed my sister isn't a shinigami, so I'm not sure. But for Koku's sake, if that's where he is, I won't fight any more against the Gotei. In return... please make sure he's all right. Please help him find a place he belongs — because in Rukongai, he never had that."

Mitsuki was silent for a moment, eying him sadly. Then, "I'm going back to Inner Seireitei," she said softly. "If you are still here by the time the officers of the Seventh return, you will be arrested, charged and maybe put to death. I can't give you any more warning — my duty to my dead comrades won't let me cross lines any more than I already have. My life was saved by you, but also threatened by you. Therefore I saved your life, but I will not protect your life. That makes us even, I think?"

"More than," Katsura's blue eyes softened in grateful comprehension. "And Koku?"

"Koku is not a killer, and so long as Juushirou has him, no harm will befall him," Mitsuki replied solemnly. "The sins of the father aren't automatically the sins of the son. If Koku can be helped, I will try and help him. You have my word."

“Then that’s all I ask. It’s already more than I deserve,” Katsura flashed her a rakish smile, but it was tinged with sadness, and Mitsuki’s own clouded gaze told him that she knew they would never meet again.

Probably, the same goes for Koku and I too. Hard as it will be, I have to disappear. For his sake, maybe for Father’s, too... I have to not exist. I already shut off contact, and now I’ll have to maintain that block, no matter what happens, even if it means breaking another promise. I don’t know what the future will hold, but for now, all I can do is take Mitsuki’s challenge and see if I can find a way to atone for what happened in the Spiritless Zone. I owe her that at least, and if she has Koku’s interests in her sights...

He reached across to grasp her hand briefly in his, before letting it fall back at her side.

“Saving you was something else I don’t regret,” he said softly. “This person who you care for, don’t take them for granted. The world can change in a heartbeat, and its easy to get caught in the flow.”

With that he was gone, slipping into shunpo as he pushed his battered body through the streams of light to a place far from the furore of Inner Seireitei.

Reaching the edge of a quiet copse, he used what remained of his strength to pull his weary frame up into the branches of a nearby tree. Hiding himself among the foliage, a bittersweet smile touched his lips, as he recalled how Sakaki had loved to use trees in her stalking games.

Well, little sister, I hope your soul can rest without blood spilt in your name.

He closed his eyes, resting back against the hard, twisted wood of the trunk.

For Koku’s sake, I won’t take any more risks. If he’s there... today I saw clearly what he wants, and needs, even if he doesn’t realise it yet himself. You and I, we cast our lot with Father, but Koku never did. Now I see why, and... maybe it’s the right choice. I guess perhaps time will tell. If Father goes to Seireitei, it will be messy. I can only hope that — if that happens — Mitsuki’s Gotei are able to protect Koku.

“I wondered whether you’d bother coming back here tonight,”

As Keitarou stepped over the threshold into the village, he found Eiraki waiting for him, her body wrapped in a thin cloak against the unsettled breeze. Her expression was impassive, and her words cold,

but Keitarou could see the red about her lashes, and she knew that no matter how hard she tried to conceal it, she was still a mother who had lost her daughter. Eiraki's normally vivid blue eyes — the eyes that Sakaki had inherited, passed down from the legendary Endou matriarch, Yayoi were dull and clouded, unusually lacking in spirit and life, and at the sight of her, Keitarou sighed, moving to put his hands on her shoulders. She flinched slightly, but did not pull away, and Keitarou knew that, despite her anger, she had been waiting for him, unsettled and desperate for his touch and reassurance that all would be all right. She had probably spent much of his absence preparing Sakaki's body for burial, he realised with sudden clarity, as he registered the specks of blood that tarnished her sleeves, and for a moment he closed his eyes, wondering how he would tell her the full truth.

"I wondered if you would come see your daughter buried," at length, Eiraki spoke again, breaking the silence that had fallen between them. 'I realise you have 'important things',' she spoke the words with genuine bitterness, "to do, which surpass your duty to your family in your mind's eye, but at the very least, I thought you could be a father for a moment, instead of a crusader trying to bring the world to its knees."

"Eiraki." Keitarou faltered, then bent to kiss her on the brow, genuine sorrow in his muddy eyes. "I'm sorry — I really, truly am. I didn't intend... if I had known what was going to happen..."

"I thought you knew everything that was going to happen?" Eiraki pushed him back, sudden life sparking in the bright, defiant eyes, and Keitarou caught a glimpse of the young girl he had first fallen in love with, who had gone through hell and high water to achieve his goals, even taking the life of the Kuchiki heir because it had made him happy. That spirit and rebellion had calmed and aged, her determination ploughed into her children and her loyalty to the Rukon people, but it somehow comforted Keitarou to know that within the woman still lived the girl who had truly understood him. He reached up to touch her cheek, then lowered his hand without making contact.

"I don't know everything. Even Kohaku doesn't know that, and I only pick up bits and pieces of the things he sees," he said softly. "When he was small, it was different. I could read much more from his aura, then — but as he's got older, and stronger... it's happened less. Besides, Kohaku isn't here... and if he knew Sakaki was going to die, he didn't tell me about it before we were parted."

“One child about to be laid to rest beneath the earth,” Eiraki’s voice shook, and Keitarou felt her hand slip into his, gripping hold of his fingers tightly as though afraid to let them go. “One disappeared into nothing with no explanation, and the third... Kei-sama, where is Katsura? He was here in the village, but he hared off in your direction, and now you come back here... without him. Tell me the truth... where is my son?”

“Alive, and in Seireitei, currently,” Keitarou told her gently.

“He’s alive?” Eiraki relaxed slightly at this, and Keitarou nodded.

“He and Koku are both alive,” he assured her. “I made sure of it. But Eiraki, listen to me. Katsura went of his own volition to challenge the fox that killed your daughter. He was angry and I couldn’t stop him.”

“What else do you expect him to do?” Eiraki demanded. “He’s an Endou. Vengeance is born into him. He’s my son — or had you forgotten that?”

“I had not,” Keitarou shook his head. “I suppose I underestimated how deep that blood ran through him — or rather, no I didn’t. I knew he felt strongly about his kin, but I hoped... he would listen to my words and wait until such a time as we could make a meaningful assault on the shinigami’s world. As it is...”

“He went to attack *shinigami*?” Eiraki’s entire demeanour changed. “You said the one who killed my daughter was that cursed fox — you didn’t say anything about shinigami! Why didn’t you say that before, Kei-sama? Go back there! Go get him and bring him back! If you don’t, the shinigami will...”

“I am not going back to Seireitei,” Keitarou put a finger to her lips, shaking his head. “Katsura understood the risks, and he went there anyway. I told him to stay, and he defied me. I warned him before, Eiraki-chan. If he defied or betrayed me again, I would not take him back. He did so openly and knowingly this time. Whether he killed Sakaki’s killer, I don’t know. What happened to the fox remains unclear in my mind... though I think it likely he’s died, I can’t be certain of the circumstances. In the case of Katsura, however, there’s nothing I can currently do about that. He made his own decision — if the shinigami capture him, then that will be that.”

“You’d abandon your own son to the mercy of your enemy?” Eiraki’s features had drained of colour, but Keitarou knew it was anger, not grief that had rushed through her body, for those bright blue eyes were now sparking at him, full of censure and disbelief. “Do

you have *any concept* of what I went through to birth and raise that child, as well as nursing you through your injury? I could've chosen one of you over the other, but I never did! I worked hard to ensure that *both* of you, helpless as you were, had a chance to live and gain strength! Katsura's first steps inspired you to get back up and walk — or had you forgotten? Katsura's existence helped bring you back to life! You owe that child and I both your life, and yet you discard him, as though he were no more than trash? Who was it who preached and lectured me on betrayal and on trust, *Urahara Keitarou*? Would *Keitsune-sama* have abandoned you in such a casual, haphazard way?"

"Father?" Keitarou stared at her, a flood of emotions rushing through his own body, and he frowned, his eyes darkening.

"Father *did* abandon me," he said softly. "He left me as a four year old boy with not an ounce of protection in this world. You say I owe you and Katsura my life, and maybe I do — but it's me who has protected you all these years. Katsura has chosen to turn his back on that protection. I would've avenged Sakaki. I had it in mind — but I needed more information. I needed to know I could protect *both* my sons and bring them back to you alive, but Katsura *would not listen*! He's just like his Endou forefathers in this respect — he doesn't heed common sense and rationality, and is always too keen to have everything done yesterday!"

"You know *nothing* about the Endou, if you can speak about them like that." Eiraki's voice shook, and Keitarou snorted.

"You, who abandoned them, now try to defend them before me?" he said disdainfully.

"Yes, I abandoned them," Eiraki snapped back. "I abandoned them because I didn't agree with how they, or the others ran Seireitei. I chose to come with you, because at least then I would be free to make my own decisions and choices! It doesn't change the fact I have Endou blood, nor my pride in what that means. I am a hunter, and I hunt. I lack the power to do it as my brother does and my grandfather did, but instead I bequeathed it to my children — to Katsura and to Sakaki — and because of that mentality, they've served you and your cause well. Katsura inherited your spirit power and both he and Sakaki my hunter's instinct, so you made effective weapons of them both. But they aren't just weapons, Kei-sama! They are *your children*! Your daughter lies bloody and cold because you miscalculated, and now your son..."

Keitarou was silent for a moment, then he sighed, rubbing his temples.

"I have *two* sons. *We* have two sons," he said quietly.

"Kohaku is different," Eiraki pressed her lips together, and Keitarou arched an eyebrow.

"Different? So as a mother, you feel nothing for him?"

"Of course I have feeling for him!" Eiraki's temper flared up indignantly once again, thin hands on hips. "A mother's bond with her son is never that feeble, no matter how hard you work to try and break it! But Kohaku isn't a hunter, and he never has been. He didn't inherit that from me. He's not designed to kill."

"You're wrong," Keitarou shook his head. "Of all our children, Eiraki, Koku's life is most wound up with death. The things he sees, the power that lurks within him — of all our children, he is the one with the most to offer. Protect him, and we protect our cause. Through him, everything can be achieved. I know where he is, and I know how to reach him. I just need a little more time. I need Seireitei to follow my paper trail and spread their resources more thinly. I wanted Katsura with me, then — but he decided against. He's a grown man, and he chose for himself. I cannot keep covering for him when he makes an impulsive mistake."

"So, like Seimaru, you'll let him be killed."

"Seimaru was killed by your brother, and his own reckless greed. It had nothing to do with me."

"Seimaru was a monster and an idiot. Katsura is neither one. He is your son, and you owe him..."

"I owe him nothing, not when he chooses to defy me," Keitarou cut across her. "I'm sorry, Eiraki, but this is how it is. A mother loves her child, whilst a father expects obedience and filial loyalty. That is the way of the world — you can't pretend you don't know as much."

Eiraki fell silent, and Keitarou saw her eyes narrow sullenly.

"You don't understand anything about it," she said at length. "When it was just you and I, and I was the one risking my life for you, it was fine. I would've died for you then, and I would die again now. I love you and that has never and will never change. But I'm not afraid of you, either. Everyone else might be, but I'm not. I've seen you at your weakest, and vowed to do everything I could to bring you back to strength. A wife and a mother makes those decisions without a man ever realising the sacrifices she makes. Clan or District, Rukon or Real World, it's the same. You men fly ahead with your goals, and you never realise the pain of a mother who has to bury her own child. It

makes me helpless, Kei-sama. I can't fight the way you do, or they can. I don't have those skills. But I would still put myself in harm's way on your behalf, if it meant that my children were safe at home."

"Eiraki..." Despite himself, Keitarou felt his heart tug at her sincerity, and he sighed, moving to slip his arms around her slender body and hugging her tightly.

"Katsura is alive," he told her softly. "I didn't just abandon him to his fate. Chudokuga interfered with those who pursued him, and threw them off his track. I could still feel his spirit power after they turned back from the pursuit — so I came back here. Your son isn't dead — neither of them are. I promise."

"That's hardly any comfort when they're so far away," Eiraki did not resist his embrace, but Keitarou could feel how tense she was beneath his hold. "You took my younger son from me when he was just born, and you never let me see him again until he was sixteen and a practical stranger. Much as I love Kohaku, I never had the chance to bond with him the way I did with Katsura. Now you've taken him from me too... it's hard to bear. My life is their lives... it's not just yours any more, but theirs as well."

"Then I'll give you my word," Keitarou spoke gently, moving to brush the wisps of dark hair out of her face and gazing down into her reproachful blue eyes. "I will go to Seireitei, and I will lay waste to the shinigami. I will rescue Koku, and we will create a world in which we can finally live, without shinigami oppressors chasing us at every juncture. We will put the past behind us and move on. No more fighting and no more hiding. And, when I have done that, I promise that I will seek out your other son. When there is no longer danger of him leading them to me and the people you care for here, then I will forgive him, and bring him home."

Eiraki eyed him sadly, leaning up against his body.

"You're not going to see Sakaki buried, are you?" she asked resignedly, and Keitarou frowned, shaking his head.

"I can't. There isn't time," he admitted. "I have already delayed too much by coming here. I'm sorry, Eiraki. I really am, but Sakaki's soul is already beyond our reach and there are others still living who will die if I don't move with speed. People I need — people we need if that future is ever going to come about. Without Koku's visions, I'm blind. I can only act on instinct and hope that it will be enough."

Eiraki sighed.

“Promise me one other thing, then,” she begged, twisting her fingers through his and eying him plaintively. “When this is over, stop treating Kohaku as your experiment? When the fighting has ended, and we have the freedom you believe in us getting... then stop making that boy see things that make him so upset. I want my sons to live their lives free and happy. Both of them, whatever that means. So promise me, when there’s peace... no more making Kohaku your guinea pig.”

“Eiraki?” Keitarou eyed her in surprise, and Eiraki offered him a sad, bitter smile.

“I was a caged bird, prisoner of the Endou, bound to their whims and their outmoded traditions,” she said softly. “I had no right to object, and I didn’t know what it would be to live free. I chose this life so I could find out those things, and I don’t regret that I did. Kohaku was ill when he was born, I know, and he caused problems... but that was then and this is now. I don’t want him to be a caged bird any more, either. Promise me, Kei-sama. When this is over, we’ll all of us live in peace? Sakaki died fighting for that cause... so promise me that your daughter’s life won’t be lost in vain?”

Keitarou let out his breath in a rush.

“Very well,” he said at length. “If it’s in my power to do, I’ll grant you your wish. If it’s possible to create such a place, then I won’t experiment with Koku and his power any more. I’ll find a way to seal it away for good, so it can’t cause him any more pain. All right? Once everything is over, I won’t need his power, anyway. It will be done.”

Eiraki’s smile softened, and Keitarou saw the relief in her azure gaze.

“Then I’ll see Sakaki off to the next life without you,” she said pensively, reaching up on tiptoes to kiss him on the cheek. “Go, do what needs to be done. Just remember you made that promise, and I will hold you to it. The world we’re creating isn’t your world any more, but *our* world.”

Author’s Note

As usual, here is the offering for Juu’s birthday, 21st December — and the last chapter to be posted before Christmas. There won’t be a chapter next week, so this is a Merry Christmas to all who celebrate (and a great Dec 25th to those who don’t). As usual, it’s not a very festive Christmas offering, sorry about that. But it DOES contain a bit of revelation of truth...

Yes, Koku is Kohaku. Kohaku is Koku. I know some of you realised that already. For those who didn't, all the red herrings along the way fudged the issue, ne. But his situation is exceptional. Only Eiraki, Keitarou and Katsura knew who he really was — therefore Sakaki's testimony, though often given, was always flawed. And the voice that lurks within Koku's mind, bullying him with horrific images of death and threatening him with complete domination? Well, if you've read *Mirror Flower Water Moon*, you know all about Kohaku and you'll most likely already realise the answer to that. But for those who haven't... I guess this story will explain that too in a chapter or three's time. Maybe ;)

All right, so with the title of this chapter, I'm going to explain a little bit about something that was one of the base inspirations for me writing this story and the characters I created within it, in particular those belonging to the enemy side. That theme was the Ten Forms of Death as epitomised by the Espada, and the fact that the word Espada in Japanese characters was written “ten blades.” Now, I have not generated my own ‘espada’, but I did begin my plans for this story with the idea of having ten satellite figures around Keitarou, loosely based on these Espada concepts, in a kind of weird fanfic foreshadowing of Aizen and canon.

For those who don't recall, the ten are as follows:

1. Loneliness
2. Aging
3. Sacrifice
4. Emptiness
5. Despair
6. Destruction
7. Intoxication
8. Insanity
9. Greed
10. Rage

There have been some tweaks to these themes when it came to reality — sometimes working with a combination of the theme and the nature of the Espada when deciding the kind of character to manifest. Also, in some cases the characters took on lives and minds of their own, which took them some way outside of the original brief. Probably it's true that the one which fits the least snugly into the ten is #2, whose theme has become more about the grandiose, power-hungry arrogance of Barragan, coupled with the unavoidability of death. There is also another caveat — the power hierarchy Kubo employed with his Espada is not entirely present in my ten characters. Some of them are in the logical position for their power level, but

others, perhaps, have a higher number than their ability merits, based on the way in which they manifest a 'form of death'.

Some of the characters are easily aligned with their 'theme'. This chapter has opened up the backstory of Kohaku and Katsura, and I'm sure it's clear now that Kohaku is Loneliness, and Katsura, Sacrifice. Sakaki is, of course, Destruction. Those were the easy ones. I think it's probably clear too that Kurotsuchi has the "emptiness" of Ulquiorra, whilst "Intoxication" represents all those pulled unwillingly under Keitarou's control, including Joumei, Hiko and Ohara... As for the others... some of Keitarou's allies haven't been revealed by name yet, but feel free to guess...

53. Kohaku

Chapter Fifty Two: Kohaku

It was growing dark by the time Mitsuki returned to the Thirteenth Division, dropping out of a slightly ragged shunpo and walking quietly across the gardens towards the glittering sheen that marked out the koi pond, shining in the moonlight. Even in the darkness, she could sense the swirl of reiatsu that surrounded the place and, though she did not recognise the fragments of spirit power that were already drifting apart on the wind, she could tell that, while she had been otherwise engaged, something had occurred here, too. She frowned, drawing her brows together as she tried to make sense of the mix of auras, registering with consternation the clear presence of her old friend and classmate, Shihouin Kai.

Whatever it was had involved the Second Division, then, and their secretive, underground force. There was no sign of them now, but they had definitely been here, dark spots of energy in an otherwise bright division, and a shiver went down her spine, though the night was not particularly cold. Not for the first time since she had left Katsura's side, she realised exactly how big and heavy the secret she had chosen to carry had become. It was no longer just about protecting the life of one scared young man out of his depth, but potentially embroiling herself and those she cared about in a deeper, darker battle. Katsura's words about Keitarou had worried her most, and her gaze flitted across the grounds towards the small chamber where she knew Koku slept. The gentle, even rippling of his reiatsu told her that he was both there and sound asleep, but the relief she should have felt that he had made it back safely did not come. Instead she felt a deep sense of foreboding, followed by a rush of resignation and regret.

I know what needs to be done now. I just have to find the courage to do it... and hope that it doesn't make even bigger waves when I do.

She knelt at the water's edge, reaching her fingers out to brush them lightly against the surface of the koi pond. The ripples distorted the surface, breaking her reflection into scattered colours. An adventurous koi broke through the dispersing image, hungry for food, and, as it returned disgruntled to the depths with an indignant flick of its tail, Mitsuki let out a heavy sigh.

"Mitsuki?"

Naoko's voice came from across the grass, the older girl ducking beneath the remaining branches of the willow tree that had been so ill-treated by Tenichi's sword, anxiety in her greenish eyes. At her approach, Mitsuki turned to face her, and Naoko's eyes narrowed, her brows knitting together as she took in her companion's appearance.

"You're a mess," she said softly, and Mitsuki glanced down at her uniform, taking in the specks of blood that covered her arms and the white fabric of her *obi*. Her fingers slipped down to touch Yuuyugo's hilt, and inwardly she hoped her friend could not sense how incomplete the sword still was following her efforts to knit Katsura's wound. It had not been a perfect heal, she acknowledged to herself bitterly, and, if her Captain were to find out, likely she would be scolded for using healing skills before she had officially been given clearance to do so, but despite everything he had told her, she had not been able to leave him there to die.

And now...

"Taichou was worried about you, when you weren't here," Naoko was at her side now, dropping down onto her knees on the grass next to her and reaching out to take Mitsuki's hand in hers, examining the delicate skin for any sign that the blood concealed wounds. "Even more so, when you still didn't come back to Thirteenth. He didn't want to tell me at first, but I got it out of him, what happened at Seventh. Charging into a fight like that was dangerous and out of character for you. You know Sougyo no Kotowari's potential — what were you trying to prove?"

"I don't really know how to answer that," Mitsuki said honestly. "I'm sorry, Nao-chan. It was something I needed to do, and that's all. It's fine. I won't run off again, I promise."

"This isn't your blood," Naoko lowered her friend's arm, casting her a quizzical look. "If not yours, then whose? You weren't bloody when last I saw you... and you haven't had time to go to Koku's chamber, so it's not as though you've been nursing him."

Mitsuki's lips pressed together, and Naoko's eyes darkened.

"All right," she said frankly, shifting around to meet her friend's gaze more directly. "Let me try this from another angle. The young man Taichou said attacked Seventh, you knew him, didn't you? Taichou seemed to think you did. He thought you'd met him somewhere before."

Mitsuki lowered her gaze, unable to find words to refute her companion's claim, and Naoko sighed.

“You worry us so much, and you don’t even have an explanation?” she asked sadly. “I thought we were better friends than that, Mitsuki-chan. I know a lot has happened and a lot of time has passed... but even despite that, I would’ve thought...”

“He saved my life, in Rukongai,” Mitsuki said softly, turning her gaze to the water’s surface once more. “That’s all. He saved me from the Hollow.”

“And then came here, reiatsu flaring, to assault the Seventh?” Naoko demanded. Mitsuki nodded.

“That was that. This was this,” she said simply. “I’m sorry, Nao-chan. It’s not that I don’t trust you — I do. I just... think I’ve... maybe been foolish. And... I don’t think telling you how foolish would help either of us. I need to speak to a... a Captain about it, really. And that’s what I’m going to do, only I’m trying to get up my nerve.”

She raised troubled eyes to her companion’s.

“I might be arrested, when I do,” she said honestly. “I don’t want to get you involved.”

“Mitsuki?” Naoko’s eyes widened in alarm, and she grabbed the healer around the wrists. “What do you mean, arrested? What did you do? What did you...”

“I told you, it won’t help anything if I tell you now,” Mitsuki shook her head, gently detaching herself from the other’s grip. “I’m sorry, but that’s how it is.”

She sighed heavily.

“I want... to tell Juushirou,” she added. “After what happened today, it’s him I *need* to tell, but I’m also afraid of what might happen if I do. I don’t want to compromise his position, either. Most of all, though, I don’t want him to hate me. I think that he’d have... very good reason to be angry with me. He might already be... beyond the point where he can forgive me. That’s why I’m out here... because I don’t know how to begin.”

Naoko frowned.

“I know, you know, that he was here before,” she said evenly. “The young idiot who came to Seireitei today, I mean. I walked out towards Seventh, when things quietened down here, and felt the reiatsu fallout for myself. Houshi-sama was quite certain he recognised it. This person might’ve saved you in Rukongai, but I’ve picked up his reiatsu before. He came here once... I thought he was here stalking you,

maybe even to cause you harm, but that's not true, is it? You lied to me then. You knew he was there, and you pretended you didn't. You met with him... didn't you?"

"Mm," Mitsuki turned to glance towards the tree, then nodded. "He was in some kind of trouble because he had helped me. I thought that, if shinigami stopped hunting for him, he might be all right. He asked me to stop them looking for him, and I agreed."

"Why would you do that?" Naoko was incredulous.

"Because he was scared," Mitsuki shrugged. "And because he really did save me, Nao-chan. Whatever other things have happened since... whatever else I've learned, I... I am alive because he chose to save me. And because I'm alive, I have to... do what's right now. Will you come with me to Juushirou's office? I want to talk to him, and I'd like it if I didn't have to go alone."

"Well, I don't completely understand, but I'll come," Naoko nodded, getting to her feet and grabbing her friend by the wrists once more, pulling her to her feet. "There, come on. Though if all you've done is be soft on someone who's clearly up to no good, I'm sure that'll be forgiven. You've been away from Seireitei for a long time, and you made a mistake. It happens. Patrols are still out looking for him, and probably they'll bring him back. The report from Seventh is that Kitabata dealt him a fatal blow with his *zanpakutou*, and..."

She faltered, realisation and alarm flooding her gaze as she gazed at Mitsuki as if seeing her for the first time.

"You let him get away, didn't you?" she whispered. "It's *his* blood that's all over you. That's why your reiatsu feels strange. You went after him to help him... to heal him. Didn't you?"

Mitsuki looked troubled, but she didn't deny the accusation, and Naoko groaned.

"Mi-chan, why?" she asked plaintively. "Aside from the fact you're far from one hundred percent fit to use your healing power yet, you have to know from what happened today that he's not someone that Seireitei ought to be putting trust in! He's clearly unstable, and there's something else. I wasn't going to tell you about it, but the investigations we've done into Hollow manipulation, they all link up nicely to him and him alone. He's probably guilty of all kinds of chaos across the Districts. Did you know that as well?"

"Not until today," Mitsuki sighed wearily. "Please, Nao-chan. I'm serious. It has to go before a Captain. It's too important. Even if what

I've done is unforgivable, I have to try and explain it properly. You can be angry with me as much as you like later, but right now I need to speak to Juushirou."

"Speak to me about what?" As they rounded the corner to Ugendou, they saw the Thirteenth Division Captain waiting for them, a look of concern on his thin features. At the sight of Mitsuki, he let out an exclamation, hurrying forward to grab her by the shoulders. He glanced her over, looking for injuries, and at his obvious anxiety, Mitsuki's heart constricted and she pushed him away.

"Please, don't," she murmured. "I haven't come for... this isn't..."

"Taichou, Mitsuki has something to report and she says it needs to be reported to a Captain," Naoko took a hand, as Juushirou cast the healer a troubled look.

"To a Captain? Reported?" he asked softly. "Relating to what occurred at Seventh this afternoon, and your subsequent absence from Thirteenth?"

"Yes, sir," Mitsuki gathered her courage, bowing her head low before her old friend. "Please, Ukitake-taichou, I'd like to beg a moment of your time. What I have to say is important, and I'd like you to listen to my confession in full."

"Confession?" Juushirou's eyes became stricken, and he glanced at Naoko, who shrugged.

"She won't tell me everything, but I think you should hear her out," she said gravely. "I also don't think I should be here to hear it all. I'll find out what my rank merits me knowing later, but if Mitsuki can bow her head to you and ask you like that, then she's serious and not even the pull of friendship ought to interfere. I'll go and help Houjou-kun, and leave you to it."

"Naoko..." Mitsuki opened her mouth to protest, but her friend was gone before she could finish, disappearing into shunpo with a curt salute, and she was left alone on the wooden walkway with the Thirteenth's District Captain.

A moment of silence passed between them, then Juushirou sighed, turning and gesturing towards Ugendou.

"As if today hasn't brought enough burdens," he said wearily. "Still, I'm relieved to see you safe. I had feared the worst, when you vanished from Seventh, and didn't return back here before dinner. Nobody knew where you were... I was worried you'd been hurt."

“I’m sorry.” Mitsuki’s voice was little more than a whisper, and Juushirou eyed her for a long time, taking in every single inch of her expression.

“We’ll go inside, Edogawa-san,” he said softly, and at his formality, Mitsuki’s heart lurched a second time. “I think it will be better if this conversation isn’t overheard by anyone else.”

“Yes, sir,” Mitsuki could barely form the words, but he had already turned on his heel, leading the way towards the small cabin. The first time Mitsuki had visited Ugendou, she had found it relaxing and welcoming, but today, stepping into its cramped interior made her feel stifled, and it was with some difficulty that she settled herself down on the cushion before the desk, watching in mute silence as her companion took his position behind it.

Another stretch of silence, then Juushirou rested his arms on the desk, eying her questioningly.

“Well?” he asked quietly. “The circumstances of today’s incidents aside, if you have something to report, do you think perhaps it should be to your own Captain, rather than to me?”

“I think you’re the only one who I can tell,” Mitsuki admitted. “J... I mean, Ukitake-taichou, I don’t want any special favours from you. Not on my own account — I mean, I’m going to tell you everything as I understand it, and you might be cross when I’m done. You might think that I should be arrested, or charged with something, and I won’t... I won’t resist it, if that’s what you decide to do. I’m not telling you because I expect leniency. I want to tell you everything, though. It’s too important not to, and I’ve already... I’ve already been keeping too much to myself.”

“Arrestyou?” Alarm glittered in Juushirou’s hazel eyes. “Do you think that I would ever sanction that, under any circumstances?”

“I’ve been communicating with the son of Aizen Keitarou,” Mitsuki cut across him, and Juushirou faltered, struck speechless by the directness of her confession. “I didn’t mean to, but it doesn’t matter what I meant to do, not given that the consequences are as they are. More, today, even knowing who he was, I healed his injuries and allowed him to escape, despite the fact that he tried to invade Seventh Division and threatened the life of Endou-taichou’s associate. I intervened in your battle this morning because I didn’t want you to kill him... and I felt sure that I could stay your sword.”

“To protect Katsura,” At length Juushirou found his voice, and Mitsuki nodded.

“It began in the Spiritless Zone,” she whispered, lowering her gaze so that she would not have to see the dismay in his eyes. “I met him the night before we were all attacked, though I didn’t know who he was. He knew my name, though... and I thought it was strange, that he was able to disappear so easily from my senses. The next day... eight of my comrades died. Six were murdered in Hokutan, whilst two died at the hands of a Hollow in Junrin’an.”

She swallowed hard, then,

“At that time, he saved me from the Hollow,” she added. “I couldn’t fight any more, but he intervened and used his spirit power to destroy it. He helped me take Seri to the base in Hokutan, but I can’t say then that I didn’t think there was something amiss. He knew there was trouble at the base, and disappeared before help came to bring us back to Seireitei. Still, I didn’t put the details together, not at that point. It didn’t occur to me that the person who had saved me might... have been involved in killing my friends.”

Juushirou did not speak, and, wanting to prevent another oppressive pause, Mitsuki hurriedly continued.

“A few days after I began to recover, he came here,” she said. “He was scared, and I felt as though he was genuinely in trouble. He said that someone had been sent to kill me. He also told me about a spy in the shadows — someone who was already dead, yet not dead. He begged me to stop the shinigami looking for him, because otherwise he would be killed. I believed him. So I stopped talking about the person who helped me in Rukongai. I let you investigate the Onmitsukidou as though he was the one who’d come after me, even though I knew he wasn’t. He told me his name was Katsura... and that he found it hard to lie to me. I wanted to find a way to help him, in return for his saving me.”

She twisted her fingers together in her lap, taking in a deep breath of air as the chamber once more seemed cloying and oppressive.

“I didn’t see or hear anything of him till today, not after that,” she added uneasily. “I had almost forgotten — it seemed as though we wouldn’t ever cross paths again. When he appeared in Seireitei, I recognised his reiatsu, though it was raw and angry and totally unlike when we met before. I involved Hikifune-san and I’m sorry — I wanted her shunpo, because at the moment I thought it would be more stable than mine. I took Koku, because he said he knew how to stop anyone getting killed, and I... for some reason, I just believed that he did. I made the decision and we came to Seventh. The blame is mine, not with Hikifune-san, and I want you to make sure you don’t

punish her. It was my pressure and my fault — I put her in a bad position and I had no right to do it.”

She took another breath, aware that Juushirou was still watching her in intent silence, his expression giving away not a single flicker of emotion.

“When he fled, the Seventh went after him, and I knew they would kill him,” she continued. “Hikifune-san was with Koku, and you were there, and I thought... but I didn’t want them to hurt him, so I followed. I didn’t even think about it. Before I knew what I was doing, I had started to track his reiatsu, and theirs. I felt Kikyue-dono’s flare, and one of her officers, and then sensed them separate. Then I knew Katsura had been hurt. I hid in the shadows, and one of the other Seventh officers called his comrade away from the scene. I think they believed he was dead, or that he very soon would be, else they wouldn’t have left so easily. I knew Katsura wasn’t dead, though, and I could feel his pain. I healed his wounds. I used Yuuyugo and kidou even though I haven’t been given permission to use my skills again. And when I did, he told me that he was Aizen Katsura, and that he had been responsible for the deaths of two of my friends in the Spiritless Zone.”

“That was the first time you knew who he was, and what, exactly, he had done?” Juushirou asked softly, and Mitsuki nodded her head.

“Yes, sir,” she said uneasily.

“But you still let him escape, even when he told you those things?” This time Mitsuki could hear the pain in the Captain’s voice, almost a note of betrayal, and bravely she raised her gaze to his, her heart almost breaking at the distress she saw in his hazel eyes.

“Yes, sir,” she repeated. “I did.”

Juushirou closed his eyes, pressing fingers to his brow, then he sighed, meeting her gaze once more.

“Why?”

“Because he saved my life,” Mitsuki admitted.

“Although he endangered it in the first instance?”

“Yes sir.”

“And you didn’t think that keeping something so important a secret might have cost more people their lives?” Now there was no keeping the edge from Juushirou’s voice as frustration and helplessness began to seep in through the cracks in his Captain’s composure. “Naoko’s

probably told you already, but in case she hasn't, let me. Your testimony only strengthens our case against the individual who came here today. His reiatsu has been located in numerous places, inducing Hollows to attack innocent people across Seireitei in order to increase ill feeling towards shinigami in those areas. It was present in the wasteland Rukon, and it has been detected here. More, there's some evidence to suggest that two officers in Tenth Division were killed by a Hollow under some kind of manipulation, with the body of one of the Tenth officers almost destroyed beyond recognition by a raw form of Kidou energy. It's perfectly possible that this person you let escape is responsible for many more deaths that we haven't identified yet. While he is still free, others are at risk. He might have valued your life, but he has shown no mercy to any others — as his actions here today proved. Moreover, he's Keitarou's son. Today, while you were absent, members of my division arrested a former officer of mine who had been driven almost to despair by Keitarou's games and manipulations, to the point he was ready to kill an innocent girl based on little or no rational reasoning. Now you tell me that you deliberately let his oldest son and heir escape — no, not only that, you healed his wounds and wished him on his way — as though we weren't in the midst of trying to prevent an all out war that could cost thousands of people their lives?"

Tears glittered on Mitsuki's lashes, and she shook her head.

"I don't believe he will kill anyone else," she said unevenly, and Juushirou banged his hands down on the desk, unable to suppress his emotions any further.

"Mitsuki!"

"I'm sorry," Mitsuki swallowed hard. "I know what I've done, and I'm sorry I lied to you. I didn't know he was Aizen Katsura until today, and that's why I've come to tell you about it now. It's too important to hide any more, and if I'd known his real name from the start, I never would've kept it from you. But..."

"Wouldn't you?" With a tremendous effort, Juushirou reined in his temper, clenching his fists for a moment before forcing his arms back down at his sides. "You just told me that you helped him today, despite knowing his real name. Do you think you would've acted differently?"

"We'll never know," Mitsuki whispered. "And if you want to arrest me, I told you — I won't resist. I don't hate him. I don't... blame him. I know... that he's not an evil person. He told me he regretted it, what happened in the Spiritless Zone. Keitarou told him to do it. Keitarou

raised him to hate shinigami, but when he met me, he said he realised that we weren't all monsters. He's been struggling with it ever since."

"His behaviour today makes that hard to believe."

"He came here on a mission to kill Joumei-dono," Mitsuki agreed sadly, "and he said he didn't have regrets for that. Joumei-dono killed his sister. Sakaki. The girl who killed Souja-dono and the other healers in the Spiritless Zone. He told me he'd made a choice to avenge his sister, even though it might mean him being killed, or losing everything."

"The Council authorised a kill on sight order for Keitarou and his children, meaning Joumei's killing of Aizen Sakaki will carry no punishment in Seireitei's courts," Juushirou said matter-of-factly, though Mitsuki knew he was coasting over things which, deep down, he too found distasteful. "By contrast, you not only aided and abetted the escape of someone just as dangerous, you interfered in Kitabata Hajime's attempt to follow that Council Order. And, because you did, Joumei may still be in danger."

Mitsuki shook her head.

"No. He said he wasn't going to come back. He wasn't going to tangle with shinigami any more," she protested, and Juushirou snorted.

"Why do you believe him so easily?" he demanded. "What did he do to you, when he saved your life, that's made you blind to the value of other people's? Why are you willing to give a man who's confessed to murder and the intent to kill again the benefit of the doubt?"

"You're willing to protect and aid and worry about Joumei-dono, when he's done exactly the same!" Mitsuki shot back, and then wished she had not, for there was true thunder and lightning brewing up a storm in Juushirou's normally gentle hazel eyes. His fists clenched again, a clear sign he was battling with his temper once more.

"Joumei's case is different," he said in low tones. "I don't condone his actions, but the law is one way and I can't change it. Sakaki's life was forfeit when she struck down the Vice Captain of the Seventh Division. I might not approve of killing in reprisal, but as a Gotei Captain I understand there are times when it happens and I have no power whatsoever to intervene. The Council's law makes Joumei's actions legal, and, as a vassal of the Endou, he would answer to Hirata's justice, not to mine. Besides, Joumei took the life of one woman who killed his childhood friend and future Lord. Ugly as I find that fact, I know he is unlikely to go on a rampage and kill anyone

else. In contrast, you are protecting someone who has already killed several times. *He killed your friends*, and left Aomori Seri in a condition where it is unlikely she will ever wear *shihakushou* again! Who knows how much pain he's already inflicted on Soul Society, or how much more he will do? Why do you believe in him, when he's done so much harm already?"

"*Because of Kohaku!*" Mitsuki snapped back, her temper rising to protect her from the rising accusation in Juushirou's voice. "He promised me, because of Kohaku!"

"Ko... haku?" At this, the wind was knocked out of Juushirou's sails, and he stared at his former classmate, confused. Mitsuki nodded.

"He promised me that he wouldn't do anything here again, because he didn't want to cause his brother any harm," she whispered. "He fought to protect his family — Sakaki and Kohaku. That's why I helped him, and let him escape. I knew he meant that. He only did... what anyone would do to protect those they loved, even... even you. He loved his sister, even though she did bad things. To us she's an evil person, but to him she was kin and he couldn't protect her. And now he wants to protect Kohaku... and so he won't... he doesn't intend to cause the shinigami any more harm."

"But what would Kohaku have to do with anything?" Juushirou was bewildered. "It's not as though we know where to find him, and besides, if the Onmitsukidou's testimony is right, Kohaku's someone we should be fearing. I don't know what he told you, Mitsuki-chan, but..."

"Kohaku is *here*," Mitsuki interrupted, reaching out to grab Juushirou's sleeve and giving it a little tug. "I'm sorry, and I know that I've put you in a bad position, but you'll understand why you were the one I had to tell when you realise everything. I didn't know this till today, either, I promise, but I knew that this alone I couldn't keep from you. I'm not the only one who's been hiding things, but it's not... it's not what you think. Katsura left Seireitei today because of Kohaku. It wasn't me, or Seventh, or anyone else who drove him away. It was his brother. He told me that they had a psychic connection, and they could communicate through thought waves. It was Kohaku who made Katsura pull back, and because of Kohaku, Katsura won't come back."

"I don't understand," Juushirou admitted. "You're saying Kohaku is here, among us... *with* the shinigami?"

"Yes," Mitsuki agreed. "Right here, in fact. In Thirteenth. In your protective custody."

Juushirou's eyes became big as saucers, his already pale features draining of all remaining colour as he put together the implication in his friend's words.

"Koku?" he murmured, and Mitsuki nodded her head.

"But... that's..." Juushirou swallowed hard, agitation clear on his face. "Are you sure? Koku is Kohaku? I mean, not that there aren't a lot of questions still surrounding... but..."

"Katsura told me things which made Koku's behaviour make sense," Mitsuki said softly. "More, I could tell that of everyone, he really loved his brother. That's why he left, even though it meant Sakaki was unavenged. I knew he was telling the truth, Juushirou. I could feel it from him — that was the real Katsura. Not the killer. The one who loved his family so much he'd do whatever it took to protect them... and Kohaku most of all."

"So Shunsui *was* right," Juushirou said heavily, burying his head in his hands. "Koku is involved with Keitarou, and in an unavoidably close way."

"No..." Mitsuki pursed her lips, then she sighed. 'Well, from how Katsura explained it, it's complicated,' she hazarded. "I don't know if I really understand completely, but Katsura wanted me to know that Kohaku hasn't committed any murders. He said that Keitarou has no hold over Kohaku, and that Kohaku hates killing. Death upsets him. Also, that Kohaku had... a rough time growing up. He was isolated for a long time, with a gift that he couldn't control... an ability to see things that other people can't see. Katsura wanted Kohaku to be happy, even if that meant he ended up choosing a separate path. That's why I knew he was telling the truth."

She glanced at the spatters of blood still marring her arms, then,

"I know that healing him was probably a bad thing to do," she added, "but as a healer, it's also my duty to help someone in distress. I haven't been in Seireitei, so I don't pretend I understand the intricacies of the Gotei or what being a Captain really means. I only know that when people are hurt, I want to help them — even if they've done bad things, leaving them to die would be something worse. Katsura understood what he'd done, and he wasn't asking me for mercy. I chose to give it, but I told him that I wouldn't help him further and I'm sure he knew I'd come back here and tell you everything. He asked for my help for Kohaku, not for himself. He wanted me to make sure that his brother was all right. He thought... Keitarou might come for him, or at least, try to use him and his power

in some way.”

She eyed Juushirou carefully.

“Koku’s fits and bad dreams are visions, aren’t they?” she asked. “You knew that much, I can tell by your face. That’s what you were keeping from me, when we talked the other night. You knew he could see things other people can’t see.”

“I did, though I hadn’t worked out what to do about it,” Juushirou acknowledged. ‘Katsura telling you the same helps support his story. It doesn’t help me muddle out what to do, though. Katsura is clearly guilty — if he’s caught, providing he’s not killed on sight, he’ll be interrogated and handled in the way a criminal of Seireitei is dealt with, and there’s nothing I can do about that. More, I probably wouldn’t try. The lives he’s disrupted and stolen deserve some justice, and,’ he offered her a bittersweet smile, “as a Captain of the Gotei, my duty is to see that justice is upheld. But... in terms of Kohaku... that’s more complicated. If he truly hasn’t hurt anyone, then he’s committed no crime... but if all of Seireitei learned what you just told me, it would cause mayhem. More, given the Council’s dictum, it would probably cost the boy his life.”

He rubbed his brow once more, then,

“I need you to tell me everything Katsura told you, in exact detail,” he said at length. “Your side in it we’ll put to one side for now, and wait and see if Katsura is brought to book. If he is, you might have to testify — but my priority right now is Kohaku. If what Katsura told you is indication that Keitarou needs Koku for his plans somehow, then it could get a lot more messy... and I need to know everything I can before I start making decisions that could have far reaching consequences.”

Katsura’s presence had gone from his thoughts once more.

Koku pushed back the heavy blankets, swinging his legs carefully over the side of the pallet and reaching out tentatively for the wall and then the window-sill as he pulled his aching body to its feet. The events outside the barracks were fragmented in his mind, broken and blurred at the edges so that he wasn’t quite sure what order things had come in. His brother had been there, angry and indignant, his *reiryoku* blazing from him like a beacon. Koku had seen it before in his dreams, this terrifying image of Katsura’s vengeance, but it had still alarmed him to understand how deep his brother’s feelings ran. Katsura had chosen to come hunt down his sister’s killer, regardless of the

consequences. In the moments before their thoughts had been segregated, Koku had felt resignation, acceptance and, overall, resolve. Yes, this had been Katsura's wish, Katsura's choice... his family first, and freedom second.

Tears glittered on Koku's lashes, as he pulled his heavy body towards the window and rested his hands on the sill, gazing out blankly over the rear of the division barracks towards the glistening surface of the koi pond. He had never properly seen this view before, yet even so it resonated nostalgically against his senses. Had it been a memory of Katsura's, or some vision of his own? He didn't know.

Following the chaos in the Seventh courtyard, Koku knew he had been returned to his chamber by Kirio, but he must have slept, for when he had awoken, the sun had already set, and though there had been a tray of food left at his bedside, he had found himself unsupervised. The door had probably been locked, he mused darkly, since he didn't imagine the shinigami would give him the chance to go wandering from his room again. Not that he had the will or the energy to — the emotion and exertion of the day had drained him enough already. The food remained where it had been left — he had picked at it, but though his body was crying out for nourishment, he found it difficult to swallow any of it down. Not while Katsura was still out there, his fate unknown.

Closing his eyes, he tried again to reach out to his brother, but was greeted with silence a second time.

Once you promised you'd always be there for me. Now you take yourself off into the sunset, and sever our bond like it was nothing at all.

Koku fought back the tears, yet he could not suppress the deep despair churning up inside of his heart.

The one person I could always count on... but it's not like I don't understand. I do understand. It began when you killed those healers and saved Edogawa Mitsuki — the woman who would end up helping to save my life. I felt the first tremors of it then, but it grew bigger and darker when Sakaki killed Souja-dono. Everything changed at that point and I couldn't find a way to claw it back. Maybe it's entirely my fault. If I'd told Keitarou-san... if I'd told Father about that last hallucination, would he have made sure it didn't happen? That's the trouble, when you see the future. Even if you read it wrong, you can't go back. It doesn't change, no matter how much warning you get... and now here we are. You on that side, me on this. But I haven't chosen sides against you, Katsu-nii. I never could... I hope you know that. Even if I stopped you killing Joumei-san, I hope you understand what choice I've really made.

“Koku?”

His brother's voice washed through his thoughts, and he leant up against the wall, resting his brow against the cool surface of the glass as memories flooded through him — images and sensations from a time long ago rising to the surface as though it had been only yesterday.

“Koku, where are you?”

From somewhere in the terrifying, swirling darkness, a voice began to penetrate, and Koku struggled to cling on to it, pushing through the dizzying waves of panic and terror to reach out for an anchor in the mist. Something grasped hold of his body, tangible and real as it held him upright, and Koku was aware of an exclamation of dismay, followed by a litany of curses. His breath was coming in panicked gasps, half-in and half-out of reality as whoever it was supporting him tightened their hold, and then, spoken so softly he thought he had imagined it, he heard the words,

“Hang on in there. It will be okay... just hang on in there, all right?”

“Katsu... ra?”

Somehow Koku parted his lips, the three syllables forced painfully over his vocal chords, but at the sound of them he felt a reassuring pat on his arm.

“Yep, fraid so. You’re gonna be fine, just sit tight. I’m gonna stop the bleeding... it’s not as bad as it looks.”

Tears glittered on Koku’s lashes as he felt someone take his arm firmly in their grasp, then the sudden tension of something being pulled tightly across his wrist. There was pain, but as he forced his lungs to spasm air in bigger and bigger gulps, he realised that the world outside of his mind had begun to take on physical form again and, as his eyes brought his surroundings into hazy focus, he made out the face of his companion, fingers red with blood as he worked to tighten the tourniquet around the slashed wrist. For a moment he didn’t speak, intent on his task, and there was silence between them, but at length he seemed satisfied, tapping the arm again then turning to meet his teenage companion’s gaze.

“What was that about?” he asked softly, and despite the gentleness of his tones, Koku knew that the older boy was not fooled. There was gravity in the usually bright blue eyes, and something in their deep concern brought Koku’s emotions flooding forward. Tears glittered on his lashes, and he swallowed a sob of fear, flinging himself against Katsura’s lean frame and burying his head in the other’s shoulder.

“Hey!” Katsura seemed startled, but he did not push his companion away, instead patting him reassuringly on the head. “None of that, else

Father will come see us and there'll be a fuss. Better he doesn't know about this... about any of this. You agree, don't you? Better he doesn't get to see you... like this."

"Mm," Koku nodded jerkily between sobs, the sound muffled by the rough fabric of Katsura's hakamashita, and the older boy sighed, shaking his head slowly.

"You might fool him, but you can't me," he added pensively. "I heard it... felt it... you screaming out for someone to help you. You were scared, Koku — I thought that things were better, now, but..."

He faltered, and Koku raised melancholy eyes to his rescuer.

"Don't tell him," he begged. "I'm sorry... I... I just... it was..."

He broke off, unable to find the words, but Katsura nodded.

"I know," he said simply. "Like I said, you can't keep it from me in the same way. We're connected, and that's how it should be. I'm not going to let anything bad happen to you, Koku-kun. Believe in me a little and see that, okay? I promised Otousama the first time we met that I'd look out for you, and dammit, I meant that. If you're scared, talk to me about it, all right? If you don't have the words for it, there are other ways. You can't hurt me — we both know that. You were the one who first reached out to me, and it happened again now. You didn't really want to die, did you? You were just scared."

"I wanted... it... to leave me alone," Koku admitted brokenly. "It... wants... me. It... wants to swallow me up... and... and then..."

"I see," Katsura's blue eye darkened, and his gaze flitted across the ground in the direction of the shadowy building beyond the trees. "Can you fight it off?"

"I was," Koku confessed. "I thought... if I... wasn't here... it... couldn't... be either. But it... wouldn't let me... and... it was trying to... take... me for its own."

Katsura's lips thinned, and he hugged his younger companion tightly.

"Well, I'm here, so no harm done this time," he said quietly. "I'm sorry I took as long as I did, but I'm here, and we'll clean you up, somehow, and nobody need ever know about this. But Koku, listen. You can't lose this fight. You know what we're here to do — what the end goal is. I want to live in Seireitei, but I want you there too, right with me. It's the most amazing place, I swear... if you saw it, I know you'd be happy. I know you'd be better, in a place like that, where it's not so full of darkness and despair. I want you to win this battle, and live your life. For you, Koku-

kun. Not for me, or for him, but for you."

"I don't suppose that will ever happen," Koku admitted mournfully. "I've only been here like this for a short time, and already..."

"It's early days, but you can do this and you will," Katsura said purposefully. "I believe in you and I always have. That place you saw, with the flowers and the trees... I will find it. One day, I will. It's in Seireitei, I know it is... and I'll find it for you. So don't give up. Keep fighting it. Father's done what he can to help, and it will settle down more, I'm sure. It waits for you to be weak, as all demons do — so you need to be strong. You need to shut it out. Don't let it shake your emotions so much, or frighten you so greatly. I know it's hard, but you're not alone... so please... don't let the demon win."

Koku stared up at the older boy for a moment, then, a faint smile touched his lips and he nodded his head.

"I'm not alone," he echoed, comforted by the simplicity in the older boy's words. "You'll never leave me, will you, Katsura? You'll always be there... won't you?"

"I will," Katsura nodded. "So don't look so pitiful. Let's go sort that arm out properly... maybe ask Mother. We can tell her you fell and cut yourself, and she'll do something to wrap it up. She's not sensitive enough spiritually to know that it was anything else, and Father's not here, so we should do it now. If he comes back and sees blood... you know how he'll react."

"Mm," Koku inclined his head in another faint nod. "All right. All right, let's go."

Koku opened his eyes once more, letting out a sigh. Gently he pushed back the sleeve of his robe, running his index finger over the jagged white line that marked the scar he had created that day. It had been a memory not just of his fear and despair, but the reassurance of his brother's presence. So long as it remained there, refusing to fade and disappear beneath layers of new skin, Katsura's promise remained fresh in his mind. No matter how dark things became, or how frightened he was, Katsura had promised. He would always be there. No matter what.

The view through the window was blurry now, and, as he touched his cheek absently with a pale finger, he realised the tears had come anyway, refusing to be set aside.

So that was why he had seen that view before. He had forgotten, but it had been a vision — an ocean of calm in a sea of panic and

pain. Katsura had been so sure that one day he would find it — and now, standing by the window of his small sickroom, Koku could see it stretched out before him.

I was always going to come here, wasn't I? Even though I've tried to pretend otherwise, I've always known that the place I was going to end my life was Seireitei.

"I'm not sure anyone would approve of you getting up on your own like this, after your antics this morning."

A voice from the door made him start, swinging around and almost overbalancing as the sudden movement made his head swim. There was an exclamation, then the sound of footsteps crossing the room hastily, and almost before the world had come back into a hazy focus, he felt two hands on his shoulders, guiding him gently down into a seated position on the bed.

"Yes, you're better there," the voice was light and warm, but Koku was perceptive, and he knew that the tones were somewhat forced, their joviality not quite sincere. He frowned, eying his companion warily.

"Ukitake-dono?"

Juushirou did not respond right away, then he grimaced, running fingers through lank white hair before letting it fall haphazardly back over his shoulders.

"We need to talk," he said, and now there was no false levity in his words. "It's a serious matter, Koku, and I need you to tell me the truth."

Koku merely stared at the Captain, forcing his expression into one of impassiveness, and Juushirou sank back against the wall with a groan. There was another stretch of silence, then,

"I need to know who you are."

Koku flinched, staring at Juushirou warily.

"Who I am?"

"Yes."

"I'm Koku. Koku from Rukongai. Didn't we already establish that?"

"No," Juushirou shook his head, frustrating glittering in his hazel eyes. "I mean, who you really are. That won't do any more, Koku. I need to know what the stakes are, and I need to know them now. There'll be no more playing around... it's gone beyond being a game. I

want to know the truth — about you, about the lad who came to Seireitei this morning, and anything else you think I ought to know.”

“Ought to know,” Koku pursed his lips, and Juushirou nodded.

“There’s two ways this can go,” he said grimly. “If you tell me everything, and I mean, everything, I’ll listen to whatever you say. I’ll do my best to understand it, and to put it all into the right context and, if I can help you, then I will. But if you lie to me, or you don’t tell me... I’m going to end up having to surrender you to a higher authority for proper questioning. Those are the stakes we’re talking about.”

“Help me?” Koku’s brows creased in confusion. “What do you mean — I don’t understand? You’re a shinigami... and shinigami went after Kat... after the person who came to Seireitei this morning. He’s clearly someone of interest to you — and if you believe I’m in league with him, why would you help me?”

“Because he’s your brother, and he asked Mitsuki to make sure you were safe,” Juushirou said frankly, and despite himself, Koku’s heart lurched in his chest.

“He... did what?” he whispered, and Juushirou reached out to rest a hand on Koku’s shoulder.

“I know who he is, and who you are,” he said quietly, his hazel eyes full of regret. “I just wanted to hear it from you directly. I didn’t want to believe it, but your expression tells me I can’t pretend otherwise. His name is Katsura, isn’t it? And yours isn’t Koku, but Kohaku. Aizen Kohaku. Keitarou’s son and the one over whom all of Seireitei has been on high alert.”

Koku was silent for a moment.

“I can’t see how my admitting to being someone like that would help me in any way whatsoever,” he said at length. “This Katsura isn’t in custody... is he?” this last in an anxious aside, and Juushirou shook his head.

“He’s disappeared,” he said heavily. “Patrols are still looking, but I suspect they won’t find him. He’s long gone now. There will be warrants, though, for his arrest. He admitted to killing shinigami in the Spiritless Zone, as well as his interruption here, and those are serious crimes for which there are heavy penalties. I can’t guarantee what might happen if he was to be captured.”

“I don’t know where he is,” Koku said sullenly. “I’m not his keeper. I can’t tell you that, if that’s what you want to know.”

“I know that much,” Juushirou grasped Koku by the shoulders again more firmly, pulling the reluctant youngster around to face him. “If you did, you wouldn’t be so anxious about whether or not he was in custody. Besides, I’m not concerned with him. It’s not my case, and I’m not sending agents to hunt him down. My focus is on you, Koku. No... Kohaku. Because that is who you are, isn’t it? The person who came here today *was* your brother, and you really are Keitarou’s son. That’s how you managed to stop him — and why you wanted to go to Seventh. It had nothing to do with Joumei — he just happened to be there. You went because you wanted to make sure Katsura didn’t get killed — correct?”

“And if I did? What then?” Koku whispered. Juushirou closed his eyes briefly, then,

“I told you,” he said. “If you tell me everything, and trust in me, I’ll do what I can to help you. Katsura told Mitsuki that you didn’t hurt anyone, and I believe that to be true. He said you didn’t like killing, and that you hadn’t been involved in the murders in the Spiritless Zone. More, you brought Souja back here, and I believe in his judgement. He had faith in you, so so will I. If you’ve done nothing wrong, then there’s nothing to arrest you for — but unless I know exactly what your situation is, I can’t prepare an argument to that effect. It will happen... the Council, the Shihouin, someone will come and want to take you and interrogate you. Even without such clear testimony as Mitsuki or I can now give, people saw you communicate with one another, and it was clear you weren’t strangers. Seventh took at least one injury, and it won’t take long for the inquiries to come around to you and to Thirteenth. I don’t want that to happen — or maybe I feel more like I know you’re not well enough to deal with something like that.”

“I’m healing,” Koku’s fingers slipped down towards his bandaged abdomen, and Juushirou nodded.

“There, you are,” he said softly, “But it’s not that I’m talking about. I was here the other day, remember, when you fell into some trance and saw the attack on people you shouldn’t even know existed. More, Katsura told Mitsuki about that, too. About your... your spirit power, and the way in which it sometimes takes hold of you.”

“*What?*” Koku’s cagey responses shattered with this final revelation, and Juushirou nodded, lowering his hands.

“Katsura wanted you to be safe,” he repeated frankly. “He admitted his guilt to Mitsuki, and told her a good deal about you. I don’t know whether she told me everything he told her, but even from the little I

know, it's enough to make me concerned for your well-being. I don't know if you believe me, or if you can use this power of yours to tell my intentions, but I do want to help. I need you to trust me, though. I can't defend what I don't understand."

"What makes you think you can understand it?" Koku asked bitterly. "Nobody else does. Nobody else ever has."

"You truly are Kohaku, aren't you?"

"You already know I am. There's no reason for me to keep denying it."

"Does Tenichi know that, too?"

"Tenichi...?" Despite himself, Kohaku stared at his companion, a mixture of consternation and incredulity crossing his features. Juushirou's lips thinned for a moment, then he nodded.

"Kotetsu Tenichi," he said quietly. "A shinigami from the Seventh Division who was arrested today for attempting to kill one of my recruits."

Tenichi-dono...

Kohaku's expression became troubled, and he shook his head.

"I don't know what you mean," he said at length. "I know of Tenichi-dono only from Kirio-san's conversations. We may have met but once, briefly, when I had just regained consciousness, and if he told you otherwise, he was mistaken."

"Tenichi didn't tell me anything of the kind," Juushirou settled himself more comfortably, fixing his companion with a grave look. "He is currently very unsettled, and upset about a good many things. But give me your name he would not. Because he would not, I realised such a connection must exist. Someone told Tenichi that your father didn't intend to murder Souja. You are the only person in Seireitei who could've told him that information... and his refusal to reveal you indicates that your acquaintance was more than just a brief encounter. I've made it clear, haven't I? I want you to trust me and tell me everything — it might mean both your life and his."

Kohaku was silent for a moment, digesting this carefully. Then he sighed, shrugging his shoulders.

"I warned him to keep out of it," he said wearily, realising that no matter how much he prevaricated, he was not going to avoid the intensity in those hazel eyes. There was a genuine concern in them, and though he did not know whether it was for Tenichi, for himself,

or for both, something in it made Kohaku want to reach out and trust in its sincerity. "That's all."

"And you met in Rukongai? Or here, for the first time?" Juushirou pressed.

"It's something I agreed not to speak about. It's not as though..."

"I don't want him to lose his life over this," Juushirou cut across him. "Tenichi has already confessed in full to his being held in Rukongai, his meeting with your father, and the events that followed. I need to know what connection he has to you, and whether that connection is going to lead him to the proverbial gallows. Tell me the truth, please. I want to know how you and he are connected."

Kohaku groaned.

"We're not connected," he said finally. "That is the truth, Ukitake-dono. We did meet in Rukongai, it's true. Father made me keep an eye on him, so we spoke a few times about non-important things. He came to... to speak to me, following his Vice Captain's death, and I told him what I knew about what had happened. I told him it wasn't his fault and to stay out of it. He was frightened that something he'd done had caused it, and I felt that vibe from him... that if he didn't step away then, it would slowly unravel him."

He offered a wan smile.

"I suppose my warning wasn't strong enough," he realised bitterly. "If you arrested him today, he chose to ignore my advice. That's all I know. I promise. The last time I spoke to him was not long after I regained consciousness... since then, we've not seen each other at all. I wanted it that way. I didn't think it would be good for him to consider me his ally."

"What you know about Souja's death," Juushirou's eyes narrowed, and he nodded. "And about your real name?"

"He didn't know that. I never told him, and nor did Father," Kohaku shrugged his shoulders. "If he knows it, then the only person who might've told him anything is the Onmitsukidou he tried and failed to kill in the courtyard of Seventh Division. But from how he spoke to me about Kohaku, I don't think he made the connection between us at all. He thought Kohaku was a monster."

He looked pained.

"It's more than a little true, so I let him keep believing it."

"You knew about the incident between Tenichi and Suzuki Naoko?"

“I have sharp senses,” Kohaku shrugged. “Once I meet a person, I never forget their reiatsu.”

“And today, whatever you said to Joumei that sent him flying off in the direction of Thirteenth — was that your sharp senses too?”

“No...” Kohaku frowned, his eyes becoming clouded. “No, that was... not the same. A swirl of everything else — things happening just out of my reach. I’m sorry, Ukitake-dono. I have been holding back, but it’s clear you know a good deal and so I’ll be frank. I knew before you told me about Tenichi-dono’s actions today, and the girl... the silver fox. I knew all of it before we left Thirteenth — I didn’t wish for anything to happen, but seeing something isn’t the same as being able to do something about it.”

“Then Kohaku’s tremendous power... is the power of prophesy?”

“I suppose it is. I don’t know. I’ve never considered it tremendous.” Kohaku shuffled back into the corner, out of Juushirou’s direct reach, folding his arms across his chest. “Besides, you don’t really want to help me. Won’t it get you into trouble, harbouring someone that Soul Society is looking for?”

“Maybe, if it were to become widespread, but I don’t intend that to happen if I can avoid it,” Juushirou said pragmatically.

“Why?”

“The Council passed a motion permitting the killing Keitarou and his children on sight, irrespective of evidence of guilt.” Juushirou said grimly, and despite himself, Kohaku’s eyes widened with genuine fear. “Yes, that’s why I said the stakes are high. I said I didn’t want to lose Tenichi’s life... well, the same applies to you, too. I was uneasy about the motion to begin with, and now, even more so. Your brother’s life is in danger so long as that edict remains, and your sister’s death will be ruled justified under the Council’s decision. Now I know this extends to you, too, I’m even less keen to let the higher powers take hold of you. I’m probably the only one in any position to help you... and even if Mitsuki hadn’t promised Katsura that we would, I have enough doubts myself to fight the Council’s edict in your case. But I need you to trust me. If you don’t, there’ll be very little that I can do to help you... and if you go out of my hands, then... that will be it.”

He made a beheading motion.

“I’m only a Captain, not a Clan Leader. I have sovereignty here, but I can’t overrule them or their orders. I need as much information and time as I can gather together if I’m to challenge their decision and

prove you're not a threat."

"I am a threat, though," Kohaku whispered. "Now you know I'm Kohaku, then you must realise that I'm dangerous... why would you want to shelter me, knowing that?"

"I don't believe you're dangerous at all," Juushirou said matter-of-factly, "except, perhaps, to yourself."

"Then you're more stupid than I thought."

"Am I?" Juushirou pursed his lips. "You've been here, in my custody, for several days now. In that time, the only person who has suffered ill effects is you. To begin with, I assumed it was the shock of being hurt by Kikyue, but that's not the case at all and I know that now. Your physical wounds are minor in comparison to your spiritual scars... every time your *reiryoku* bubbles up inside you, it flares and overloads you and your body can't handle it. So you become faint, and dizzy, and weak, and ill. Those things I know for sure... but who else is it hurting but you?"

"You're wrong," Koku shook his head impatiently. "I... my *reiryoku* influences people. If I'm upset, or desperate, or frightened... it can... spill over."

"I know," Juushirou agreed calmly, and Koku stared at him.

"Did Kirio-san say...?"

"Kirio?" Juushirou was startled, then he smiled, shaking his head. "No, but I had already surmised from what both she and later, Mitsuki said that you'd had something to do with their uncharacteristically impulsive trip to Seventh. Also, with my desire to race off to save the Kitsune the other day — your *reiryoku* has the ability to strip people of inhibitions, doesn't it?"

"I don't know that it's meant to. I just can't control it. It leaks," Kohaku spoke bitterly. "It can leak far worse, too. When I see something, that something can be picked up by other people. If I really try hard to, I can make someone else see something... but usually it's by accident that I do. That... something... is what turns people's minds and makes them act unlike themselves."

"And when you broke Keitarou's hold over Joumei?"

"I made him see images of his family being killed," Kohaku lowered his gaze, glancing at his hands. "The same images I saw... that you saw too."

"Of his family being..."

“By doing that, I broke Father’s hold over him,” Kohaku admitted. “It’s experimental — I only learned I could do it recently, so I’m still perfecting it. But..if you scare someone enough, their body goes into survival mode. When it’s in that mode, it can fight back more strongly against an invading force than it normally would. It disrupts and disperses Father’s control... and so it breaks down. But it’s not a nice cure. It wasn’t nice for Joumei-dono, and I felt that when I touched him — but it was the only way I knew to break it.”

“Fear can break Keitarou’s control?”

“I don’t know if it’s fear, or if it’s something toxic in my *reiryoku* that acts like a corrosive against Father’s,” Kohaku shrugged helplessly. “Like I said, I didn’t know I could do it, till now. It takes a lot of my strength to manage, so perhaps it’s my demonic *reiryoku* more than anything else.”

“Then your spirit power can’t be seen as all bad, can it?” Juushirou pointed out, and Kohaku snorted.

“You have no idea what I’m capable of doing,” he whispered, and Juushirou eyed him keenly.

“But you don’t believe in killing,” he pointed out, “and you put yourself in serious danger when you brought Souja back here, too. You must’ve known that was a risk — a huge gamble, if we worked out who you were. Yet you did it anyway. You didn’t want him to die, even though he was your enemy... so...”

“He wasn’t my enemy,” Kohaku shook his head impatiently. “I won’t make you understand — I don’t have enemies, it’s other people who draw lines and use rhetoric to try and make something right or wrong. I just don’t like people dying. It doesn’t matter to me whether they’re shinigami or people in the Rukon, or even whether they’re someone who killed my sister. I don’t believe in taking life. It doesn’t solve anything, and I don’t like to see it, over and over again in my head, the different ways in which people can be ripped apart.”

He swallowed hard, burying his head in his hands as flickers of panic lurched against his senses.

“Even talking about it, I know they’re there,” he whispered. “The images of people being killed. I helped Souja-dono because he was hurt. I didn’t lie to you about that. But I did know it was going to happen. I did try to stop it. I didn’t succeed, that’s all. That’s the only bit I didn’t tell you the truth about, Ukitake-dono. I wanted to help Souja-dono — but he wouldn’t listen to me when I tried to warn him he was in danger. I knew that his life was important, and if he lived or

died, it would affect everything from that point on. I knew that if he lived, there was a chance of avoiding all out conflict, and so I wanted to persuade him, even if he realised who I was.”

“So you did meet him before he was lying injured on the ground?” Juushirou asked softly. “That’s the information you knew... the thing you told Tenichi?”

Kohaku nodded.

“Souja-dono came to my hut,” he said bleakly. “The hut where Father kept me — did Katsura tell Edogawa-san about that, too?”

“Mm. Yes,” Juushirou’s lips thinned in disapproval. “I know what place you mean, but we can discuss that more later. So he came there and found you — did he let you free?”

“No... I wasn’t a prisoner. Not then. Not for a long time,” Kohaku shook his head. “But I still went there... and that day, I went because I knew Souja-dono would be there. I wanted him to turn back. I hoped that, if I talked to him, he’d go back to Seireitei. I hoped... but he wouldn’t listen. He told me it was his duty, and then he used shunpo and escaped. I... I can sense people’s reiatsu really well, Ukitake-dono. I knew where he’d gone, but I couldn’t follow him, not at his speed. I can’t do shunpo. I don’t know how. So by the time I got to where he was... he was already hurt.”

“By your sister?”

“Yes.”

“You saw her there?”

“I chased her off,” Kohaku sighed, raising resigned eyes to his companion. “It was too late, though. She’d already taken it too far. Souja-dono knew it too... but I couldn’t just leave him. I helped him open the *Senkaimon*, and I brought him back here.”

“Did he realise you were associated with Keitarou?”

“Yes,” Kohaku admitted. “He suspected I was when we met, and then, when Sakaki spoke to me, she called me by name. It was clear he knew Sakaki was Father’s child, and so he knew. But he... he didn’t blame me. He said he would help me, if I took him home. I knew that he couldn’t... but...”

He paused, then,

“Well, maybe he did,” he acknowledged reluctantly. “I know you took me here because Souja-dono asked you to. You’ve looked after

me for his sake. Maybe that's how he kept his word... I don't know."

"Maybe because he knew you were his cousin, too," Juushirou suggested, but Kohaku shook his head.

"He never knew that," he said bitterly. "Sakaki didn't know I was her brother, so how could he?"

"Even *Sakaki* didn't..?" Juushirou was flummoxed, and Kohaku shrugged.

"Safer for me, Father said," he responded wearily. "People in the village associated the name Kohaku with a demon. A man went mad and died because of my spirit power, so when Father found a way to seal some of it in a sword, he decided it was best for the sword alone to keep my name, and for me to pretend to be just another member of the Rukon population. Katsu-nii knew, because he found me when we were small. But Father forbade us from telling Sakaki the truth, so she never knew. To her I was just Koku."

He reached up to brush a finger against his eyelids.

"I have darker eyes than Father, but they're brown like his, not blue like Mother's," he continued pensively. "Father said they're like his mother's, but I never met her, so I don't know. My hair is brown, like his, but darker again, because of Mother's black. I don't look like an Endou, nor like an Urahara. It was an easy lie to tell. Sakaki and Katsura both look like Mother, but I... I don't look like anything. I'm a muddle of genes and a muddle of spirit power — and because of that, nobody ever suspected who I was."

"So he locked you up and denied you were his son, and made you live in a kind of limbo, hiding who you were from everyone around you?" To Kohaku's surprise, there was genuine anger in Juushirou's tones, and he faltered, confused.

"Ukitake-dono?"

"Yet he used you, didn't he? He used this power of yours. He didn't teach you how to manage it properly, even though I'm sure he knew how. He wanted it there, so he could feed off it — and use you for his own ends."

"No..." Kohaku hesitated, a doubtful look on his face. "I... don't know. Honestly, I don't. I'm not sure anything can be done about it."

"And this sword? Souja mentioned a sword with your name on it. That was the sword into which Keitarou confined some of your power?"

“Yes.”

“A *zanpakutou*?”

“No... not a proper one,” Kohaku looked troubled. “He would’ve liked me to summon one, I think, but it never happened. I have a voice in my head, and I wish I didn’t, and Father thought it might be one... but it never became what he anticipated. Katsu-nii and Sakaki never had that — only me, and it didn’t act as he expected, so he wasn’t sure. In the end, I didn’t have enough strength or... or control to summon anything. It told me it’s name was Kyouka, but that it wasn’t its full name, and that a worm like me would never hear any more.”

“Kyouka?” Juushirou’s lips thinned, and Koku nodded, a hollow smile touching his lips.

“Even now, it delights in tormenting me, and I wish it were gone far far away,” he agreed. “Father made this sword to confine it, but it wasn’t enough really and he knew it wasn’t. It took him a long time, so maybe he began working on it when I was still small — I don’t know. I only know that I was sixteen before he brought it near me. He said it was more like an upgraded *asauchi* — a spiritual sponge to soak up some of the power I couldn’t control. It’s... really not nice, my power, and it hates me. Because it does, it tries to take me over and do with me as it wishes. Father wanted to stop that happening, so that I could be rational for longer periods. Maybe it was to be of use to him, or maybe it was for my sake — I don’t really know. But he still did it, and the result was the same. He sealed the hilt with Sekkiseki so that it couldn’t pour back into me if I touched it, and because my power is as it is, I was the only one who could. He couldn’t remove all of what he wanted to the blade, but I think he tried...”

“Not hard enough,” Juushirou said flatly, and Kohaku frowned.

“Ukitake-dono, why do you care?” he asked softly. “It’s nothing to do with you. Father did what he thought was right, and that’s all. It was better than how I lived before. Before he made the sword, all I remember are shadows, delusions and being locked in a cold, dark place, often on my own. Sometimes Katsu-nii was there, and we’d play, but those memories are broken and confused with bits of the past and the future, so they’re not coherent. I was... damaged. You don’t understand... I was broken from the time I was born, and then...”

“He told you you were broken?” Juushirou’s eyes widened in dismay, and Kohaku shook his head hurriedly.

“No!” he said hastily, “or well, yes, but not... in those words. But the *reidoku* damaged me. I wasn’t normal when I was born... so there was only so much he could do.”

“*Reidoku*?” It was impossible for Juushirou to look any more horrified, and Kohaku sighed, rubbing his fingers against his brow.

“I’m making this worse,” he said heavily.

“Did he make you drink *reidoku*? Is that what you’re telling me?”

“No,” Kohaku held up his hands. “He stopped making it — he said he didn’t want to have it anywhere around me, because he was worried about the consequences with my *reiryoku* as it was”

“Then...?”

“He drank it,” Kohaku said simply. “He told me that, to escape the shinigami the last time, he had no choice but to. But it didn’t clear his system like he thought it would. It stayed. It affected him, and those effects became part of him as he healed. He didn’t really understand it either, though he thought it was because... well... because his body was so broken, and there was so much mending to do. The *reidoku* just bound with his body and became a part of it. But because of that...”

“It was passed on genetically,” Juushirou murmured. “Good grief, and we thought it bad enough if ingested by one individual, but something of this level! You, your brother, your sister...”

“Katsu-nii was conceived before,” Kohaku shook his head. “It’s only Sakaki and I who were affected. I got too much *reiryoku*, and she got none at all. For that reason, Father wasn’t sure if Kyouka was really a *zanpakutou*, or just a mutation of my spirit power caused by the *reidoku*, which had allowed it to create it’s own split personality inside of me, fighting for control.”

“I see,” Juushirou chewed on his lip.

“I don’t hate my Father, Ukitake-dono. If you ask me where he is, I won’t tell you.”

“Do you *know* where he is?” Juushirou asked sharply, but Kohaku shook his head.

“No,” he admitted, “but I could find him pretty easily, if I wanted to try. I don’t think it matters, though.”

“Even if it means more people are killed?”

“They probably will be,” Kohaku said soberly. “I understand Father better than you or anyone else in Seireitei. Probably better than any of

my family, too, to be honest. I know his good points and his bad ones, and why he acts how he does. I know he won't ever give up, and that talking to him about it is pointless. It's been tried before, but you can't reach him. His heart is too scarred and damaged to be changed. He's looking for something he can't ever find, so he won't ever stop. Even though he knows he can't find it, he'll keep going regardless."

"Yet you don't believe in stopping him?" Juushirou asked. "Are the ties of kin that strong? Even though he confined you, and even though he raised you in such a horrible location, even so...?"

"It's not that," Kohaku said sadly. "I stopped Katsu-nii from killing Joumei-dono because killing him wouldn't change anything. Sakaki would just be dead, and I know Joumei-dono also has a sister, doesn't he? It would be stealing from another family, and that's wrong... it's always wrong. I don't agree with Father's way of doing a lot of things. But you're wrong about something, Juushirou-dono. I grew up in a horrible place, it's true. Supplies were meagre and life hard. But we were alive, and so were the others who lived there. Because of Father's connections, and Mother's determination, the people in Rukongai were able to eke out a living. Your people ignored them. You left them to die. Maybe *you* didn't know about them,' as Juushirou looked stricken, "but I bet somewhere, someone did. Somewhere in the past, a record was misfiled or a decision made without any proper investigation. I know people died in the Rukon before — shinigami, not just ordinary people. I've been to those places and I've felt the fragments of their spirits on the wind. Maybe that's why the shinigami chose to isolate the souls with *reiryoku*. Maybe this was their solution — I don't know. But I do know that a lot of very poor people would be dead without Father. And I can't condone that. If you go attack Father, wherever he is now, you'll bring them into it and they'll be hurt more. They don't deserve that. So I won't try and find him, nor try and stop him. I don't think Father is any more wrong than the shinigami are when it comes to sacrificing life. All life is as important as each other, isn't that what Kyouraku-dono said? But it seems as though shinigami still hold themselves above ordinary folk. And... and while I admit that you've been kind to me here, I don't know... that that makes you right and Father wrong."

"Koku..." Juushirou paused, then sighed, nodding his head.

"I suppose that's true," he admitted reluctantly. "I know Keitarou is wrong, because I've seen the things he's done to hurt people around me, as well as to me directly. But... when I first met him, he said things about the inequalities in society, and those things haven't changed completely. I... wanted to try and help open up Seireitei, by

becoming the first District Captain, and creating a safe place for District graduates to come from the Academy and serve in uniform alongside those from the Clans. But, though some Clan squads do accept District applications, now, we're still known as the District squad, with the least budget to work with. Some Clan shinigami still look down on me and on us. That's just the periphery, isn't it? It's beginning to thaw the inequality in Seireitei, but nobody's paid enough attention to Rukongai. We knew about the Plus Souls, and Fourth have worked hard to help those by establishing the Spiritless Zone. But... but it's been bothering me, too, that there were others. Ones like you, and not like you, who had spirit power but who the Gotei don't officially acknowledge. Since you came here, it's been bothering me more and more. I truly didn't know anything of it before that — but that's also my fault, for not questioning enough. Maybe that makes me as guilty as anyone else in their neglect. If they turned to Keitarou, it was because we refused to notice."

A faint smile touched Kohaku's lips, and he shook his head.

"I don't think you're to blame," he said honestly. "You've known I was from Rukongai, but it didn't affect your care of me. And now, too, even knowing who I really am, you're still talking to me as a person, not simply as an enemy. Perhaps because of that, you can understand that it's not a clear cut case of good and bad, not for me. Father has done unforgivable things, and so have shinigami. Father has done good things, and so have shinigami. I think you're the same... you just approach from different points of view. The things and people that are bad to Father are good to you, and vice versa. It's all on perspective. That's why I don't have enemies... because I don't choose to take sides like that. To me, if someone is alive, they should stay that way. It's not for me to take their life away, or to stop them from doing what they want to do with it. Even if I see it... it's not for me to interfere. I might make it worse, and even if I didn't, I don't have the right to dictate someone else's choices."

Juushirou was quiet for a moment, then he sighed.

"I understand," he replied softly. "I do, more than you think."

"Do you?" Kohaku looked doubtful, and Juushirou pressed his lips together.

"To you, I'm a privileged Seireitei-jin, aren't I?" he realised. 'I've always had food and shelter, and I've taken those things for granted. True, my background isn't rich, but even the poorest families in Seireitei probably can't imagine the things you've faced. Shunsui told me about the place he investigated, and I know how barren and dead

it was. I can't imagine living in that kind of surroundings. I suppose for you to look at me, in my shinigami uniform, with this,' he touched his *haori*, "flapping about my shoulders, its hard to believe that I understand anything you say at all."

"Maybe a little," Kohaku confessed.

"You're still talking to me about it, though," Juushirou observed, and Kohaku looked startled.

"I guess so," he realised. "I don't think I've ever talked like this to anyone, not ever. Not even Katsu-nii. I never thought I'd say stuff like this to a shinigami... but you... don't seem angry with me for saying it. You said anything I thought you ought to know. Maybe... this is that. What you ought to know."

"Maybe it is," Juushirou admitted. "The big question is, what to do from here. The trouble is that even if we're at fault, it doesn't mean we can just leave Keitarou to his own devices. You're right when you say that the lives of the people in the Rukon are important, and we must find a way to settle that properly. They can't continue to be treated so badly, and I agree that we mustn't turn our back on them a second time. I promise, I won't let that happen. But the lives... the people here in Seireitei, their lives are important too. And sacrifices like Souja, or the healers in the Spiritless Zone... they deserve justice too. It's not even just shinigami he's targeted. Before you were born, many, many people were killed by Keitarou and his associates in the pursuit of reidoku creation."

"Many people?" Kohaku pressed his lips together. "Ordinary people?"

"Ordinary Seireitei people," Juushirou nodded. "I saw evidence of it myself, when I first met your Father, and many, many people have given testimony about relatives stolen away or in some cases, sold to prevent the whole family being killed. Maybe he's stopped creating reidoku now, but that doesn't change the number of people who died because of his work. I understand Keitarou suffered a lot himself, and that, perhaps, the matter of your Grandfather might've been settled in a better way. Even Nagesu-sama has said that he wishes it had been handled differently. My adopted sister lived with Keitarou for four years, and she said that he wasn't a bad person, just one damaged by circumstance beyond all help. You've said the same about him now, and I... I don't believe he's completely evil. But, if you undergo suffering yourself, you... surely the last thing you want to do is make other people suffer? If you understand it, how could you ever want anyone else to go through the same?"

“I... I suppose that...”

“Kuchiki Ribari, Endou Souja, Amai Suzuno,” Juushirou counted the names off on his fingers. “A boy not even into his adulthood, killed simply for being a Kuchiki. An Endou shinigami killed because he wanted to protect his family and do his duty. And a young Unohana who made the mistake of healing your father’s wounds... and paid for it with her life.”

Kohaku’s eyes widened in alarm, as before his eyes the white wraith-like form of a young woman began to take shape, a healing sword held in her hands. She appeared pure and beautiful as an angel, but then blood began to trickle from her throat and her chest, saturating the entire image in a flow of crimson. She gazed at him for a moment, her soulful eyes burning right through him, then, with a ripple of light she faded into nothing.

“Amai... Suzuno?” he murmured.

“When you train to be a shinigami, you expect to fight,” Juushirou continued evenly. ‘As shinigami, though, we’re also trained not to fight. We’re taught not to kill people we ought not kill. Civilians. Children. Those who show you no hostility. Healers. The wounded. In an ideal world, these swords,’ he patted Sougyo no Kotowari’s hilt, “would only be used to purify Hollows. But, people like Keitarou, they make it necessary for us to consider killing on a different level. I don’t like that. I want a peaceful Seireitei, in which we can do our duty and protect the balance of souls between this world and the other. Many of us don’t like killing.”

“Your sword has never taken a person’s life, has it?” Kohaku whispered, reaching out towards Sougyo no Kotowari, half sure he felt the blade calling to him. Briefly, images of two fish splashed across his senses, then, as soon as they were there they were gone, making him sure he had imagined their presence completely. “I can tell... it isn’t tainted. There’s no blood on the blade.”

“Well, I do polish it,” Juushirou said matter-of-factly, “but you’re right. I’ve purified many Hollows, but that’s all. I know I could, if I needed to, but knowing that is enough... not to need to. There are a lot of shinigami who feel like that. Shunsui told you so, didn’t he? We’re not blood-thirsty killers, even if sometimes we make mistakes.”

“Maybe,” Kohaku lowered his hand with a sigh. “It’s hard to know. It’s hard to work everything out.”

“But you do believe killing is wrong,” Juushirou pointed out. “Don’t you believe people who take life ought to be brought to account for

it?"

"I don't believe in taking life," Kohaku said simply. "You might not want to kill, but Shinigami kill people who kill other people, don't they? That's the same as Joumei-dono killing Sakaki, or Sakaki killing Souja-dono. It's all wrong. No matter what the justification, a life is a life. That's what I believe. I don't like death. That's all. And just because Father has killed... or Katsu-nii... I... if they were to be killed... I..."

"What if one death could prevent the deaths of many?"

Kohaku stared at Juushirou, momentarily struck speechless as unwelcome images flooded in from all four corners of his senses. A pale, broken body lying across cobbles amid the scattered remains of black-clad others, the thick white fabric of his *haori* stained red with blood that seeped slowly between the cracks in the stone. The ends of his obi, torn loose in the struggle, fluttered helplessly in the wind. Two hazel eyes stared up at the sky, sightless and devoid of spirit, and the ragged wisps of snow white hair...

One death, preventing the deaths of many...

He closed his eyes, forcing the images back, but no sooner had he suppressed it than another, more familiar visage began to take shape in his mind's eye. This was a corpse he had seen time and time again, yet this time more vivid and real against his senses. The wispy, sandy-brown hair, and those mud-slurried eyes, unblinking and accusing. The man's lips could no longer move, yet Kohaku still heard him speak a single word, the syllables trickling down his spine like ice water.

"Betrayal."

"Stop it," he whispered, but a flurry of other images washed over him, overwhelming him before pulling sharply back and returning him with a cruel jolt to the small chamber and the concerned gaze of the Thirteenth Division Captain.

"Koku? Are you all right?"

"The death of one..." Kohaku wet his lips, gazing at Juushirou with a sudden flash of alarm. In that instant, the things which had not been clear before had been laid before him in perfect technicolour. At last, he understood.

"Ukitake Juushirou is going to be a problem for me,"

Keitarou's words came suddenly to his thoughts, and Kohaku's

heart clenched, interpreting those words anew.

I wonder if you understood what that really meant, Father.

He took a shaky breath into his lungs, struggling to regain some composure.

If I'd understood, would I have ever come here? Would I have taken the risk and brought Souja-dono back? But it's too late. I can't turn back from it. I've tried to run away from it for too long, but I can't escape it forever. I can't, can I, Kyouka? If I act, or if I don't, people die. It just... it's a matter of... of who... and... of when.

Author's Note

Happy New Year Everyone!

54. Trust

Chapter Fifty Three: Trust

“Well? How do you feel this morning?”

Keitarou sank down onto the stump of an old oak tree, casting his companion a quizzical look. It was barely past dawn, and in the Real World, a cold breeze was stirring through the uneven terrain. It sent a rustle through the long grasses, making them sound as though they were whispering, and Keitarou pulled his cloak more tightly around his body, trying to push the sensation out of his mind. It had been many years since the day Eiraki’s brother had confronted him, Wind Hawk released, but it was not a pleasant memory and, in light of the current situation, not one he wanted to dwell on too greatly. It would not do, he told himself for the umteenth time, to show weakness before allies he desperately needed.

“Not much different, to be honest,” At length, Haruya responded, flexing his arm thoughtfully, then shrugging his shoulders. “You’re sure this potion of yours will work to stabilise our powers if we release them? We’ve only your word for it, and you’ve taken your time getting around to it. Since the shinigami came, we’ve been on high alert — but nothing has happened. Yet.”

“No... not yet,” Keitarou settled himself more comfortably against the rings of the wood. “They will come — and soon, but they are still making preparations. As for my own delay — you have my apologies. A couple of things occurred outside of my calculations, and putting together a stable formula took longer as a result. I wanted to make sure it was absolutely perfect — and I’m quite sure that it will prevent the breakdown of your spirit in battle. Even sitting here I can feel your *reiryokuis* settling. You needn’t have any concerns about it, Haruya. I’ve fixed Kusakawa’s fatal flaw. When the Gotei come, you’ll be ready for them.”

“Mm,” Haruya flexed his arm again, then sighed, turning to glance in the direction of the makeshift shelter which had become the home of the three strays since their liberation from the cave. Aki was sitting not far from the entrance, studiously winding together blooms she had picked from the long grass into a chain. At her brother’s attention, she glanced up, offering him a bright smile, then returned her attention to her task, clearly unconcerned by the fact that, a few feet away, her

brother and his companion were discussing plans for war.

“What about Aki?” Haruya lowered his voice. “You’ve stabilised her abilities — does that mean...?”

“I can’t do anything about her... means of reacting to them, when they come,” Keitarou had anticipated the question and he sighed, shaking his head. “I have no idea what you three have been subjected to, and I’m not a psychotherapist. I am a scientist and I can fix what’s tangible and calculable, but Aki’s trauma...”

He spread his hands.

“The only thing I could offer to subdue it would be to put her under the direct control of my sword,” he added frankly. “Aside from the fact that would leave me with my spirit power spread across two worlds at a time I need it at its full capacity, it would serve your sister no better to have Chudokuga lurking inside of her. It would slow her reactions and make her movements reliant on my thoughts, not on her own. I have no intention of making any of you my puppets — you are my allies, I hope, and I want to respect you as such. Aki’s problems are significant, it’s true, but they also give her speed and potency in attack. Since now she shouldn’t suffer from the same overload she did when faced by Nagesu... I don’t foresee any problems.”

“I’m not talking about her as a fighter, Keitarou,” Haruya’s brows knitted together in a frown. “I’m talking about my sister’s well being. Her mental health. Her stability and her happiness. Here, like this, she’s fine. She’s content. But faced with danger... I don’t want her to suffer. I don’t want her to remember more than she already has about what went on in that place. She’s so much like a child, still. So innocent and naive, yet inside she’s broken and it upsets me when I think about what that man did to her. Stabilising our lives is all very well, and I’ll fight for your cause, since I owe you now for our very survival. But if you can’t fix Aki...”

“When this is over, I’ll see if I can find a way to help her,” Keitarou promised. “I don’t know if I can, or if there even is a way, but I hope... there will be significant changes that will give us some leeway into investigating.”

“And what of the Gotei?” Haruya was wary. “Only some of them are coming here. We might defeat them, but if we do, you can’t think you can take out all of the rest on your own.”

“I won’t be on my own,” Keitarou smiled. “I have a couple of tricks up my sleeve. You needn’t worry about the Gotei back in Seireitei. I have plans for them. As for the ones here... I’m relying on you to take

them out. I won't be able to come back here and provide support... I'll have my own fight to win, so I want you to be prepared."

He fumbled in his *obi*, pulling out a crumpled sheet of paper and holding it out to his companion, who took it, glancing at its contents. His eyes narrowed, and he gazed at Keitarou speculatively.

"You're extremely well informed, for someone the Gotei apparently hate the sight of," he said suspiciously. "How did you get so much detail? This doesn't just detail squads, it details individual names of officers — I can't imagine you acquired that through legal channels."

"No..." Keitarou shook his head. "No, I have had some help from an agent of mine within the Gotei itself. They took very careful mental notes of everything that was reported to them, and passed the information back to me so I could do with it whatever I wanted."

"An agent," Haruya rubbed his chin. "And this agent approves of you using creatures like us to further your cause?"

"In the world I want to create, there will be nobody to look at you as 'creatures,' but rather as" people ",", Keitarou said succinctly. "In this case, though, I have learned that it never serves well for anyone to know the whole of a plot, just in case it goes to pieces before it reaches completion. My agent has not been apprehended — they are not even under any suspicion, so far as I can ascertain — but it never hurts to be sure. They only know that I intend to act on Soul Society at a time which it is most vulnerable. I believe the Gotei suspect I have connections to you, thanks to Nagesu's report back to the rest of them — but the exact particulars... no."

"I see," Haruya folded the document, sliding it into his own rough sash. "And what does that mean you've kept from us, Keitarou? If you never tell your associates everything, what part of the puzzle are we missing?"

"You are a remarkably astute man," Keitarou acknowledged with a rueful nod. "You're right, of course. I can't disclose to you every inch of my plan in Seireitei, but my not doing so isn't a threat to you. I just find that the fewer people who know how I'm thinking, the better. Even my wife doesn't know..."

He faltered, then frowned, a shadow touching his expression, and Haruya cast him a quizzical look.

"Keitarou?"

"I'm sorry," Keitarou shook his head, offering him a faint smile. "For a moment I allowed personal thoughts to intervene with

professional clinicism. My daughter was killed in action a few days ago, and my wife has been preoccupied with her burial. In light of that, I have felt... it better she doesn't know the full details of what I want to attempt. I don't want to cause her more grief than is necessary."

"You aren't sure that you'll live to see the end of it, are you?" Haruya was on him in a flash, and Keitarou shrugged.

"A man is always willing to give his life for his beliefs," he said pragmatically. "I don't aim to die, Haruya, but so long as I can achieve my objectives and open up the new world I've hunted for my entire existence, I feel... I could be at peace at last. I have lived on luck for many years, but luck doesn't last forever. I'm not afraid of dying... but the ties I have in this world trouble me, so I don't talk about those concerns with other people."

"Yet you'll talk to me, a virtual stranger?"

"We're not so much strangers, not really," Keitarou shook his head. "Your lives have been in peril and you, like me, have been abused and discarded by members of the same Clan society since you were born. You understand the world I want to create, and you understand the ties of kin that cause you to hesitate and worry about things beyond the fight right in front of you. We are very similar indeed, Haruya."

"And if you were to die? Who, then, would bring in this new dawn of yours?"

"That I can't tell you," Keitarou looked regretful. "It is too dangerous... I dare not. But rest assured, I am not going into this fight intending to lose my life, nor do I wish you three to lose yours. On the contrary, I want to stand triumphant over the broken and bloody remains of Inner Seireitei and see it fall with my own eyes. I want to break down the barrier between Rukongai and Seireitei, and allow those with spiritual ability to claim what ought to be theirs, regardless of their origins. That includes you and your companions. Hollows or shinigami, it matters not to me. Even hybrids of the two. That is the world I seek to build — a meritocracy, instead of an aristocracy. A new Seireitei... with an entirely different concept of 'balance'. Even if it means a long, protracted war and sacrifices, well, I'll make them — even with my own life — providing in the end that world comes to be."

He smiled sadly.

"My father died because of the old world, and their ideas and prejudices," he added. "Ever since I learned what it meant to be

betrayed, I've longed to bury the betrayers in the dust. I thought it would be enough just to kill one person here, one person there. I finished off the last survivor of the Council that condemned him, and avenged the death of a close kinsman, but it wasn't enough to quench my thirst for revenge. An assassination here and there is no longer enough. I have to move into the heart of power and destroy it at its core. That's where you and your companions can help. The shinigami Captains who are coming here are all Council members. Those left in Seireitei are, with the exception of my brother-in-law — largely political small fry. Crushing them and their underlings should not be a challenge... providing you three can also do a job here."

"Well, we'll do our best," Haruya promised, getting to his feet and holding out his hand to Keitarou's to shake it. "We have our own scores to settle, and it sounds as though we can benefit long term from allying with you, so we will. You've kept your word so far, and I've no reason to believe in the Clans for anything. We will fight and kill on your behalf, Keitarou. You have my word on it."

"Enishi told me that you were here,"

At the sound of Shunsui's voice, Juushirou set the book he had been reading on one side, offering his friend a relieved, rueful smile. It was early the next morning, but for Juushirou it was as though the two days had blurred one into the other. Despite the events of the previous day, he had been hard pressed to sleep and the sunrise had found him making the small walk from his own division quarters to the big Seireitei archive in search of something that could put his mind at rest. Though he had sent no message to Eighth for Shunsui, fearful of the implications of widening the web of knowledge beyond his own division confines, he knew that, more than ever, he needed his friend's advice.

"I wondered what time you'd get back," he admitted now, gesturing for the other man to come and join him. "You're earlier than I thought... I've been waiting for you."

"Here?" Shunsui glanced around him at the books, a look of surprise flooding his dark brown gaze. "No offence, Juu-kun, but of all the places in Seireitei you might expect to see me, the archive isn't one of them."

"But you're here now," Juushirou pointed out, and Shunsui nodded, sinking down onto the seat opposite and making himself comfortable.

"Only because, when I dropped by Thirteenth with my brother's

best wishes and some good quality Kyouraku sake as a goodwill gift, I found you'd already gone roaming," he said with a grin. "I left the alcohol with your adjutant, by the way — apparently there are rules about sake in the archives, and in any case, I figured I could trust it in Enishi's hands."

"Probably," Juushirou nodded. "Thank Tokutarou-sama for me, would you? He's always been generous to me, and I appreciate his kind thoughts."

"Will do," Shunsui agreed, resting his chin in his hands and running his gaze over the spines of the several dusty books that surrounded his friend's position. "I have to say, though, that you must've been here a while, to accrue that many volumes."

"Mm, maybe," Juushirou cast a pensive glance across towards the window, gauging the position of the sun in the sky. "Perhaps a few hours. I'm not exactly sure. I had something I wanted to look up, but I haven't managed to find anything useful."

He frowned.

"Shunsui, what did Enishi say to you about yesterday? I assume he told you something — he wouldn't've just sent you on a goose chase over here for no reason. You came all this way to find me because you knew something was up — so he must've said something."

"I guess probably the bare bones," Shunsui acknowledged with a sigh. "He seemed pretty busy, and I didn't like to get in the way, though he didn't make me unwelcome. I understood there'd been some kind of drama at Seventh yesterday, correct? And as a result, both the Kitsune are currently in your custody."

"I wouldn't put it like that," Juushirou shook his head, glancing around him then lowering his voice. "This isn't a good place to talk about things like that, not even while it's so quiet, but Joumei left Thirteenth at the same time I did. He's gone back to Seventh to report to Hirata, now things appear to have calmed down. You're right, though. There was an incident at Seventh yesterday. There was also one at Thirteenth, and I can't say at the moment whether or not they were connected. Ultimately, they led me to having some information I'm not sure I ought to have... and more, I have no clue what to do with."

"That sounds complicated and cryptic," Shunsui observed. "Enishi didn't say anything about Thirteenth, but he did seem uncommonly preoccupied for him, now I think of it. Well? If you don't think here's a good place to discuss it, how about we relocate to somewhere

quieter?”

He raised his hand, gesturing to the upper gallery.

“One of the secure alcoves up there ought to be fine. We can lock the door and the walls are soundproofed. Nobody would hear anything, and you could bring your books.”

“All right,” Juushirou agreed, getting to his feet and resting his hand on the top of the nearest volume. “I’m not sure if they’re of any use or not, or if I’m even looking in the right sections, to be honest.”

“These are all books on *zanpakutou*,” Shunsui realised. “On raising them, controlling them... their history... spirit nature..”

He picked up one of the smaller tomes, flicking through the pages.

“This is the kind of stuff we had to wade through for our Senior exams, only much much more wordy and with far fewer pictures,” he realised. “Juu, I don’t get it. What has this to do with Seventh being attacked?”

“Nothing, probably, but come upstairs and I’ll tell you. Everything, if I can,” Juushirou grimaced, running his grimy fingers through his lank white hair, and Shunsui tut-tutted.

“See, now you’ve given yourself skunk-stripes,” he scolded, extending his free hand to brush away the dust from the thin, straight hair. “You go back to your squad like that and they’ll think you were rolling in the bookshelves, not studying their contents.”

“Shunsui,” despite his preoccupation, Juushirou allowed himself a wry smile, and his friend returned it with a grin.

“Yes, that’s better,” he decided, scooping up three or four of the books into his arms and nodding in the direction of the alcove. “Well? Shall we go? It’s a bit like old times, though I’m warning you, my essay writing days are long since over.”

“Mine too, thankfully,” Juushirou ruminated, as he obediently followed his companion across the open floor of the archive and up the steps to the landing where three or four private study alcoves had been constructed for confidential research. Only Captains were permitted access to this hallowed area and, as a result, it was completely empty, giving them the pick of the rooms. Shunsui made a bee-line for the nearest, depositing his burden down on the table and indicating for Juushirou to do the same before moving to shut the door, fastening it with a soft click.

“Right, now we’re alone, and nobody can hear anything we say,” he

remarked, leaning up against the door and folding his arms across his chest. "Tell me what happened yesterday. In bitesize fragments, if you don't mind — I want to absorb and understand everything, because if it's got you here at this time doing random research, it's obviously important."

"Where do I even begin?" Juushirou groaned, sinking down into the seat beside the window.

"Seventh," Shunsui suggested. "Enishi gave me the impression that was the beginning, so start there, and I'll try to follow."

"Mm," Juushirou pursed his lips. "I'm not sure really how it began. I just know that Hirata was away from the Division, and that Kikyue sent Tenichi to come find me, on account of the fact Joumei had appeared at Seventh and he was being pursued by some unknown enemy. You were away, so that's why she came to me."

"Joumei the Kitsune?"

"Yes."

"I thought Kikyue didn't know anything about him and his people,"

"So did Hirata, and so did I, but that seems the least of our concerns right now," Juushirou thinned his lips. "To cut a long story short, Joumei had attacked and killed the young girl who took Souja's life, and one of her allies took exception to it. A young man by the name of Katsura, who manifested what I can only call spirit-disrupting or psychic powers, and pretty much zero spiritual control."

"I see," Shunsui looked thoughtful. "And this Katsura came to kill Joumei, in a tit-for-tat type killing?"

"Something like that," Juushirou agreed. "I don't know whether it was his emotion driving his spirit power or vice versa, but he was not in the mood for negotiating. I intervened, and I would've taken him down — at the very least, taken him prisoner, but then Mitsuki decided to make an impromptu appearance."

"Wait, back up," Shunsui's brow creased in confusion. "Mitsuki? As in your Mitsuki?"

"She's a long way from being my Mitsuki, and getting further from it by the day," Juushirou tugged absently on a length of his hair, leaving fresh smudges across the surface. "Yes. It turns out that this Katsura person is the one who saved her life in Rukongai. It also transpired that he was the one who put it in danger... because he's not just an agent of Keitarou's, but his oldest son."

“Ooh,” Shunsui let out a low whistle, wincing. “Did Mitsuki know all of that when she stopped you?”

“No, thank goodness,” Juushirou responded, “else the situation would be much more complicated. Katsura escaped, and Seventh pursued him, but whether they caught him or not, I have no idea. Mitsuki admitted to me that she’d healed his injuries and let him go — but beyond that, there’s been no report. I think Seventh are still hunting him, but I can’t be certain. I didn’t pursue him myself — I stayed to help put the division back in order, and as I left, I had a summons from my own division, telling me that Tenichi had lost his mind and decided to try and kill Joumei’s sister, Izumi.”

“It was a busy day,” Shunsui pursed his lips. “I missed everything, didn’t I? So, what came of that? Is the girl all right?”

“She is, thanks to Ketsui, who intervened on her behalf and arrested Tenichi,” Juushirou replied, “but Tenichi is in a highly confused state, and though I’ve handed him over to the Onmitsukidou, it concerns me that he’d act in such an irrational way. More, Ketsui is very upset about it. Tenichi is the only family he has, and he’s idolised his brother since they were small. This has been a huge blow. There’s been no time to pander to his feelings on the subject, though. He also reported to me last night — and Izumi confirmed it — that they had been working on Sekime-taichou’s data, and they’ve found a serious loophole in the figures. They both believe that Keitarou is planning to launch a direct attack here, on Seireitei, probably during the time that some of our Divisions are in the Real World looking for him. That seems to tally in with our own worries so badly, I’m sure they’re right. The trouble is, I don’t know how to pass that information higher up the chain without putting the Kitsune in more danger. Clearly even Thirteenth isn’t as safe as I hoped it would be, and the stakes are growing ever higher.”

He sighed.

“Yesterday’s events ought to have been reported to the Council straight away, being that Keitarou’s son was involved,” he admitted, “but I’ve done nothing about it, and I doubt either Hirata or Kai have, either. Kai knows all about the Kitsune, now, but he’s the kind to treat it with the discretion it needs whilst he investigates Tenichi’s situation. I didn’t tell him that Keitarou’s son had attacked Seventh, because I didn’t really know how to bring it up, especially as it wasn’t my division. Hirata sent a message late last evening to say Kikyue had returned and to ask me to leave the settling of this particular issue in Seventh’s hands from hereon in. I don’t know if that means they killed

the young lad Katsura, or if they're still pursuing him — but with Nagesu-sama and the others so preoccupied with preparing to go to the Real World, I guess he's hoping the flurry at Seventh has slipped their notice completely. Perhaps he sees Katsura as a form of vengeance for his son... but I don't really want to be any more involved in that situation than I already am."

"I suppose they expect violent swirls of spirit power from the Seventh. It's that kind of division, especially if Hirata is angry, and nobody tends to encroach on other divisions' private business unless they're formally requested," Shunsui rolled his eyes. "Fine, I suppose if Hirata said that, there's not a lot you can do to take it further. It wasn't your barracks, so it's effectively not your jurisdiction... and Hirata is also a member of the Council. He can pull rank on you there, so I would leave it with him. If he knows about it, then, in a sense, the Council knows, even if its current leader doesn't."

"I'd honestly rather it didn't go further," Juushirou confessed. "It's so complicated and tangled. I'm not protecting Katsura, Shunsui — I saw plenty of evidence that he was dangerous and I heard him say he'd killed shinigami, which means he should be at the very least captured. But if capturing him brings others into serious danger... then..."

"You're worried about Mitsuki getting into trouble?" Shunsui asked astutely, and Juushirou shrugged.

"She made a formal confession to me of all she knew, last night," he said heavily. "I would rather not see her charged for healing him. I don't pretend I like the business, but I don't think she acted with deliberately treasonous intent. It's not just that, though. Reporting the whole encounter to someone higher up the chain of command might result in people losing their lives in a way that I can't condone."

"Like Joumei and Izumi?"

"Yes... and no."

"And somehow this all connects to why you're suddenly interested in everything about *zanpakutou* control?" Shunsui reached across to tap the cover of one of the books. "Everything you've said is serious and obviously has deeper ramifications, but I don't quite see how it tallies up with your research this morning."

"That's another problem entirely," Juushirou sounded weary. "Mitsuki didn't make her interruption alone. Kirio and Koku were with her... and it appears to have been on Koku's impulse that they intervened in the fight."

“That boy again,” Shunsui’s eyes narrowed to slits. “Well? Did you speak to him about it and get a satisfactory answer as to why?”

“It seems like he managed to make both Kirio and Mitsuki feel a sense of urgency about coming into the confrontation, just as he did with me when he saw the Kitsune being attacked, but I don’t know that he did it consciously,” Juushirou admitted. “You were right about his involvement with Keitarou, though. He intervened to let Katsura escape. True enough, his appearance diffused the situation, because it broke Katsura’s will to attack and forced him onto the backfoot instead. Moreover, he somehow used his spirit power to break Keitarou’s sword control over Joumei, and he did so of his own volition. But, when Mitsuki discovered Katsura was Keitarou’s son, she also discovered some things about Koku — things she thought I should know in full. I spoke to the boy directly after meeting with her, and mostly, he admitted they were true. Koku is the boy Kohaku, Shunsui. He’s Keitarou’s son, too.”

Shunsui’s face went through several different expressions, then he sighed, coming to rest a hand on Juushirou’s shoulders.

“I’m sorry,” he said softly. “I know you wanted to believe in the kid.”

“That’s the foolish part of it,” Juushirou rubbed his brows, oblivious of the smears he had now deposited across his pale skin. “I do believe in him. Even knowing all the things I do about him now, I still... don’t intend on giving him up to Seireitei.”

“What?” Shunsui’s expression became one of consternation. “Juu, you know what the Council decided. You know what it will mean, if you’re caught. And you said yourself, you didn’t know what or who you were protecting. In the circumstances...”

“He’s a scared boy, Shunsui,” Juushirou cut across him, shaking his head. “You can call me naive, or overprotective, or anything you like, but he’s been in my custody, and I’ve seen that that’s the case. Moreover, when Mitsuki spoke to Katsura, he admitted his own role in the murders of the shinigami in the Spiritless Zone, and didn’t try to conceal anything from her. But he said very clearly that Kohaku had committed no crime, and more, that he was not under Keitarou’s control. Mitsuki seemed to think he was in danger from Keitarou in some way, and listening to Koku himself talk, I felt... I felt very angry, to be honest. Angry that a father could use his son in such a merciless way.”

“Such as?” Shunsui sank down on the floor opposite, fixing his

friend with a quizzical look. “I know you when it comes to lost waifs and strays, Juu. You won’t listen to reason, nor see it when it jumps up in front of you.”

“I like to believe in people as much as I can, true,” Juushirou’s voice carried a faint edge, “but I’m not completely simple. Koku did bring Souja-dono back here, even at his own risk. He also broke Keitarou’s hold over Joumei, which can’t possibly be to his father’s advantage. Yes, he helped his brother escape, but if it were Tokutarou-sama, Shunsui, wouldn’t you?”

“Tokutarou-nii would’ve had to have lost all reason and sense, but I suppose I would,” Shunsui sighed, burying his head in his hands. “All right, but even if those things are true and he didn’t act simply to get your trust in those examples, there’s still Suzuki Naoto’s claims that Kohaku had the power to destroy Soul Society.”

“Kohaku’s power is the power of prophesy, and because of it, he was locked away by his father for most of his childhood,” Juushirou said evenly. “Koku told me that Keitarou helped him confine some of his power to a sword, but it seems to me that a genius like Keitarou could easily have done more if he really cared to protect or support his son. Koku mentioned a voice in his head, which Keitarou wasn’t sure was a *zanpakutou* spirit, or a mutation of the boy’s spirit power. Apparently Kohaku has extremely high *reiryoku*, on account of the *reidoku* Keitarou ingested before he was conceived. Yet even a genius scientist like Keitarou didn’t bother to experiment on ways of really bringing this power in hand. He wanted to *use* it. And he did. Katsura told Mitsuki as much, and said that he was afraid Keitarou would try to do so again. The hut you found in Rukongai is undoubtedly the place Koku was held, and the sense of death around the place is probably the overspill of Koku’s *reiatsu*, fragments of the death visions he’d been made to relive, over and over. Nobody should be made to live like that, regardless of who they are or where they were born. Right now he’s also clearly not well enough to face proper interrogation, let alone a full scale trial. Even when I was talking to him about this, he slipped away with the fairies — or the demons, one or the other — and I had to stop because I could no longer get coherent sense out of him. He’s frightened, and perhaps his mental state isn’t firmly in the here and now at present, but he hasn’t shown any hostile intent. He’s not evil. I would stake my life and my reputation on that fact.”

“You may be doing that exact thing,” Shunsui looked troubled. “Oh, don’t worry, I wouldn’t report on you, and your secret is safe with me, but it bothers me all the same. Even if everything you say is true, and

Koku is what you believe, the Council won't see it like that. Kohaku is the ultimate target in all this, aside from Keitarou himself. You heard them at the Captain's meeting. There's no interest in granting mercy. And if you are aiding and abetting him, it could be seen... in a very negative light."

"I know," Juushirou admitted. "I know, but Shunsui, I've made up my mind. Last night, I didn't sleep at all. I kept thinking over everything — the fight at Seventh, Tenichi's confession, Koku... and I came to a decision. I couldn't do anything for Tenichi. His case is in other people's hands now, and I feel badly about that. In Koku's case, though, maybe there is something I can do. Like Tenichi, Koku's born into a contentious bloodline, but he didn't choose that any more than you or I chose our families. And, if he has no blood on his hands, I won't see him killed. It's not what Seireitei is about. It's not justice."

"And all of these? For his sake?"

"I suppose I thought that, if I could find an adequate way to manage his spirit power, then I'd have a case to present before the Council," Juushirou admitted. "I don't know though. I've dealt with swords before. I know *zanpakutou*. But power like Koku's... I don't understand. There's nothing in any of these books about the kind of prophetic ability he has, nor on ways to keep it in hand."

"Juu, how attached are you to this boy?" Shunsui asked softly. "To go to those lengths, it suggests more than just wanting to shield him from justice."

"More than?" Juushirou stared at him, and Shunsui pursed his lips.

"Its more like a father might fluster over a child," he said at length. "I tease you about taking in waifs, but this time, I'm going to be serious in my warnings. Until we know everything about Keitarou and his plans, and can see clearly where Kohaku fits into them, don't let yourself be sucked in too deep. Koku is Keitarou's son, he's not yours. You might feel Keitarou abused him, and you might want to protect him — but ultimately, blood might prove thicker than water. No matter how kind you are to him, he has no reason to return that to you. You understand that, don't you? Yesterday, he let his brother — a confirmed murderer — escape your justice. Much as you might want to see him as the innocent victim, I don't think that's for sure yet. So be careful, okay? Thirteenth would cry if anything happened to you... and so would several others."

Juushirou was silent for a moment, then he nodded.

"I can't argue with you, because I know you have a point," he said

with a sigh. “I am fond of Koku — protective of Koku — in a way beyond my own understanding. It’s as though, by coming into my division grounds, he’s become a part of my division, and the protection I would extend to any of them also now includes him. I don’t know about trying to be his father, Shunsui — I’m not a father, and so that’s a step beyond my knowledge. I am a Captain, though, and more — Koku told me a lot of things yesterday. Things about the Rukon, about Keitarou and all he and Eiraki have done to protect souls there which we abandoned. Koku hasn’t promised to be my ally, nor has he sworn himself our enemy. I understand his position, because, as a District shinigami in a Clan world, I was just as ignorant when I was his age. Most of all, though, I don’t want this to carry on into the next generation. I don’t want us to condemn a boy based on his bloodline, not based on actual proof. We know his sister was guilty of Souja’s murder — Koku himself acknowledged that — and his brother’s antics yesterday, coupled with his confession to Mitsuki make him a wanted felon, probably beyond anyone’s pardon. But Koku is... not the same. He isn’t setting himself up as our enemy. If we make him our enemy... if we kill him, simply because of who his parents are, then we’re no better than the people who helped create this whole mess in the first place. Keitarou became how he is because of how the situation of his father and his family were managed, and the way he was treated as a child. Koku has had a hard background, but he’s still... I believe he’s still salvageable. I want to save him. Even if it means putting myself on the line... that’s why I am a shinigami. It ought to be why you are too — to protect those who are innocent, regardless of who they are.”

“Juu...” Shunsui faltered, then he offered a rueful smile, holding up his hands.

“Fine. I can see when I’m out-talked, and I won’t argue any more,” he conceded. “I don’t say I like it — or that I don’t have serious doubts about the amount of risk involved. But you’re my friend, and ultimately, I believe in you. If you’re breaking rules and flying in the face of Council decrees, I might as well hop on for the ride. Which means that, for now, we need to put Kohaku on one side and return to the more pressing subject — that of Keitarou, and on finding a way to persuade the powers that be that he’s likely to launch an attack here, rather than the Real World.”

“That’s not going to be easy,” Juushirou sighed, but there was relief in his hazel eyes, and he returned his friend’s rueful smile with one of his own. “Thank you, Shunsui. I hope you don’t live to regret taking my part.”

“Well, you have a track record for insane whims of principled idealism,” Shunsui said resignedly. “I should know by now that coming along for the ride with you will probably only be dangerous, chaotic and not for the fainthearted. But I’m your friend, and even if I think you’re nuts, it’s kind of a done deal.”

He pursed his lips, eying Juushirou for a moment.

“But if he betrays that belief, Juu, I won’t be standing by whilst you get into trouble,” he added. “I know your sword, but I also know your personality. Even if Sougyo is strong enough to cut the boy down, I doubt you’d be able to bring yourself to do it, not when you can talk of him so fondly. I want to believe in him, for your sake — but if it turns out badly, if I’m there behind you, I can do the things you can’t do on your behalf.”

“You don’t like killing any more than I do,” Juushirou was matter-of-fact, and Shunsui nodded.

“True,” he acknowledged, “and I’d rather not blood my blades with Aizen blood a second time. But Juu, even though you don’t need me to protect you in terms of spiritual skill, sometimes, you’re a lot softer than I am. And whilst I don’t want to hurt anyone, if they hurt you, or anyone else I consider close to me, I’m not going to stand down. I said it years ago and I’ll say it again now. I intend to protect the things that matter to me, whether they want or need it or not. That includes you, so you tell that boy of yours to mind himself and not do anything rash or stupid.”

Juushirou was silent for a moment, then he shrugged his shoulders.

“It won’t come to it, I hope,” he said softly, “but in this instance, I’m glad you have my back. You’re right in that I probably couldn’t kill him, not now I know him. And I don’t want you to, either... but none of us really know what we’re facing. I don’t think I’m wrong, but then, a lot of things have happened lately that I’ve been wrong about.”

“Like the Kotetsu boy?” Shunsui arched an eyebrow, and Juushirou nodded, burying his head in his hands.

“If it hadn’t been that Ketsui was the one who arrested him, I might still not believe it,” he admitted. “I’m angry about it, Shunsui. Whatever foolish things Tenichi’s done — and they are foolish, and reckless, and dangerous — I’m sure it’s really Keitarou who’s at the root of it. The lad isn’t himself... the man I spoke to in our cells didn’t sound like the one I recruited and trained. I’m very afraid he’s damaged beyond repair, and he seems to think so too. It upsets me to think that, if I’d noticed sooner, I might’ve been able to do something

about it. The signs were there and I didn't see them... I guess my judgement's not all it's cracked up to be sometimes."

"I don't like that face," Shunsui admonished him firmly. "It's not the face of someone who's about to save Soul Society through daring rebellion and dashing heroism. At least try and look the part. With a miserable mug like that one, you're not going to convince anyone of anything. Not even me."

"Shunsui," Despite himself, Juushirou smiled, and Shunsui grimaced in his direction.

"So back on topic, then," he said firmly. "I don't know if the Kotetsu boy is or isn't salvageable, but whilst Keitarou is roaming loose, there's probably no chance of retrieving him. He's with Kai now, so let Kai handle him. He'll get the truth, and he'll be fair. Our job is elsewhere."

"Mm," Juushirou pressed his lips together, considering. "We don't have a lot of time, either."

"Then lets start at the beginning and see what we do know," Shunsui said frankly, sitting back in his seat. "Everything, no matter how minor, that might connect to Keitarou and what he's about."

"One, the deaths in the Spiritless Zone," Juushirou reflected, holding up his index finger. "Deaths we can now almost certainly lay at the door of Aizen Sakaki and Aizen Katsura, acting on their father's instructions."

"Two, the murder of Endou Souja," Shunsui added. "Ordered by Keitarou for reasons unknown."

"No..." Juushirou became thoughtful. "Tenichi seemed to think that Keitarou didn't order Souja to be murdered."

"Juu, that implies the Kotetsu boy was wrapped up in more than just an unfortunate kidnapping," Shunsui looked alarmed, but Juushirou shook his head.

"No, he said someone told him," he replied. "He refused to say who, even when I told him it could put his life in danger if he didn't tell me. He said he'd given his word and it was someone he hadn't betrayed yet, so wasn't going to. There was a flicker of the old Tenichi when he said it, so I didn't push the issue. However..."

He offered a sad smile.

"I thought it might be Koku, so I asked him about it."

“That was a jump,” Shunsui was startled, and Juushirou shook his head.

“I saw Tenichi at Thirteenth late one night, and it bothered me a little at the time. He seemed out of sorts,” he replied. “Koku didn’t want to discuss it — but ultimately, when I told him Tenichi’s life was at stake, he did agree that they’d spoken. They met in Rukongai when Tenichi was kidnapped, as far as I can gather. Koku said he told Tenichi that nothing was his fault and he ought to stay out of it. The more I think of it, though, the more I think Tenichi is right. Souja’s death isn’t quite like Ribari-sama’s all those years back. Ribari-sama’s came out of the blue, and was staged to make the Kuchiki rip holes in each other looking for the culprit. By contrast, Souja’s death happened because he was investigating an already suspicious circumstance. Whether Koku had become involved or not, killing someone of Souja’s standing was bound to get attention.”

“So Souja was in the wrong place at the wrong time?”

“And encountered that girl, Sakaki,” Juushirou agreed. “Tenichi told me that he was attacked by her too, only she was made to hold off. It makes me think that this girl — who we will never now question, thanks to Joumei’s sense of vigilante justice — was simply out for blood and Souja’s was as good as any on offer. Souja knew Sakaki was Eiraki and Keitarou’s child. I suppose he just knew too much and had to be silenced once he did.”

“At the expense of Hirata and his poor wife,” Shunsui groaned. “All right, so Souja’s death wasn’t in the master plan, but it happened anyhow. Rukongai was, though. To incite a rebellion? Or...?”

“No idea,” Juushirou tugged absently at his hair once more, and Shunsui tut-tutted, reaching across to tap his friend on the wrist.

“You carry on like that and you’ll be bald. I’ll have Naoko-chan on my case for de-hairing her Captain,” he reproached lightly.

“Maybe if I pull hard enough, I’ll tweak something useful out of my brain,” Juushirou released his grip sheepishly, glancing at his smudged fingers. “I’m probably dusty all over now, but it’s frustrating when things don’t lock together and I really didn’t get enough sleep last night.”

“Then lets look at another angle,” Shunsui said thoughtfully. “Juu, did you ask that boy about what happened in the Real World? With Nagesu-sama and that hollow-girl?”

“No...” Juushirou admitted. “He became unwell, so I couldn’t speak

to him any more. But he couldn't have known about that. He was with us at the..."

"Koku knows a good deal more than what happens in front of his eyes. We've established that already," Shunsui pointed out grimly.

"True," Juushirou conceded. "I see your point. But I'm not sure he would tell me even if I asked. He's happy to talk about a lot of things, but he told me plainly that he won't try and find his father, or tell me where he currently is. I don't think he knows Keitarou's location — yet — but he's not keen to attempt to find out. I suspect he wouldn't want to discuss the Real World. Oh, but..."

His brows knitted together, and Shunsui eyed him keenly.

"But?"

"The other night, he had a bad dream," Juushirou's expression became grave. "Tsunemori was with him, and he went for help... it was one of those dreams, and Koku woke up in tears. He went back to sleep on his own, so nothing more came of it, but Tsunemori thought the kid said the name 'Sakanoue'. I didn't get a chance to ask him about it, not with everything that happened since, but now, talking like this..."

"Sakanoue?" Shunsui's brows knitted together. "Now that is a tantalising lead. The name of a dead Vice Captain of the Eleventh Division... on the lips of someone not even born when the man died."

"Which makes me think it's important," Juushirou agreed. "I didn't know, then, that Koku was Keitarou's son or anything else, but now I do..."

Shunsui pursed his lips.

"Nagesu-sama went to the Real World," he murmured. "He went and he saw and fought a girl who had been Hollowfied in some way, like Ryuu's father was, only... not quite the same. That incident not only inspired Nagesu-sama to believe Keitarou is in the Real World — which we know is probably a ruse — but also triggered discussion about what happened in the Rukon 25 or so years ago, in which Sakanoue was killed. Anabomi said he thought Keitarou was part of that, too. Now you say Koku had a dream about Sakanoue — or something connected to what happened then? Mareiko-chan was so sure her Captain's data was accurate and it proved Keitarou couldn't have been responsible for what happened there, but does this suggest that he was?"

"I'm not sure," Juushirou scratched his head pensively. "Anabomi

did raise it, but Sekime seemed quite certain, and Nagesu-sama too, that that data indicated something else. But she did also say that her Captain thought there was someone behind it. Nobody was ever caught, though, and the whole business faded and got overridden by other concerns.”

“Not for Minaichi,” Shunsui reflected. “I never saw him as the emotional type, but to miss a Captain’s meeting on the anniversary of his adjutant’s death, twenty five years after the event suggests he has more of a heart in that stiff body of his than I gave him credit for.”

“Well, if he saw Sakanoue like a son, it makes sense,” Juushirou sighed. “But we didn’t know Sakanoue at all, Shunsui. Even Enishi only knew him by name, from what I’ve managed to gather. Plus, he, along with Sekime’s predecessor and other members of both divisions died in the Rukon at the hands of Hollowed souls and a similar type of soul appeared in the Real World. That ought to be our focus right now, shouldn’t it?”

“There’s something uncanny about that boy of yours,” Shunsui said slowly, “but after the incident with the Kitsune, we clearly can’t rule out what he said as being unimportant. Maybe what happened in Rukongai 25 years ago was or wasn’t deliberately staged, but either way, Keitarou — having hidden in the Rukon himself for a long time — might have learned from it, and applied the scientific principles to projects of his own. That might be the connection we’re looking for. Maybe he came across some of them. Perhaps that’s his reasoning for protecting Plus souls with reiatsu. And if he’s really protecting them, he ought to still be with them. In Rukongai.”

“It would make sense,” Juushirou agreed darkly. “Koku believes that his father is the reason those people are alive, and much as I hate to admit it, I think that’s probably the truth. Which means that he’s double-bluffed us, making it look like he’s gone to the Real World when, all the time, he’s actually still right back where he started. Maybe even in the same village, now that we’ve finished examining it.”

“It’s exactly what I’d expect from him,” Shunsui mused, “safe in the knowledge that the Gotei were preoccupied with his appearance in the Real World. He set that up so beautifully, and if your young’uns have been putting together matching evidence that supports it, I’d bet that’s where he is.”

“I trust Izumi’s science,” Juushirou reflected. “Ketsui seems to have become very involved in this too. Their explanations make sense... and even if he is in Rukongai now, unless we go there and preempt

him, he's likely to come here and take advantage of our split forces. His motives in looking after the sickly might appear unselfish, but I don't trust them being that simple. Protecting a large number of weak, impoverished individuals must have some personal benefit for him and his cause. Call me paranoid or judgemental, but I can't see anything Keitarou does as being entirely altruistic. Even if he had their loyalty, though, would starving Rukon strays make a good fighting force?"

"Probably not," Shunsui considered. "Not unless he intended to fodder them. Which, incidentally, I wouldn't put past him either."

"Mm," Juushirou agreed. "Even if Koku doesn't know about it... and given his feelings about killing, I'm sure he doesn't... it seems likely Keitarou might be using members of the spirited population for a new line of experiments. Koku said he was no longer producing *reidoku*, so it would mean he'd need another idea. This seems to be it. And we need to stop "it", before" it "is right on our doorstep wreaking havoc. Starting with the trip to the Real World... and convincing the Captains in question to take a detour to the Rukon instead."

"Well, it's something to go on at least," Shunsui remarked. "It's still not deep enough, though, and that's bothering me. Maybe it all connects to the stuff that happened 25 years ago. Maybe Keitarou is or isn't involved. Maybe the data Mareiko got from her Captain — whatever his name was again, I forget — was as flawed as the data you got from them this time. Perhaps Keitarou was smashed up by Kinnya-sama, but it doesn't mean his brain was. Who knows what he might've achieved, even in a badly injured state? We can't underestimate a man like that."

"No. Especially since Koku let slip that the *reidoku* Keitarou took definitely played a part in his healing," Juushirou responded grimly. "We can't just go straight in and hand over Izumi's findings, though. Right now, Ketsui's brother is in custody and there's every chance he'll be charged with more than just attempted murder, since he concealed Keitarou's whereabouts. Whether that will reflect on Ketsui, I don't know, but it might bring to light the fact his father had close connections with Keitarou. I don't doubt Ketsui in this — he's made his feelings very plain, and, unlike Tenichi, he's more prone to sharing than shouldering burdens. But the source for the data is the *hime* of a condemned tribe and the cousin and son of Urahara exiled traitors. I can't think of a single way to explain that in words that Nagesu-sama will accept... and they won't change their plans without being able to verify the information."

“Well, no. Nagesu-sama saw Keitarou. That trumps figure manipulation and data readouts,” Shunsui sighed. “This is our weakness, though, Juu. We don’t know enough about what really happened before we graduated, and what the politics were at the time... before and after the death of Sakanoue and the others. I remember lots of talk about a ‘Real World Earthquake’ before Mitsuki-chan was seconded to the Rukon, but it seems pretty clear that was some kind of smokescreen told to us students so we wouldn’t think we were graduating into a bloodbath. We know Minaichi wanted Enishi because his Vice Captain was killed. That Vice Captain was Sakanoue, yet at the time, we knew nothing about any of this. Don’t you think that’s strange?”

“Now you mention it, it does seem overly conservative,” Juushirou rubbed his chin. “Though it might simply be as you say — a ruse to prevent us, and especially Mitsuki, from being scared about what we were going into. Whatever happened twenty five years ago, it also ended then. Maybe for that reason, it wasn’t good P.R to publicise mass shinigami slaughter outside of the Gotei — and at the time, you and I were far from being what we are now. On top of that, when we both began our careers, Seireitei wasn’t like it is now. Even keeping contact between you and I was far more sporadic than it is now we’re in the same rough area — I was more concerned with foiling Endou assassination attempts and you were busy crafting Eighth Division within your Clan heartland. Neither of us were attending Council meetings, and Captains got together far less regularly than we do now. By the time we were permanent residents in Inner Seireitei, Sekime was long since installed as the Twelfth Captain, Ikata was Vice Captain of the Eleventh, and a line had been well and truly drawn under what was an unfortunate incident in Seireitei history. In fact, now I think of it, I think Sekime said something along those lines when she told me what she remembered from the Rukon incident. She said that Seireitei didn’t like to talk about it, and she thought it was because Minaichi felt it reflected badly on the Eleventh Division, or some such thing. Probably at the time it was considered done with — and Minaichi probably thought he’d never get a Vice Captain if the fate of the last one was well publicised.”

“Yes, but since, recently, it keeps coming up, it must be relevant in some way,” Shunsui pointed out, “even though — or maybe because — nobody is actively making the connection. If Keitarou’s in Rukongai, and utilising creatures like those who caused the massacres 25 years ago — we need to find out about what happened then, and then try and work out a way of using that to apply it to now.”

“We don’t have time to do a long, detailed investigation into

historical reports, and most of the ones we'd want are probably not available," Juushirou pushed the pile of books to one side, getting to his feet. "Nor can we ask Minaichi, and Sekime already told me her recollections — which are incomplete, because she was rendered unconscious from her injury for much of what occurred. She told me she didn't know what had happened with Sakanoue, so that's no use to us."

"Then what do you propose?" Shunsui looked helpless. "From everything that's been discussed, Minaichi and Mareiko-chan are the only ranked survivors from this little jaunt. Michihashi was still a student with us, so it's before his time. Ikata might've been there, but I would've thought getting useful information from him would require smashing his head against a stone and picking it out manually from the resultant bloody mess. If we're not going to dig around in here for the evidence, where are we going to dig?"

"Nagesu-sama," Juushirou said simply, and Shunsui blinked at him, bewildered.

"Nagesu-sama?"

"He entrusted me with data, via Sekime," Juushirou nodded. "He'll expect me to speak to him, even if I have to be careful about what to say now that the Kitsune are both within our midst. I'll ask him about souls with *reiryoku* in the Rukon region, and about what happened 25 years ago. He was Clan Leader then, and the Urahara must've been involved in the cleanup, on account of losing one of their own, and their scientific background. I'll ask him, and while doing so, see if I can't spark his own curiosity about the whole business. If I can convince him that he's thought of it himself, then maybe we won't need to worry about the evidence we have. Maybe it'll resolve itself.."

"You think that it's a good idea, being so direct?" Shunsui was doubtful, and Juushirou grinned.

"They expect ignorantly idealistic approaches like that from me," he said matter-of-factly. "Nagesu-sama will assume I'm just being the District Captain again, not understanding full protocol, and he'll probably indulge me in the questions I ask. It helps, sometimes, to have a fairly positive and blemish free record, and to be someone the Clans don't consider particularly politically threatening."

"Sneaky," Shunsui looked approving, and Juushirou nodded.

"Well, we don't have a lot of time," he reflected. "I can't ask Koku about Sakanoue, because he's still sleeping, and I don't want him upset again if it can be helped. Plus, I don't want to rely on his

evidence too heavily until we know more about everything. But this is important and it can't wait. If we're going to convince Nagesu-sama to call off the trip to the Real World... anything is worth a try."

Hirata gazed down at the unconscious form of his fifth seated officer, frustrating and weariness coursing through his body. It was a little after dawn, the warm rays of the summer sun beginning to spread a glow across the roofs and passages of Inner Seireitei.

The previous day had been one of chaos and confusion, but, ultimately, Hirata had felt an overwhelming sense of relief when Kikyue and her companions had returned to the Seventh. At first sight, Hirata had thought Ohara was dead but, as Hajime had laid him grimly but carefully down on the low slung pallet of the chamber, he had realised that the man was still breathing. It had already been a distressing day, with the early summons and Ai's hysteria only served to remind him anew of Souja's death. The Thirteenth Division recruit's message had been an additional blow, and he had so far concealed it from the remainder of his division in the flurry over Ohara's immediate treatment needs, but early that morning official confirmation had come and he could no longer pretend that nothing further was amiss. Now, as he stood in the middle of his sleeping officer's chamber, he sorely wished for a target on which he could firmly and guiltlessly unleash the Wind Hawk. Tsumi no Fuuhi's anger was boiling inside of him, but he knew that he dared not let it free. Seventh Division had been shredded, from inside and from out, and there was only him, as Captain, to ensure it held together.

Or no, not quite just him.

He turned to glance at his two other companions, taking in their mixed expressions with a frown. Nakata had been dispatched to Fourth to get his arm seen to and stitched, in good spirits despite the blood still dribbling through the makeshift bandage, and Hirata had granted him the day to rest and recuperate as a reward for his bravery in protecting Kikyue's life. He would have to speak to Nakata later on the subject of Tenichi — one he was sure the older officer would take to heart given their close working relationship. Retsu had sent the man back to barracks with a note to the Captain about the potential severity of his injury and the worn out state of his body following the assault on Seventh, so for the time being, Hirata had chosen to let him rest in ignorance of his friend's fate. Consequently it was only Kikyue and Hajime of his higher seated officers who remained at his side. Looking at them, Hirata felt his heart twitch a second time.

Vice Captain, murdered. Fifth seat, in a state of deep unconsciousness.

Seventh seat with a wounded sword arm that'll take some time to heal. Eighth seat currently under arrest after attacking another division's recruit. Sixth and Ninth, on duty at the main estate since Souja's murder, acting as spiritual protection for my wife and youngest child. What Juushirou said about Masaoka is reassuring, but barely a drop in the ocean in contrast to our current position.

"Seventh Division is in a weak position, Taichou, isn't it?" It was Hajime who voiced the Captain's own thoughts, and Hirata let out a heavy sigh.

"There's no pretending otherwise," he said wearily. "I'm sorry I left you yesterday, both of you. It was a bad choice and it won't happen again. I've already dispatched a messenger to the main estate to that effect. The situation has become more serious, now that both Ohara and Tenichi are out of commission."

"Kotetsu too?" Hajime started, staring at the Captain in dismay, and Kikyue frowned.

"Where is Tenichi, anyway?" she wondered. "I sent him to the Thirteenth, and that was the last any of us saw of him. Ohara was going to discipline him for it..."

Her gaze strayed to the unconscious officer, and her lips thinned.

"Now you say he's 'out of commission'. Did something happen, while we were away?"

"I have received a formal notice this morning from the Onmitsukidou, co-signed by the Thirteenth Division's Captain and Vice Captain, advising me of the arrest of our Eighth Seated Officer with immediate effect," Hirata extracted a rolled up scroll from the folds of his *hakamashita*, holding it out to his daughter, who took it, eyes big with disbelief.

"Arrested? Somewhere other than here? For what, exactly? Tousama, what did he do?"

"Apparently he tried to end the life of Thirteenth Division's newest recruit, and was apprehended on site," Hirata said frankly. "The truth and the circumstances of it, I couldn't tell you. I've sent a message to Second telling them that Seventh will cooperate with their investigation entirely from this point on. I don't know what's going through Tenichi's head, but it's clear that something is... and maybe, has been for some time."

"The Onmitsukidou, huh," Hajime's eyes became slits. "Kai-dono was after Kotetsu before, sir. You remember, I'm sure — broke the

man down into tears, and so on. If this is connected to that...”

“From the little I know, it was the Thirteenth, not the Onmitsukidou, who placed Tenichi under arrest, and who are the witnesses in this case — including Tenichi’s brother,” Hirata shrugged his shoulders. “I know what you’re thinking, but there’s nothing I can do. More, I’m too tired to even think about it at the present time. There are too many questions, and not enough answers. I will wait for the official conclusions, and, if there is one, a formal judgement. Until that time we can consider our Eighth Seat suspended pending further enquiries.”

“What will you do, then?” Kikyue handed the notice to Hajime, eying her father with a quizzical expression. “If Tenichi is in custody, Nakata injured and Ohara is... is... like this... I can’t run any patrols. I don’t have any senior officers, and Onii... I mean, Hajime-dono’s patrols are already depleted, with ranked officers away at the main house. All we have are the recruits and the lower seats.”

“I have Masaoka,” Hajime ruminated, “but you’re right, *hime*. It’s not enough. Without Ohara and Kotetsu... we have a problem.”

“Patrols are the last of my concerns right now,” Hirata admitted. “Kikyue, you were the one who cast the *Geki* over Ohara, correct? I know that he attacked you, and that you believed him under the control of some outside force — did he say anything before you laid him out?”

“No,” Kikyue’s eyes softened. “He bit his lips shut to prevent himself releasing his sword. I’ve never seen him as anything but an arrogant idiot before, Otousama, but yesterday I thought I saw him as an Endou for the first time. He wasn’t afraid of dying, just afraid of spilling my blood.”

“There’s a reason he’s Seventh’s Fifth seat, Kikyue,” Hirata pointed out acidly. “I don’t rank officers based on their family positions, or how much money or influence a kinsman provides. I would expect no less of him — of him or any of my officers, when faced with the threat of harming a superior officer.”

He rubbed his temples.

“It seems as though Keitarou is not content with killing my eldest child and assaulting my division, he also has the intention of killing my daughter, and isn’t too choosy about his weaponry,” he said blackly. “Ohara was clearly struck by Keitarou’s manipulative sword, though how and when I wouldn’t like to guess.”

“We didn’t notice anything amiss, and I’m not sure even he did, not at first,” Kikyue bit her lip. “Hajime-dono may have seen more... but the first I knew of it was when he came down after me. Hajime-dono pushed me out of the way, and Nakata took his blade — twice, I think — but it all happened so suddenly. Ohara looked terrified, and we were all thrown off balance.”

“I chased down the intruder who infiltrated our division,” Hajime added. “Kikyue-hime sent me after him, so I went. I’m sorry if you think my actions lax in any way, Taichou, but an order was an order, and I thought...”

“Kikyue has proven she can protect herself,” Hirata dismissed it with a flick of his hand, “and as you said, it was an order. Did you manage to kill him?”

“I certainly hit him,” Hajime’s eyes narrowed thoughtfully. “Normally, I wouldn’t have expected anyone to survive my shikai at such close range, and he really didn’t see me coming till it was too late to dodge. But knowing that Keitarou was in the vicinity... may have altered that situation. I didn’t have a chance to decapitate him as I would have liked, so I’m afraid I can’t be certain, sir.”

“I called him back, on account of Ohara’s condition,” Kikyue added. “I didn’t want any other members of the Seventh to die, Father. I’m sick of our division being treated like Keitarou’s playground, and even more now I know that Tenichi’s locked up. For all we know, he’s like Ohara, too — he was abducted by Keitarou, wasn’t he? Maybe he’s been possessed, too, to make our situation more chaotic. It’s like a vendetta against the Endou, backed up by Eiraki-basama and her bastard children, and I’m sick of it.”

“What you say about Kotetsu is true,” Hajime acknowledged. “That possibility must exist.”

“Keitarou’s vendettas never stop with one person, or one Clan, or one line of attack,” Hirata said grimly. “In terms of Ohara’s life, Kikyue, I understand your feelings, but it may have been a greater mercy for you to have struck him dead, rather than using Kaisoushu to render him unconscious. I don’t know any way of breaking the spell Keitarou cast. If it is indeed his sword at work here, then there is no way we can release the Bakudou — it would be much too dangerous.”

“I know,” Kikyue’s eyes darkened. “I know, Otousama, but I’m fed up with it. I can’t even explain, but out there in the forest, I was so determined. Keitarou isn’t taking any more members of Seventh Division. He just isn’t! Not Ohara, not me, not Nakata, not even

Tenichi, if that was his doing too — and I'm sure in some way or another it must be. Oniisama's death is the last. For his sake as well as for the Division's, I'll find a way to break Keitarou's sword technique. There must be a way, other than death. I'm not going to let Keitarou make all of us his puppets, acting in the way he wants us to. I'm sorry, Otousama, but I'm just not."

"*Hime*," Hajime cast her a pensive look, then he nodded his head. "Taichou, I agree with Kikyue-hime," he said frankly. "Enough is enough and this is Endou pride on the line. Ohara is a good officer. Yes, he can throw his weight about, but his skills are beyond doubt and he's always worked very diligently in Kikyue-hime's shadow. Kotetsu too — whatever the truth behind his case, I can't believe him to be the kind of officer who would randomly go on a killing spree in another division. This all has the hand of that man behind it, and we still have Fukutaichou's death to firmly avenge. There's no better way to do that as Endou than to track down and kill the man himself."

Hirata remained silent for a while, digesting this. Then he shook his head.

"Seventh Division are not going to the Real World," he said simply. "Those decisions are made, and I have no intention of trying to change them. If Keitarou is there, it will be the jobs of other squads to track him down."

"But Taichou!" Kikyue

ue's eyes opened wide in dismay, and Hirata offered her a grim smile.

"More than anyone in this Gotei, I want to see Keitarou dead," he said darkly. "I remember him, lying there helpless and broken all those years ago and every single day since your brother died I wish that I had had the strength of mind to ignore your aunt's presence and just blast the both of them through with Tsumi no Fuuhi's blade. There's no concealing how much I want him dead... or how dearly I would like Tsumi no Fuuhi to finally be able to complete what it could not do then. But it is not just about me, not any more."

He rested his hands on Kikyue's shoulders.

"Your mother is already in great distress thanks to the loss of your brother," he continued. "I won't let her lose you too, even if you feel I'm acting irresponsibly or against the interests of the Clan. If Keitarou was out there in the forest, it's not impossible that he aimed his sword at you, and got Ohara by mistake. Moreover, I have encountered the effects of this weapon before. It's been recorded in prior accounts that

killing Keitarou wouldn't necessarily release the control he has over a person's soul. If that person has been instructed to kill, then that instruction remains. In Ohara's case, killing Keitarou can do no good."

"Then what do we do?" Kikyue demanded, frustration in her eyes. "I promised Ojisama that I would be of use to you, Father, and support you as much as I could. I'm a *hime*, and I'm not going to be your heir. I'm not going to make some advantageous, fancy marriage, either... that's not the kind of person I am. I've fought all my life to be a shinigami like you and Souja-nii — and now, more than ever, that's what I believe in. Ohara is my subordinate, my patrol second. I want to save his life. If killing Keitarou won't do it, what will?"

"At the moment, I don't know." Hirata admitted.

"I heard a story that Keitarou used his sword, once, to manipulate Ukitake-taichou," Hajime recalled, and Hirata nodded.

"He did," he agreed.

"Then how did Juushirou-dono survive, if that's the case? Did Keitarou withdraw his sword of his own free will?" Kikyue demanded. "Do we have to find this man and make him pull back his blade?"

"Juushirou's heart was stopped. He effectively died," Hirata shook his head. "At the time, he was fortunate that a young healer was at his side, and able to repair the damage quickly enough that his life was not lost. However, it's come to my attention that Keitarou's spirit power is not the same as it was back then. I don't know that, even if the same technique was attempted, it would have any success. Keitarou's victims seem far more able to think and act for themselves — we wouldn't know until it was too late if such a tactic had failed. And, ultimately, Ohara's life might still be lost."

He pursed his lips.

"That reminds me. Kikyue, Juushirou said you sent to Thirteenth for his help on account of Joumei's presence. That surprised me."

"Joumei?" Hajime's expression became one of confusion, and Kikyue reddened, nodding her head.

"Was I wrong, sir?" she asked softly. "I thought... with you not there..."

"No, your decision was sound," Hirata shook his head. "I'm more concerned with how you came to know anything about that man and his family at all."

"Oniisama mentioned him, before he died," Kikyue pointed out. "I

asked you then, but you... you didn't... explain anything to me. Still, I... I remembered."

She pursed her lips.

"Ohara confronted him, in the front courtyard. When I heard him give his name as Joumei, I remembered what Oniisama said. I knew this was the same person. He was a friend of Oniisama's, wasn't he? He told me he was, and I... I believed him."

Hirata was silent for a moment, then he sighed, rubbing his brow as though by doing so he could smooth out the lines of tension that had become a permanent fixture there over the past few weeks. Slowly he nodded.

"Yes," he said at length. "A friend he knew from childhood. I'm sorry, Kikyue-chan. I didn't tell you, because it wasn't something that was shared between anyone but the Clan leader and his heir... but your presence of mind probably saved lives. Your putting together fragments of evidence and believing in Souja's last words so strongly... is part of the reason Seventh was able to withstand the invader's hostile attack."

"Sir, who is Joumei?" Hajime asked quietly. "If it's beyond my rank to know, then I apologise for the insolence, but... there was a young lad with silver hair in the yard when Nakata and I joined the fray, and though I didn't get a chance to approach him... Kikyue-hime seemed to be protecting him in some way."

Hirata moved to Ohara's bedside, watching the slow, stifled rise and fall of the man's chest.

"I will tell you. Both of you," he said at length, "I need you to realise, however, that my doing so may well put his life — and the lives of others — in your hands. It may even create a political incident, especially with so much uncertainty. I trust not a war... at least, not with Keitarou still very much on the loose — but I need your word that you won't speak of this outside this room — to each other, to me, or to anyone else."

"Yes, sir," Kikyue was quick to respond, and Hajime bowed his head in acceptance of the instruction. Hirata sighed.

"Joumei and his people are effective outlaws of Urahara descent, from a people known as the 'Kitsune'," he said softly, noting the mix of expressions that crossed his companion's faces. "They themselves have committed no crime, but their forefathers sinned against the Urahara's main house during the infamous *reidoku* incident and they

were punished accordingly. Neither Council nor Clan offered them sanctuary. As many did, they fled to Seventh and went into hiding — but they were hated even by exiles such as Keitarou, and remain in danger of their lives even generations on. Some of them lived till now in an old Sekkiseki mine, but in the past few weeks this was attacked by Keitarou and its remaining residents killed. Joumei was the only survivor of the raid — and his sister is currently in the protection of Juushirou at Thirteenth.”

“Killed? By Keitarou?” Hajime looked startled. “But you said the *reidoku* incident, sir, and surely that means they should be on the same side.”

“It’s not so simple as that,” Hirata replied. “I don’t know all the particulars, but it seems Joumei’s ancestors tried to protect themselves by selling Keitsune-dono out. Their actions were universally condemned and their status became untenable. Their flight occurred before Keitsune-dono was executed — and, judging by Keitarou’s actions, he still holds a grudge more than a century on. Perhaps more of one than he holds against the main line of the Urahara Clan.”

“If Keitarou hates him, I’m prepared to think of Joumei as an ally,” Kikyue said darkly. “More, though, Oniisama thought of him that way, so I will too. Our family’s steeped in past sin as well. Present too, thanks to Eiraki-basama. Whatever went on with the Urahara, it means nothing to me. If Joumei was Niisama’s friend and ally, and is yours, Tousama, he’s mine and I’m glad I acted to protect him. Besides, it’s his ancestors who did those things. Not him. Our ancestors did bad things too — I’ve heard Grandfather talk of Great Grandfather and Seimaru-dono and how they almost bankrupted our District by slaughtering the populace. We’re really no different, so we ought to work together.”

“Father thought the same,” Hirata agreed with a sigh. “He stumbled upon them during investigations into the Sekkiseki mines and rebuilding the stone trade in District Seven, not long after he became Head of the Clan. He and their then leader, Joumei’s father, reached an accord whereby they would act as eyes and ears for the Endou, and he would ensure their continued protection. That promise was passed on to me when I was sworn in as leader, and it was shared with Souja, too, as my prospective heir. Juushirou knows of it from his time living in Seventh — he too knew Joumei’s father, who was a very intelligent man and not uninclined to forge new alliances, providing they could be trusted. It seems that, before Father encountered them, they had received protection from an ally of Keitarou’s — so he was open to the idea that not everyone, even of Urahara blood, was necessarily his

enemy.”

“One of Keitarou’s own turned traitor against him, huh?” Hajime’s features twitched into a malicious smile. “There’s a certain dark pleasure in that idea, sir.”

“Perhaps,” Hirata acknowledged. “Though I imagine not even Keitarou knew of it. The man died at the hands of my Grandfather — Kikyue’s Great Grandfather, Shouichi-dono, and he died protecting Keitarou’s life. I don’t know his reasons for shielding the Kitsune — Joumei’s father only told me that he had decided to, because he felt the ties of kin and thought, deep down, they were the same. Though this individual, Daisuke I think his name was, had deep grudges against the Urahara and the Endou for the purge of his people, it seems he didn’t see sins transcending generations where the Kitsune were concerned. Perhaps there was a tighter blood bond between that line of the family and the Kitsune’s northern descent. I don’t understand the intricacies of Urahara logic. But the man who protected them is also the father of Kotetsu Tenichi and Ketsui. For that reason, even knowing the history of the boys and the way in which their father died, I chose to take Tenichi into Seventh and make him a part of our Division.”

He looked pained.

“Maybe I was wrong,” he murmured. “The recruit Tenichi attacked was Joumei’s sister, Izumi. Maybe Tenichi’s politics are different from his father’s, or maybe Keitarou’s meddling made the whole thing unclear. Perhaps he knows nothing of his father’s actions... I can’t be sure. The fact remains, though, that everything is tied in together. That’s why I need both of you to understand the delicacy of the Kitsune’s situation... and of our own as a result.”

“War with the Urahara now would not be a good move,” Hajime said blackly, and Hirata shook his head.

“I believe Nagesu-sama a reasonable man,” he agreed wearily, “but you never know what might trigger violence, as we’ve seen recent proof.”

“I brought danger into your division, Hirata-sama, for which I am deeply sorry.”

Before either Hajime or Kikyue could comment, a fresh voice joined the conversation, and Hirata turned, seeing the Kitsune leader standing outside the window, a look of solemnity on his young features. He was dressed in fresh, clean robes, the wounds he had suffered hidden from view, and despite the deference in his stance and

tone, Hirata recognised something of the family's noble blood in his appearance. At the sudden attention, he bowed his head low, as if to emphasise his apology, and Kikyue hurried forward, putting herself between the newcomer and the still, silent form of Ohara.

"If you're still poisoned, Joumei, you can't come in here," she said warily, and Joumei started, glancing at her in surprise. Then, as if understanding her meaning, he offered her a faint, rueful smile. He shook his head.

"Keitarou's poison was nullified in the aftermath of yesterday's events," he said softly. "I am once more my own man, Kikyue-hime — and, as ever, the humble servant of the Endou Clan."

"Broken?" Hirata stared at the young man in disbelief. "By what method? How can you be sure? Such a thing surely isn't possible, not by anyone in Seireitei!"

"I didn't think so, but I thought wrong," Joumei nimbly mounted the windowsill, dropping into the room with barely a sound, though Hirata saw him wince and knew that putting pressure on his injured upper body was still painful. "Hirata-sama, please forgive me. I have come to report to you my actions, and accept the consequences of them, whatever they may be. I realise that the damage done to Seventh yesterday was entirely of my doing, and as such, will not resist if you choose to relieve me of my life as punishment."

"Stand up straight, Joumei, and look at me," Hirata commanded, and the Kitsune did so, his light blue eyes glittering with silver resolve.

"Juushirou told me that you went and killed the girl who took my son's life. Correct?"

"Yes, sir," Joumei spoke softly, bowing his head once more. "As a result, I brought danger to the members of the Seventh in the worst possible way. Yesterday, I confessed my crime to the Captain of the Thirteenth and his comrade from the Secret Operatives, expecting to be taken into custody, but it appears that a twist in Council Law justifies my recklessness in a way I had not foreseen. I sought to avenge Souja-dono's death, but I had not considered all the ramifications of my act."

His gaze flitted to Ohara, his expression clouding.

"Your man is probably hurt because of me," he added sadly. "I must take responsibility for what I have done, and accept whatever you decide my fate to be."

“Ohara was attacked by Keitarou,” Kikyue hurried forward before her father could speak, grasping Joumei by the arm and giving it a little tug. “From how Father spoke, the poison that afflicted you was the same as that Keitarou used on him. The power to control... to make him a puppet. Am I right? Is that what you meant, when you told me you were poisoned and may become violent?”

“Yes, *hime*,” Joumei was startled, gently detaching his bandaged hand from her hold.

“But this is now cured?”

“Yes, but...”

“Then tell me how. How did you cure it?” Kikyue demanded. “If there is a way to release such a spell, Joumei, tell us now, and quickly.”

Joumei’s gaze rested on Ohara once more, and slowly he shook his head.

“I don’t truly understand how the spell cast over me was broken,” he said at length, a note of regret in his tones. “I simply know that it was. I’m sorry, *hime*. I don’t know how to answer your question.”

“Maybe Keitarou released it himself,” Hajime suggested gruffly. “We know he was in the area. Maybe he released you in order to snare Ohara more effectively.”

He pursed his lips, casting Hirata a glance.

“Taichou, what are your orders?” he asked softly. “How will Seventh operate from hereon in, with our ranks in the disarray we currently find them?”

“In the way that the Endou should,” Hirata said simply. “We are fighters, and we will simply have to do our best to fight.”

He turned to the Kitsune.

“Joumei, you said you came here to accept my judgement, did you not?”

“Yes, sir,” a flicker of consternation entered the young man’s eyes, gone almost immediately but not before Hirata had noticed. He nodded his head.

“Then your orders are as follows,” he replied frankly. “You say you put Seventh Division in danger? Then in return, you shall work from now on to protect it. In the absence of ranked officers, I will expect you to do your part if the enemy once more attacks our boundaries.”

Joumei was startled, then he smiled, relief glittering in his silvery eyes.

“Yes, sir,” he murmured. “I am at your service and the service of the Seventh Division. I am not an Endou, but I have reason enough to hate the enemy, and more reason still to show you and your family my loyalty. Izumi and I have already decided that we have nobody else to trust in now but shinigami. I do not carry a sword, but I have *reiryoku* and, despite where I grew up, I am able to use it. Since Keitarou’s control is broken, I return my loyalty once more to you and pledge my life to your cause. Please, take me and deploy me in whatever way you see fit.”

Author’s Note:

I think I owe Hirata cookies. Aside from being so utterly obnoxious to his division throughout this story, not to mention his family, I also realised I’d failed to give him a Sixth or Ninth seated officer. Since I didn’t want to add new characters, they’re away doing duty at the main house, protecting the family there from the threat of Hollows. Sorry, Hirata. Cookies. ;)

55. Rukon Skeletons

Chapter Fifty Four: Rukon Skeletons

“People with spirit power in Rukongai?”

Nagesu paused in his perusal of the cluttered shelf of books, casting his visitor a startled glance at the suddenness of the question. “Why this all of a sudden, Ukitake? Don’t you think we’re all busy enough, with preparations to go to the Real World? Why do you suddenly want to search Rukongai for people in an area we already know is abandoned... I don’t understand?”

“Abandoned now, yes, but Shunsui’s pretty sure that it hasn’t always been, and I agree with him,” Juushirou bowed his head, an apologetic look in his hazel eyes. “I’m sorry to barge in on you like this, Nagesu-sama, but when I thought about it, you were the only person I could come to. You’re currently Head of the Council, and I thought that, given your own trip to the Rukon, you might...”

He faltered, searching for the right words, and Nagesu frowned, adjusting his spectacles absently on his nose.

“I might agree with you and sanction an investigation?” he asked softly. “I thought your priority was Keitarou. Is that not the case?”

“It is,” Juushirou nodded his head. “I believe he must be stopped — as much as you or anyone else in the Gotei. I’m being forward and cheeky and I know I am, overstepping the bounds of my rank and I’m sorry. But there isn’t a lot of time, and... I really think we ought to be... to be looking for Keitarou in Rukongai.”

“I see,” Nagesu leaned his slender frame against the thick wall of books, folding his arms thoughtfully across his chest with a sigh. “The discussion at the Captain’s meeting has stuck with you, has it? Anabomi’s unguarded comments about Keitarou’s guilt in an incident before you were even a Captain? I realise your acquaintance with Keitarou is a deep one, and a personal one on some levels, so your determination is logical, but you have to know that there were no living souls in the area Shunsui-dono and I patrolled. Your friend will have told you that himself, I trust — or if not him, the members of your Division who travelled there with us?”

“I’ve spoken to all of them, sir,” Juushirou said earnestly. “They all agreed that there were no residents... now. But my officers searched

the village, and, with all respect, they felt that it had been lived in until quite recently.”

“Your evidence for this?” Nagesu arched an eyebrow, and Juushirou looked rueful.

“Kira almost put his foot in a cooking pot,” he admitted, “and Atsudane reported to me that, aside from this, there were scraps of food and bits and pieces that suggested whoever had been there had cleared the premises in a hurry.”

“You don’t think that this was Keitarou, and any who surround him? His son, perhaps, or daughter?”

“It’s possible,” Juushirou agreed slowly, and Nagesu smiled.

“Keitarou’s base is not in the Rukon. It’s in the Real World,” he said gently. “Whatever games he’s played between locations, Ukitake, the Onmitsukidou and our intrusion into Rukongai will have told my cousin that it’s not safe to be lurking anywhere so close to shinigami headquarters. We are closing in on him, and we will not let him get away this time. As much as it pains me to be arresting a man of my own family... that is what I will do, and that is why we are going to the Real World.”

“And if he isn’t there?” Juushirou hazarded. Nagesu frowned, brows knitting together in consternation.

“This is unlike you,” he observed. “I’ve known you to push ideas and issues before, but there’s something different about you today, Ukitake. You don’t usually come before me in private to discuss such things — if you had concerns, why not raise them at the Captain’s meeting so we could all discuss them? Even if I did agree with you — which at present I am not sure I do — I cannot overturn a voted decision without calling another meeting. It was decided by the Gotei and I believe it is sound.”

Juushirou’s lips thinned, and for a moment he didn’t speak. Then, slowly, he shook his head.

“I’m sorry, Nagesu-sama, but I would like to know what happened in the Rukon, twenty five years ago,” he said quietly. Nagesu’s eyes widened in surprise.

“In the... you mean, Shougo-dono and Sakanoue-kun? Then you really do think Keitarou was...”

“I don’t,” Juushirou interrupted, trying to pretend he hadn’t seen how increasingly incredulous his companion was becoming. “I know a

little already about the deaths of Shougo-dono and Sakanoue — Sekime-taichou already told me about it, when she came to deliver something to Thirteenth. I don't want to dig up bad memories, and I realise that you weren't there yourself, but I didn't like to ask Sekime-taichou to rehash those recollections over again."

"No, indeed," Nagesu looked troubled. "I did examine both bodies from a scientific standpoint on their return. They both sustained deep wounds of a similar nature to some of the other corpses retrieved from the scene."

"Wounds inflicted by the Hollow creatures?" Juushirou asked, and Nagesu shrugged.

"Some of them appeared to be inflicted by swords," he admitted, and Juushirou's eyes widened in surprise at this unexpected tidbit.

"Swords? But..."

"I see what you're thinking," Nagesu smiled what could only be described as an indulgent smile, but Juushirou felt he was covering the troubled emotions of a memory best left buried. "We had witness testimony from several of the surviving lesser officers — and, in fact, Mareiko's own account, if I recall correctly — that some of the souls were not completely turned. We also recovered several such implements when clearing the scene, many of which were bloody. Our conclusion was that some of these mutations possessed dead blades before they came into contact with whatever damaged them — presumably relics from their real lives. There was a lot of meshed reiatsu at the scene, so it was impossible to draw a particular spiritual imprint from any of the bodies we brought back. Dead blades possess no discerning aura, so our findings made sense. The wounds and the physical evidence were all consistent with the witness statements. It was a tragic happening, but the investigation was straightforward and quickly closed."

"Dead blades again," Juushirou bit his lip, and Nagesu eyed him keenly.

"You're trying to make a connection with the deaths of Souja-dono and the people in the Spiritless Zone?" he asked softly. "Ukitake, the girl who slew Seventh's Vice Captain was a teenage girl. She could not have been present twenty five years ago. I grant that she showed particular hostility and ruthlessness, but we have no evidence of any spiritual ability on her part, let alone Hollow characteristics. You're reaching to pull threads together that just can't be tied in a knot. I believe Shougo-dono's hypothesis is sound. The events twenty-five

years ago occurred through unexplained reasons, but there is no evidence to prove it was done on purpose and is far more likely Keitarou took the science exhibited then and deployed it in the creating of the poor soul I fought in the Real World.”

“Shunsui and I had reached a similar conclusion in that respect, sir,” Juushirou admitted. “He’s an opportunist, and it’s entirely his style.”

“Well, then,” Nagesu tilted his head on one side. “If you feel that way, why the interest in the past?”

“I realised that I don’t know enough about it,” Juushirou said honestly. “I think it’s important. Very important. What happened then... and not only that, in this whole business now. Even if it’s true that Shougo-dono and Sakanoue died in those circumstances, something must’ve occurred afterwards to bring that knowledge into Keitarou’s hands. It bothers me a lot that we’re missing something obvious, somewhere, so I thought, if I asked you... you’d be able to fill me in on the missing gaps. Eleventh and Twelfth didn’t run patrols to Rukongai after the incident, correct? They withdrew... yes?”

“Twelfth did,” Nagesu rubbed his chin pensively. “I don’t really understand the importance of asking all of this, since it was so long ago and if you believe their deaths had no link to Keitarou, a random stab in the dark at a time when we’re all so busy with other things. Keitarou picks up information — you said it yourself. Focusing on the source of that information is, in this case, less relevant than finding the current offender. But you’re not usually an impertinent Captain, nor given to flights of idiocy, so I’ll try and answer. Doubtless you’ll come to your own conclusions in time, and the sooner you do that, the better for all. I’d like to know that Seireitei will run smoothly in the absence of several squads.”

“I’d like that too,” Juushirou murmured, more than half under his breath, then, “Twelfth did? Eleventh didn’t?”

“To be honest, for a year or two after the incident, nobody really did anything at all,” Nagesu admitted. “Not from our side, anyway. Mareiko was very much in shock — she was always very fond of Shougo-dono, and they worked closely together on many things. I believe Eleventh went there once or twice. Well, Minaichi is that kind of officer — not one to let feelings interfere with duty, though I doubt he took much pleasure. Other Divisions did their bit too. Fourth established a permanent base there, with a small collection of officers, in order to help the residents recover from the shock of such violent warfare. First did a good deal to help, too, and Third made a few

sorties — now I think on it, I believe Shiketsu might have led a patrol or two there. Anabomi and some of Ninth went there once during the early stages of the clean up operation, I think, though you'd have to check that with him. He and Shougo-dono were friends, and trained together often, so he felt it was important he did his bit in the aftermath and his help was gratefully received. Whatever horrors my kinsman faced, though, none of these latter patrols ever encountered them. There were a few stragglers who could be called hostile, but nothing concerted, and it died out. Then the Spiritless Zone was conceived, and all our effort went into working on that. Eleventh and Twelfth were no longer called on to operate in Rukongai. As you know, everything was handed over in entirety to the Fourth to run, once the establishment was complete. Third, Ninth and any other divisions who had been involved in the initial investigations weren't so actively involved in the Rukon planning for that."

"The Spiritless Zone," Juushirou chewed thoughtfully on his lip. "So all the souls in Rukongai were moved to this area, where the Fourth intended to work?"

"They were the best locations, and far from the killing grounds, so yes, that was the plan," Nagesu agreed. "After the incident with Shougo-dono, we were particularly concerned about spiritual pollution, which is why we set up the barriers and regulations in the way we did. Well, your friend Edogawa can probably tell you more from the healers' side. Have you asked her about all of these things?"

"I don't really want to ask Mitsuki too much about Rukongai," Juushirou admitted, and Nagesu's expression became clouded.

"No, I suppose not," he acknowledged. "I'm sorry. That must have seemed insensitive — she suffered a good deal there and, like Mareiko, would probably rather forget."

"Sekime-taichou is lucky," Juushirou observed. "Her Clan Leader is understanding and supports her despite her own hesitations."

"Ah, well, Mareiko may not be so much of a fighter now," Nagesu looked rueful, 'but she is still a very smart woman. Smarter than me, I'm sure. You might not see it, not in every day life,' as Juushirou looked quizzical, "but it's often said that those who are scattered over the ordinary are shrewd when it comes to the extraordinary. And, well, we both lost Shougo-dono. She has filled his scientific shoes more than adequately — dare I say, even overreached him on occasion — but we both miss him and regret that we couldn't prevent what happened."

“Of course,” Juushirou nodded gravely. “I didn’t ever meet Shougo-dono, but I imagine the death of a Captain would’ve come as a great shock... for him to have been a kinsman and close long-term colleague, even worse.”

“Well, we are soldiers, and war claims the best and the least of us,” Nagesu said wearily, “but this is moving some distance from your original question. You were talking about people in Rukongai — and have darted all around the corners while making your point.”

“I’m sorry,” Juushirou looked guilty. “When you’re so busy too — but I really think it’s important, what happened in Rukongai. If not when the massacre happened, then in the time after Shougo-dono was ’s a clue somewhere and we keep missing it.”

“I don’t really understand why you feel so certain.”

“Because I’m sure that not all souls left in Rukongai were pure Pluses,” Juushirou said earnestly. “Because of what happened, it makes sense that Seireitei would worry about polluted spirits. The Spiritless Zone was set up to protect against that — but what about the souls left who had spirit power and who weren’t mutated? What about them... what happened to them?”

“Souls left with spirit power?” Nagesu blinked. “Ukitake, didn’t I make it clear? There were none. *All* the souls living in Rukongai were transferred to the Spiritless Zone project. Every one of them was screened, and none of them had *reiryoku*.”

“What?” Juushirou stared, disbelief in his eyes, and Nagesu frowned, resting a hand on Juushirou’s shoulder.

“If it makes you happy, I can give you the official report,” he said softly. “I have a copy of it, somewhere here, and you’re welcome to read it. It’s not very interesting, but if it will put your mind at rest...”

“If you don’t mind,” Juushirou nodded his head almost automatically, and Nagesu moved carefully between the piles of books and old papers littering his office floor, rummaging for a moment in the recesses of one of the further-most alcoves before producing a thick document with a stitched spine and cloth cover. He brushed the dust from it, coughing as a cloud rose up into the air, then offered Juushirou a rueful smile, holding it out.

“Here you are. My room seems disorganised, but I know where things are, and that’s what counts,” he said reflectively. “You can keep this as long as you need. I hope it satisfies your doubts.”

“I hope so too,” Juushirou admitted, taking the volume gingerly

and lowering his head in a bow. “Thank you, Nagesu-sama. I’m sorry for the interruption and my lack of manners — I’ll return this to you as soon as I can.”

“Well, I hope it will prove academic,” Nagesu grinned. “And don’t worry. We will find Keitarou. This time, I’m determined. We’ll find him or die looking.”

“I think all of Seireitei would rather not lose any more Captains, sir,” Juushirou said honestly, and Nagesu nodded.

“Indeed,” he agreed grimly, “but sometimes, needs must. One sacrifice is a small price to pay for peace. Well, maybe I’ve some of my Father’s blood in me after all — I suppose we’ll soon see.”

He patted Sekizanha’s hilt with a sigh, turning to gesture towards the door.

“I hope you can make your own way back. I’m afraid I still have much to do.”

“...and in his absence, Guren-sama expects the Ninth to be diligent in their protection of Kuchiki assigned space.”

The messenger finished reading his droning message, folding the scroll up with a snap of paper and bowing his head formally towards the Captain of the Ninth before handing him the bound letter. “These are the words and will of the Clan Leader, transmitted as instructed to Anabomi Seizuku, Captain of the Ninth Division.”

“The orders are understood. You are dismissed,” Anabomi flicked his fingers towards the door, and the messenger bowed again, disappearing into a quick, neat shunpo and leaving the Ninth Division Captain once more alone. He glanced at the rolled up scroll pensively for a moment, then set it down on the top of his desk, moving across to the window and pushing back the shutters to their full expanse. Outside, in the yard, one of his seated officers, Takaoka Sakura was training a couple of recalcitrant Kuchiki recruits, and at the sight of her, Anabomi’s brows knitted together, a troubled expression entering his soft grey eyes.

Such a peaceful scene, and yet...

He turned away, leaning up against the window frame as he considered.

Guren-sama was cross with me for not reporting the abduction of our recruit. I thought I might lose my Captaincy, but he was of a merciful disposition and I escaped with a warning. My judgement was simply askew

in yet another instance. I wonder why I was ever made a Captain, given all the mistakes I make.

He glanced briefly back towards the courtyard. It had been his own incentive to accept the application of the Yamamoto-born Sakura, and Guren had let him have his way, even though the Kuchiki Clan as a whole had not entirely welcomed the decision to expand Ninth's territory beyond the Kuchiki's control. Anabomi was a loyal Kuchiki, but he disliked discord and segmentation, and it had been for this reason that he had hushed up the truth of the recruit's disappearance. Whether it had been Sakura or one of the other division members who had leaked the story, he did not know, but he felt a passing sense of resentment for their indiscretion. Ninth's business was Ninth's, he reflected regretfully, and their practices and decisions ought to be handled by the Ninth alone, yet they were still under the chokehold of Anabomi's own Clan leader.

That's not the way forward we hoped for when we were young, was it, Shougo?

A bittersweet smile touched his lips as he remembered sessions of sword against sword in the big, sprawling grounds of his family's estate, the fair hair of his companion drenched with sweat and glistening in the sunlight as they went through drill after drill. Sometimes he would take Shougo's sword, sometimes Shougo would take his, but there had never been any malice behind their spars and, when they had both been awarded positions as Captains in the same Council parliament, Anabomi had felt that maybe the world was beginning to take faltering steps forward.

"They're Clan squads," he could hear himself saying, as he had examined his haori-cloaked reflection in the mirror for the first time, smoothing invisible creases out of the fine white fabric. "Subordinate to the Sixth and the Third, Shougo — just another extension of the Clan's overreaching power. We aren't really Captains — not like they are."

"Not today, maybe not tomorrow," Shougo had told him, resting a companionable hand on his shoulder and offering him a grin. "It's all right, though, Seizuku. We'll prove our worth the old-fashioned way. You're slick with a sword and you get the trust of people easily. You're a reliable, honest soul and your squad will flock to you. You'll make Ninth your own space. And me, well, I have my science, and all the things my father taught me, before he died. Nagesu-sama has already told me that he intends on relying on me and my skills a good deal, so even if I don't have your people skills, I'll still manage to do something with the Twelfth."

“You always do yourself down,” Anabomi had scolded his friend, who had laughed.

“I know my flaws, and you should too, after this long,” he said warmly. “I don’t expect perfection. Perfection is boring. I expect progress, and change, and evolution. And I expect all of those things from this squad I’m going to lead. For the first time in Gotei history, people other than the leaders of the Clan have been given power to decide things for themselves. We’re their subordinates, but only in terms of Clan, not as Captains. The world is changing... and we’re at the forefront of that change.”

Anabomi closed his eyes, picturing his friend as he had been the last time he had seen the man alive. The bright smile and warm assurances to be back before he knew it blurred and faded, however, into the silent, shrouded form atop the funeral bier, his bloody wounds cleaned and bound to prevent them staining the burial robes. It had been the first time in their whole acquaintaince that Anabomi had ever seen Shougo’s face solemn and unsmiling, and it had burrowed right through to the core of his being. Mareiko’s sobs still punctuated his memories, but for Anabomi it had been a different kind of wound.

Shougo believed in making Twelfth his own. For his sake, I’ve worked to do that with Ninth, balancing my loyalty to Guren-sama with my hopes for the squad’s future. Perhaps it came at the cost of the dwellings of some Seireitei common folk, but in order to expand the Ninth’s reputation as effective and efficient, sometimes those decisions have to be taken. We can’t all feed every poor, homeless soul — it ought to be enough just to save their lives. I don’t wish them ill, but it is we who put our lives in danger on their behalves. It seems unfair that they then resent us for the damage the Hollow inflicts. I only want to make Ninth a great Division in its own right, separate from the Clan... but the Kuchiki are not the Urahara, and they don’t tolerate...

He glanced down at his sword, pulling it slowly from its sheath and glancing at the blade.

Besides, there are other things. Things you should never have told me... things I would rather not know. As your friend, Shougo, I’ll take those things to my grave. I’ll protect you as I would protect my own life, with this sword if need be. That’s why I went to the Rukon... that’s why I made sure of everything in the way you would’ve expected. I know it was wrong, but it was the last thing I could do for you. I decided to protect you and to protect Sekime and the Twelfth you believed in creating from any backlash. And now... with all these recent reports of Keitarou and his actions... it troubles me. It makes me remember... things I ought to forget.

He sighed, slipping the blade back into its sheath.

Now I have orders from the head of my Clan, and I realise I'm not as strong a man as you were. I believed in it, but I haven't managed to do all that I hoped I would. Whatever this next adventure accomplishes, I'm Guren-sama's subordinate and I have no option but to obey his instructions in his absence. You said I had the skill to bring people to me, but Shougo, I didn't have your spirit and I can't... do the things you longed to do.

He moved towards his desk, sliding gloved fingers beneath the sleek wooden surface to release the catch and retrieve the silver key that had been lodged there between the seams in the wood. For a moment he glanced at it, running his fingers over the fine, delicate metalwork, then he made his way across his office to the far side of the room where a heavy, expensive wall hanging concealed much of the bamboo panelling from view. Pushing it aside with his left hand, he slid the key into the lock beneath with his right, turning it with a soft click. The hidden cupboard swung open with the faintest of creaks, indicating how long it had been since the last time he had accessed it, and for a moment he just stood there, running his gaze over the compartment's meagre contents.

A dusty old book, bound in leather and tied with ribbon woven in Third District. A small, wood-carved box with a pearl catch and gold finish. A sword ornament, scuffed and dented but still clearly identifiable as bearing the crest of Shougo's family, the Urahara from the Eastern province of District Three, and, finally, a note, folded in half and half again, its corners dog-eared and its edges worn. Leaning up against the wall so as to keep the door from swinging shut by itself, Anabomi retrieved the letter, turning it over in his hands pensively.

"Take this and keep it safe for me," Once more he could almost hear Shougo's words, echoing in his head as though the man was standing in the room with him. "I don't know who else to give it to, and I'm worried... that if I keep with me, people might get into trouble. There have been things, lately... I don't know..."

He had paused, then grinned, shrugging his shoulders.

"It's probably nothing, but just in case," he had said. "Everything that happened in the Kuchiki recently put me on my guard. Everything associated to that man — that Keitarou — it troubles me. All the data Nagesu-sama gave me, and everything I've learned from my own work suggests that he's probably still on the loose. Even injured, he'll recover. His sword has the power to invade a person's heart and soul and turn them into his personal puppet, and as time goes on, I've understood just how much damage that weapon may have done. I don't believe Shouichi-sama was his first Clan murder,

and because I don't, I won't let even the slightest chance he's alive slip by me. I've been working especially hard since that Kuchiki *bocchan* died, and Seizuku, I think I know a way of breaking that control. I think I know a way... of making people immune to that kind of lure."

"Shougo, what are you getting involved in now?" Anabomi had demanded, and Shougo had laughed.

"Don't look so serious. I told you, this is just in case," he had said dismissively. "I've done some theorising based on all the evidence we've collated, and I think that I've created something that might eventually form an antidote. His ability is manipulative, but I read the autopsy report on the mindless Shihouin boy and it seems that Chudokuga requires latent will to properly function. That means that somewhere in his ability must be a level of willpower suppression. Some way of... I don't know..." he had broken off, gesturing absently as he tried to find the words, and Anabomi had pursed his lips, knowing that his friend was trying to put his thoughts into the most coherent of language for his non-scientific companion to understand.

"It's hard to know exactly how to put it," he had admitted at length, "and it's still very much a theory in many respects but... if somehow, Chudokuga suppresses then infiltrates individual willpower, well, if that willpower could be made stronger, maybe the control could be broken? I've read studies on curse-based *zampakutou* whose abilities have been nullified in such a way, so I believe it must be possible."

"I'm not sure you ought to be pursuing this, not without the backing of your Clan," Anabomi had said cautiously, apprehension in his gaze, and Shougo had shrugged.

"Keitarou's been allowed to run riot and stories of his murder of Shouichi-sama spread like wildfire, but nobody at the main house is doing anything about it," he said frankly. "I thought that, with your family's recent experiences, you'd be glad that it hadn't just been buried under a rock by everyone in light of more immediate routine duties."

"Of course," Anabomi had smiled, resting a hand lightly on his friend's arm, "but not if it means you putting your neck on the line. Let the Clan leaders handle it, Shougo. They have a wider range of resources than we do, and if Keitarou were to target you... try to silence you..."

"Then he'd give me a chance to test my theories, I suppose," Shougo had replied flippantly. "Listen, Seizuku. The Clans aren't doing

anything. They've not said it, but it's as though they've decided to let it go until he appears again — by which point, it will be too late. If they're not acting, I thought that maybe I would, since, to be blunt, I think killing this man is a pretty good idea. For Twelfth, too, it would be a coup — nullifying and killing or capturing Keitarou would be the very impetus we need to establish our division as worthy to stand beside Third and the Clan squads as an equal."

"Maybe... but even so..."

"A scientist always likes a gamble," Shougo's eyes had twinkled. 'Knowing how you feel about your status as Captain, I did think you and Ninth might like to play along, but perhaps it's too close to the recent crisis for you to join in just yet. I'll let you think it over... I don't suppose it will have an immediate result, anyway. To kill Keitarou, Seireitei need to be able to get close to him, which means denuding him of his sword's power.' He had patted the box again. "And so I've been working on this, for just that kind of opportunity. It's a very rough serum, based on something my father began, and it needs fine tuning. It's not like I can ask Otousama all the things I need to, and obviously I haven't had time to properly trial it. Probably I won't be able to until the exile comes out of hiding... I can't imagine anyone sanctioning me using it otherwise."

He had rolled his eyes.

"The reality is that now I've got to go back to the Rukon and run around with that idiot Minaichi and his useless satellites," he had added wearily. "It's getting far too busy out there now to do any interesting environmental studies, and the last time I tried to take mineral samples Ikata *sat* on my box of vials when we were setting up night camp, and used it as a stool while he trimmed his toenails with his sword. His weight smashed the lot to smithereens and he didn't so much as apologise. Still... I think Keitarou is there. I don't know where, and I can't prove it, but with the number of times going in and out, it's a feeling I get every time. Call it Urahara intuition, if you like... though Mareiko's not said anything. Maybe it's just my paranoia, or the fact I've been hunting for him for this long. Even if I can't put my fingers on where, I feel that he's somewhere... there."

"In the Rukon?"

"Yes," Shougo's eyes had darkened. "The missing piece in the puzzle... the genius who's concealed himself for far too long."

He had sighed.

"Though I don't mind admitting that, even though I've stuck it this

long, after this mission, I'm tempted to ask to move duties and patrol somewhere more civilised for a change. At least until there's something more direct to take me back there... and not in the company of the monkeys from Eleventh. I've exhausted the prospects of our patrol region scientifically — and my patience is worn out mentally. If I came across Keitarou, it would probably not be a pretty encounter for either of us. I know too well what his sword is capable of — and I don't fancy my chances against it directly until this serum is perfected. I won't be the next Clan puppet and if he saw me, he'd have every reason to want me dead. My background means I probably know more about Keitarou's science than anyone else, even Nagesu-sama. I'm also an Urahara whose family chose the right side, which would make me top of his kill list. If he found my research on the subject, any chance of countering Chudokuga chemically would be lost. He might have spies in Seireitei. If they weren't so blundering and stupid, I might even suspect Minaichi's lot — but I've worked with Eleventh for long enough to know that that level of subterfuge is well beneath them."

He had held out the box, bound book and paper at that point, and wordlessly, Anabomi had taken them.

"Anyway, my reason for coming here today is this. I wanted to make sure this was somewhere safe while I was gone. Just in case there are other people here in the Gotei who aren't on the level, people who still look down on divisions like ours and consider us dispensable in the bigger picture. Twelfth is vulnerable when Mareiko and I make trips into the Rukon or the Real World hunting Hollows, and it sounds like this will be a heavy job. I don't expect anyone to raid Twelfth in my absence... but with everything that's happened in Seireitei, I can't be sure. Us lesser squads don't have formal barracks here in Inner Seireitei, yet, nor do we have proper bases within Clan lands, either. We're almost nomadic, forced to beg and borrow shelter here, and that's far from secure. This place is still Council orientated and Clan focused and it still hasn't evolved into a proper military stronghold. I don't have time to go back to my family estate before we leave, not even for this. I know I can trust you, and Kuchiki security at present is stronger than anywhere else... so you're my only hope. I'm being melodramatic, and I know I am — but you're the only one who I know can keep it safe and secret while I'm gone. I'll take it back when I return... but in the meantime..."

Anabomi pursed his lips, unfolding the note and glancing at it. As ever, it meant nothing to him — squiggles and lines and curves that indicated some chemical formula far beyond his scientific understanding. He set it aside, flipping open the box, and gazing for a

moment at the vial inside.

You never did come back for it. Inner Seireitei grew and strengthened... but you never did see it happen.

With a sigh he replaced the paper and the lid of the box, shutting the door of the cupboard and fastening it with the key.

Whether I should've done something about your secret, I don't know. It didn't seem important, not after you died. But maybe you were right. Maybe it was Keitarou, in the Rukon. Maybe Keitarou found something he shouldn't... did something he shouldn't... and you paid the price. I saw the body, though. My friend was killed by a sword, not by a Hollow. I've always believed it was Keitarou who killed you, Shougo, or one of his associates... but all the investigations showed no sign of him or anyone else, and so I kept quiet. Now this is all flaring up like this... maybe it's proving that you were right.

“Taichou?”

He had just finished rearranging the wall hanging over the hidden door when the sound of a voice made him jump, and he swung around, meeting the concerned gaze of his Vice Captain.

“Taichou, is everything all right? I thought I sensed the reiatsu of a messenger — have we had word from Guren-sama?”

“He sent a message,” Anabomi nodded, extending an elegant hand in the direction of the desk. “You can read it, if you like. It’s simple enough. Guren-sama is entrusting us with Kuchiki-patrolled space in his absence, both here and outside of Inner Seireitei. Even if it stretches us thin, we must do as he instructs.”

“Yes, sir,” Hyakken reached for the scroll, scooping it up and carefully unrolling it. He skimmed over the contents, then nodded.

“With permission, sir, I’ll begin working on a rota of deployment to cover the time period in question,” he suggested, and Anabomi inclined his head.

“Do so,” he agreed, his expression becoming tired. “It will be a heavy few days, Hyakken... but we must show that, at the very least, Ninth Division is up to the task.”

“No souls with spirit power left in the Rukon, huh?” Shunsui stretched himself out more comfortably on the soft pink fabric of the haori, turning his gaze lazily towards his friend. “So it was a whitewash? Someone covered something up, or it was complete incompetence from start to finish?”

“Not really sure, but one of the two,” Juushirou groaned, setting the book down beside him with a shrug of frustration. “I’ve skimmed through it, but it’s as Nagesu-sama says. All of the souls in the Rukon were relocated. Every area was searched and evacuated, then certified empty. The whole population of Rukongai should have been in the Spiritless Zone.”

“And yet they weren’t,” Shunsui mused. “Somewhere, there were others, people not recorded by Seireitei. And one very notable mad scientist, with his wife and small child... or maybe, depending on how old that waif of yours is, I should be saying small *children*.”

“Do you think Keitarou could’ve hidden people?” Juushirou looked doubtful, and Shunsui shrugged.

“I don’t know,” he owned. “I’m pretty sure that village had been lived in recently, though. Hanako and Kaoru thought so too, and so did your men. They’re none of them fools, and I trust their judgement. They have no reason to lie about something which in their eyes would be trivial and without deeper meaning — none of them know the real purpose of that search, not in proper detail.”

“True enough,” Juushirou sprawled out on his front, resting his chin in his hands. “It’s too hot today, and it’s not helping me think.”

“Well, then give me the book, let me have a look at it,” Shunsui held out his hand. “And while I am, tell me again what you intend to do about your surprising stray. Because if everything you said to me is right, Juu, you have a big problem. If Nagesu-sama finds out you’re harbouring... well, if he finds out, after your meeting with him, who knows what conclusions he’d come to. And he’s not one to jump to random ideas, but lately he’s been more... that way inclined.”

“It’s Keitarou. Nagesu-sama wants to find him,” Juushirou sighed heavily, nonetheless handing the book over. “Here. Good luck. I can’t find any obvious holes in it — it just seems as though these people either vanished when the shinigami were there, or appeared from nowhere.”

“Well, then lets try another approach,” Shunsui flicked through the book, pausing at the end and squinting at the columns of messy characters. “Geez, did nobody teach these people calligraphy? I’ve never seen such haphazard scribble before.”

“That’s rich, coming from the person whose writing Ryuu likened to a spider in its death throes,” Juushirou observed, amused. Shunsui snorted.

“Maybe, but this is an official document, not a class paper. It’s different,” he defended himself. “Besides, I... ah-hah. That’s what I was looking for. Now, let’s see...”

He rolled over onto his stomach, laying the book flat against the surface of the roof.

“What have you got?” Juushirou leaned over to look, and Shunsui tapped the paper with his index finger.

“The names of the people who authorised the report,” he said evenly. “Yamamoto Hashihiko, Urahara Nagesu... but neither of them went to the Rukon themselves. Hashihiko-sama is dead now, and you’ve already heard from Nagesu-sama, so that’s no good. They would’ve read the reports they were given and just authorised them — there’d be no reason to suspect anything amiss.”

“You think someone deliberately omitted information from the reports?” Juushirou asked softly, and Shunsui nodded.

“I think that’s the easiest explanation,” he agreed, turning back a page. “Let’s see who was sent to investigate. Members of the Second — that’s no real surprise.”

“Suzuki Naoto?” Juushirou asked sharply, and Shunsui shook his head.

“No. That would be a nice juicy catch, but I’m afraid not,” he responded. “Oh, but wait. Kounou. Wasn’t that someone of interest to Kai at one time?”

“He’s the man Suzuki killed before leaving the Second’s prison,” Juushirou remembered. “It doesn’t mean anything, though — Kai trusted him, from what I could gather, and up till ten years ago, he had a high position in the Onmitsukidou. He was arrested on separate charges. Probably this is coincidence.”

“Probable, though I don’t like those,” Shunsui looked pensive. “A man like that might be bribed to look the other way — by Keitarou or by someone else who’d rather their name didn’t appear on this kind of documentation.”

“Now you’re getting paranoid,” Juushirou scolded. “Kounou is dead, so we’ll learn nothing even if you settle on him as the source — what else do you have?”

“A nice array of nobodies,” Shunsui looked dissatisfied.

“Nagesu-sama said Anabomi-taichou went there once,” Juushirou remembered. “I don’t know the circumstances, but apparently he was

friends with the former Twelfth Captain. According to Nagesu-sama, anyhow. Maybe we should approach him?”

“Ask Anabomi to tell us something?” Shunsui snorted. “Not a chance. I’ve lived and worked next door to him for the past twenty five years, give or take, and one thing I’ve learned about him is that for all he appears as a peaceable, respectable man, he’s famously like a clam with information. I told you, didn’t I? The information about his missing recruit came through Kaoru’s friendship with Sakura-chan and some illicit whispers over the fence, not from official channels. Never once in the whole time we’ve been stationed next door to one another has the Ninth Division ever asked the Eighth for help or advice, or offered any in return. They’re not unfriendly, but they are... not exactly proponents of community support.”

“That’s harsh,” Juushirou reproved. “Anabomi isn’t hostile, nor is he unfriendly. You make Ninth Division sound like the Onmitsukidou’s prison — it’s not as though it’s a hotbed of intrigue and suspicion.”

“Perhaps not,” Shunsui relented. “but the fact remains that even if it was, we’d probably not find out about it. Take it from me, Juu. Anabomi’s an odd man. I’ve spoken to him several times and yet I don’t believe I know him at all. He’s not unfriendly, and he seems to be highly respected by his subordinates. He’s a handsome specimen of a Kuchiki in his prime, which if you ask me, explains why he gets more female recruits than even I do — but to me he’s still something of a mystery.”

“You should be careful. Someone objective might think you were jealous of his recruitment skills,” Juushirou teased, his expression lightening despite the seriousness of the discussion. “He sounds pretty much like a typical Kuchiki to me, that’s all. They’re not like they were once, maybe, but they still don’t look for help if they can avoid it. How many requests for help have come out of Sixth since we got our *haori*? True, Guren-sama’s squad often offer their aid, and I believe Hirata has a very successful working relationship with the Sixth — probably on account of Ryuu’s presence there. But I don’t think that Anabomi keeping himself and his squad affairs to himself means we ought to suspect him of subversiveness.”

“No... I tend to agree,” Shunsui conceded. ‘I don’t know if I like or dislike him, it’s hard to tell — but it’s not as though he keeps his subordinates prisoner, and even if I don’t speak to him on a regular basis, Sakura does visit Kaoru often. She’s a bright sparky girl and a chatterer — and if there was anything bad going on there, it probably wouldn’t remain a secret for long. We found out about the abduction

quickly, so I accept your point. I just don't think asking Anabomi anything about this is worth our time. 'It's nothing to do with Ninth'. That'll be his response. Friend or not, I guarantee it. Besides,' he flicked the book in Juushirou's direction, "he's not listed in here."

"Now I think of it, Nagesu-sama said he went once when they were still clearing up the stragglers of the incident in question," Juushirou recalled, "though apparently none were ever found. Third and Eleventh also participated, as did First, but I don't remember seeing Third or First division deployments mentioned in that book. I guess Anabomi wanted to make absolutely sure the people who killed his friend had been properly dealt with — but the Spiritless Zone was, apparently, beneath his notice."

"We *are* talking about a Captain who hushed up the abduction of his recruit and the fact his Division haven't been clearing up after themselves in Seireitei," Shunsui pointed out blithely. "Doesn't sound like the resume of a man who'd care much about a few Rukon souls being relocated."

"No, true," Juushirou agreed. "All right. What else?"

"Not much," Shunsui grimaced. "A few from Eleventh. Noticeably none from Twelfth, though Mareiko-chan countersigned a few of the reports in Nagesu-sama's place."

"I suppose it was too much for her to go back there herself," Juushirou mused, and Shunsui nodded.

"Ikata, from the Eleventh, he's listed too," he remarked.

"Ikata?" Juushirou was taken aback. "Minaichi's adjutant?"

"The same, though I'm not sure that rank had been conferred then. He's not listed as an adjutant, and seems to have been just one name in a list of names from Eleventh who were dispatched to divide and conquer," Shunsui sighed. "There are probably a lot of things wrong with his evacuation technique, but do we think he's responsible for covering up Keitarou's hiding place? Do we think he's capable of something that subtle?"

"Honestly, no," Juushirou admitted. "Enishi did say that Ikata was a cousin of the dead Sakanoue — but they didn't apparently have much of a relationship. In fact, Ikata was after the Vice Captain position almost before Sakanoue's body was cold — well, that's how I heard the story. And Ikata isn't subtle. I doubt he could keep from bragging about it, if he'd known where Keitarou was and managed to deceive Soul Society about it."

“I agree,” Shunsui tapped his finger absently against the page, then flipped the book closed, setting it aside. “The trouble is, even if we have these suspicions, we have no particular direction to point them. Clearly the reason we never knew there were others living outside the Spiritless Zone is because the official report told us so. And because it told us so, none of us questioned it or went looking. Keitarou was able to conceal himself and his family, and from the young lad Koku’s testimony, there are others. Ordinary souls who just happen to have *reiryoku*. Maybe there was no cover up. Perhaps the people simply hid with Keitarou and his family, because they were associated with him and he helped them as a result. All it would take was a patrol not being as thorough as they ought, and with Keitarou’s skills, they’d be overlooked. Remember, Naoko thought he was building an army... maybe that’s not the case, but he is putting us shinigami to shame. Protecting those people is our job, and if we’d done it properly...”

“But we haven’t, and we need to rectify that,” Juushirou said firmly. “One way or another, we need to find these people. Keitarou’s taken them somewhere, and I don’t believe it’s the Real World. It makes no sense for him to flee there if he had spirit-enriched Pluses in tow — in the Real World, they’d be in much more danger from Hollows than they are here, with far fewer resources at hand. That means he’s probably somewhere else, just like Joumei suggested. And if what Izumi thinks about the Gate kidou is true...”

“The Real World is a bluff, and we’re right to believe he’s actually in Rukongai still,” Shunsui’s eyes darkened. “Perhaps we weren’t thinking in quite the right context, though. The most logical part of Rukongai to take starving Plus souls to is obvious — so obvious I can’t believe we didn’t see it. Hiding in plain sight is Keitarou’s *piece de resistance*. He’s gone to the one place we’d consider impossible. The Spiritless Zone itself.”

“Kai and the others swept it clean, so now we consider it empty of danger, and it has resources to support such a community without needing to resort to outside support,” Juushirou looked troubled. “Tenichi said the condition of the people there reminded him of when he was a refugee in your brother’s land, and Koku’s words backed that up — so Keitarou would have to make other provision for feeding them, if he took them back to his original base camp. But the Spiritless Zone, even with souls in residence, would provide all they needed. There are no shinigami there now, either. Maybe you’re right. No, I’m sure you probably are. The trouble is, what do we do about it? Nagesu-sama won’t be convinced by our conspiracy theories, and we have no evidence. I still can’t tell Nagesu-sama that a girl who’s a descendant of a condemned branch of his family thinks he’s been

duped, nor can I tell him that his cousin's son is sheltering in my division. Certainly not while the kill on sight order remains."

"Well, if we can't go to the Council, we'll go somewhere else," Shunsui pulled himself into a sitting position, getting to his feet and holding his hand out to haul his friend up too. "Come on. Hot or not, I don't think we can stop around here. We're going to find someone who has power to help us without needing to clear it with Clan. Someone we can trust — almost certainly — to be discreet... and someone who, from your account of Tenichi's situation, already knows about the Kitsune to some degree."

"Such as?" Juushirou looked surprised, and Shunsui grinned.

"Kai, of course," he said with a shrug. "We're going to Second. If we can't have the Council or the Captains, well, I guess the Onmitsukidou will have to do."

56. Departure

Chapter Fifty Five: Departure

“These are hardly the circumstances that I hoped we’d continue our acquaintance in, Kotetsu.”

Kai pushed open the door of the bottom level of the Onmitsukidou prison, casting its sole occupant a resigned glance as he refastened the divide behind him. “I was having you watched, you know, outside of your own quarters — but I never imagined that you’d commit a crime on your old territory. I had the impression you were fond of Thirteenth, but perhaps that was my oversight too.”

At the sound of Kai’s voice, Tenichi raised his head, meeting the other man’s golden gaze with a sad one of his own. He shrugged his shoulders.

“I’m safer here,” he said softly. “I don’t understand anything myself, Kai-dono. All I know is that if I’m here, I can’t be out there, thinking about hurting people and confusing myself with what I want to do.”

“Houjou said something similar about your reaction, and so did Ukitake,” Kai rested his gloved hands against the bars, taking in the prisoner’s appearance carefully as he did so. Tenichi was no longer robed in his shinigami uniform, for once the official notice of his arrest had been circulated, his suspension had been quickly and formally confirmed. Instead he was robed in pale blue cloth, a rough, nondescript fabric woven from hemp and fastened at the middle by a length of the same in grey, and at his wrists and ankles were powerful spirit cuffs, suppressing his *reiryoku* and preventing him from using any kind of spiritual power to escape. His feet were bare, his reddish hair tousled and messy across his shoulders. His eyes were shadowed, indicating a lack of sleep, and faint stubble at his chin indicated that this was the third day since he had arrived at Second. Given the nature of his crime and the man’s apparently unstable mental state, there had been no question of anyone allowing him a blade with which to shave.

“In a way it’s a good thing you’re not planning on resisting any more... but I’m sad to see it come to this. Seventh needs you more than ever at present... yet here you are, rotting in one of my cells.”

“Taichou...” Tenichi faltered, then shook his head. ‘It might be

because of me that Seventh is in the situation it is,' he said honestly. "I didn't mean for things to happen that way, but no matter how many times people say it wasn't my fault, I still feel that if I'd known quicker... done something different... not been abducted... Fukutaichou would still be alive."

"Probably that's true," Kai said matter-of-factly, and Tenichi flinched, staring at him in dismay. "Well, you said it and I'm inclined to agree. I'm your gaoler, I'm not here to make you feel better about decisions made. Perhaps you did some foolish things — certainly if your behaviour at Thirteenth is anything to go by, you did plenty of them. If you want to believe Souja-dono died because of them, it's not my place to tell you otherwise. What I'm here to judge is how much *criminal* culpability you have — in that incident, and in any of the other incidents Soul Society are trying to resolve."

For a moment, Kai thought Tenichi was going to start crying again, then the prisoner sighed, running his fingers through his messy hair. From its current knotted state, Kai had the impression that he had spent many hours doing similar, probably attempting to make sense of everything through a series of sleepless nights. Leaving a prisoner alone to contemplate his actions was one of Kai's preferred techniques before trying to extract clear confessions — locked in the gloom of the Onmitsukidou's deepest level with nothing but rats for company was usually enough to convince even the most stoic criminal to break down and talk. Yet despite employing this tactic, Kai had the distinct impression that it was what was inside this man's head that was causing him the greatest grief, to the point that he had barely noticed his surroundings at all.

"Ukitake-taichou told me to tell you everything and not to lie any more," Tenichi spoke quietly now. "I lied because I was afraid, and I didn't want to hurt Ketsui — but I don't suppose I could do more to hurt him now, save striking him with my blade. I'll answer whatever you want to know — but Kai-dono, if I do so, please don't do anything to Ketsui. I told him nothing about my abduction, or anything since. He and I are blood to Keitarou, but just because I've done unforgivable things, it doesn't mean..."

"You can rest your mind on that account," Kai pulled a stool forward, squatting before the cell and eying his companion expectantly. "Well? Your brother is under no suspicion at all. Aside from the fact he was the one who stopped you completing your assassin mission the other day, I've heard no reports of suspicious behaviour from his part of Seireitei. You mistake me and my organisation if you think that I automatically hear the name Keitarou

and start hunting down anyone who might share his blood. Nagesu-sama is also as close a kinsman to Keitarou as you or Ketsui, but that hasn't slurred his good name and it won't either. The reason that I and other people became interested in you and your connections to that man stem from your own odd behaviour. Most of all, your deceptions. Your pretence of amnesia... which was becoming just too convenient to continue to believe."

"I see," Tenichi's face became sober, and he nodded. "That makes sense. I'm sorry, Kai-dono. I haven't been thinking sensibly about much for a while, now. Keitarou didn't use his sword, but I think he did something to me and I haven't been quite right since. Everything you say is logical and I know it to be true — but it's only here, in this cell, that I'm able to think it all through rationally. It's too late to change any of it, but there's a certain relief in knowing that the big decisions are no longer in my hands."

"This is pitiful for an officer who received Eighth Rank in the Endou division, and who is spiritually capable of much more," Kai was scathing. "Ukitake might've mollicoddled you or appealed to you in that fatherly way he has, but you won't find me playing the sympathetic card this time around. You had your chance to answer to me on those terms when I came to Seventh, after Suzuki's escape. Now you are simply a prisoner — and I'll establish once and for all what you do and do not know about Aizen Keitarou and his movements."

"I don't mind," Tenichi said simply. "If Ketsui is safe, then I don't mind. Whatever you do to me... I'll try and tell you what I know."

"That's a good start," Kai settled himself more firmly on his stool. "I don't believe in torture, but the possibilities here exist, and even if I won't oversee or authorise it, it can be overseen and it can be authorised. That's why you're kept so deep underground — it's bad for morale if the less experienced officers of Second hear prisoners scream or beg for mercy."

A faint smile touched Tenichi's face.

"You don't need to try and scare me," he assured his companion. "I won't lie any more. I promise."

"Well, let's hope *that's*not a lie," Kai said frankly. "Let's begin with the abduction. You originally said you didn't remember it, and then that you remembered bits and pieces. How much of that was true?"

"I remember all of it," Tenichi glanced at his hands. "Keitarou didn't treat me like a prisoner at all. That's what made it so hard, when I was returned. He appealed to me like a member of his family,

because of his close bond with my father, and my past as a refugee in District Eight. He knew all the ways to manipulate me and he treated me well. He promised to take me to Father's grave, and he kept that promise. Since I came back, I learned of the murders in the Spiritless Zone and that they were at his hand. I was in Rukongai at the time those occurred, and Keitarou was with me when they must have done — so I know nothing of the agents who were sent to do it. If the girl is the same as the one who killed my Vice Captain, I believe I met her once, when she tried to kill me... she was stopped, however, and so I came back to Seireitei unharmed."

"And you didn't think to report any of this to a superior officer?"

Tenichi was silent for a moment, then he sighed.

"At the point I left Rukongai, I think I was... confused by Keitarou's attitude towards me," he admitted. "When I was a small boy, he'd come and visit our family often. He'd bring sweets and talk to my brother and I and... and things of that nature. Then, when my mother died..." he paused, hesitating, then, "no, I said I'd tell you everything, and so I will. When my mother died, he came again. I was a recruit at Thirteenth then, and my brother still a student. He came to see Mother, but she was too sick for him to be able to. He spoke kindly, as a kinsman would, and brought her medicine which she chose to take. It gave her great relief in her last days, and she was grateful for his kindness in bringing it."

"And you concealed this from your superior officer, too?"

"I don't suppose at the time I considered it very much," Tenichi admitted. "Nor did Ketsui. I had told Ukitake-taichou about our past and connections, and he had said it was no big deal, so I let it go. I didn't think it might have greater consequences. In the Rukon, Keitarou acted much as he did when Mother died. He appealed to that side of my memories. I knew he was a felon, but I didn't understand... everything as to why. He told me what happened to my father, and why he acted against Shouichi-sama, to take vengeance. Father died in such a horrible way, Kai-dono. I suppose, once I learned that... I forgave him."

"And the Kuchiki boy's murder? What of that?"

"I didn't really know a lot about it," Tenichi admitted. "I was still a young boy when it happened, and living in District Eight, far from Six and far from a position of political note."

"Well, I suppose I see now why you were worried about Ketsui," Kai's eyes narrowed. "If your story is true, and he visited you as a

child, in that you can't be considered culpable. Your family was as it was then and I have no interest in your father's politics so long as they don't influence this case. But in terms of his later visit, and then your abduction — clearly he had designs on you and wanted you to know that he knew where to find you and what you were doing. It should have been reported when it happened, however unimportant you felt it to be. You — and Ketsui, and anyone else who knows of this visit — broke a significant law of Seireitei by concealing the whereabouts of a class one felon who is extremely dangerous."

"I didn't conceal his whereabouts," Tenichi shook his head quickly. "Nor did Ketsui. We didn't know his whereabouts. He came to us, and then he disappeared. Our priority was Mother's comfort in her last days, and I didn't report it when I returned to barracks after she died. I didn't think it mattered, and even if I did, I wouldn't have been able to tell you where to find him. Ketsui and I made him no promises that day, Kai-dono. He came to see Mother and brought her medicine. He commented on how much Ketsui looked like Father, but that's all I clearly recall him saying. I would never have thought of it again, if not for all this happening now."

He looked anxious.

"You won't charge Ketsui with anything, will you? You promised you wouldn't, and..."

"I already said that your brother is not in my sphere of interest," Kai dismissed this with a flick of his hand. "I'm glad you told me the truth for once, but I don't see much point in dwelling on the incident any further. It just helps me pinpoint your thought processes in this matter, that's all. So when he took you from Seireitei, he treated you as a friend, even though he had forcibly abducted you?"

"Yes. He wanted my help in supporting the people in Rukongai."

"People in Rukongai?"

"The people with spirit power, who weren't allowed to live in the Spiritless Zone because they were tainted Pluses," Tenichi nodded. "They were living in terrible conditions. Keitarou told me he was abducting shinigami to demand ransoms in food and supplies in order to feed these people. I don't know if any other prisoners were kept in Rukongai — I don't think they were, because it seemed to me like I was different. But I don't know where they might have been kept. Keitarou told me that Kurotsuchi — the man you know as Suzuki Naoto — he was the go-between. Keitarou himself didn't go to Seireitei. Suzuki did that for him."

“I see,” Kai’s eyes became slits as he processed this. “And Suzuki’s current whereabouts?”

“I don’t know. If I did, you’d probably find him dead,” Tenichi offered a humourless smile. “Even if my desire to kill the girl has faded, Kai-dono, the Onmitsukidou is different. I’d still slit his throat, for every threat he made against my brother and I.”

“Not if my people find him first — we have a prior grievance to settle with Suzuki Naoto, and we will settle it our way,” Kai said matter-of-factly. “Moving on to another topic you prevaricated on the last time we talked — Kohaku. I want to know what you know about this — because I don’t believe you know nothing.”

“I really don’t know anything at all,” Tenichi said honestly. “I did see the hut. It had an aura of death around it, and the Rukon people were frightened of it. There were stories that whatever lived inside the hut was a demon of some kind, and that it had driven a local man mad. That man died, so nobody went near it. I never tried to go in. Keitarou confirmed the story of the Rukon people. He said it was the location of someone very troubled and spiritually like a Hollow, who he was trying to help.”

“And the fact this was apparently his child..?”

“That was as much a shock to me as it was to you,” Tenichi said darkly. “If it is even true, and not another trick. I don’t know what Kohaku is, Kai-dono, or whether anything Keitarou told me was the truth. He told me lies about other things interspersed with true stories, so I’m not sure. That’s the whole of my knowledge on the subject, though. Kohaku was a monster confined in a hut. That’s all.”

“Keitarou never gave any indication about how he might use that monster?”

“No... but I did hear it said that Kohaku was a weapon but it wasn’t like he was about to be unleashed at any time,” Tenichi said thoughtfully. “I don’t know what that means, but that’s what I was told.”

“Well, so far we have Suzuki who’s disappeared into thin air, and Kohaku, about whom you can tell me nothing,” Kai folded his arms, eying Tenichi speculatively. “If I discover any of these things you’re telling me are further lies, Kotetsu, there’ll be no hope for you whatsoever. You understand that your life depends on how deep your involvement with Keitarou can be proven to be?”

“I expect to be executed, Kai-dono,” Tenichi met Kai’s gaze, and to

the Onmitsukidou's surprise, there was peace and acceptance in his eyes. "I'm not going to beg for my life, or for mercy of any kind. If you want to execute me, go ahead. But I've told you the truth. That is all I know and if I make stuff up to please you, or preserve my life, I'll just be perverting justice all over again."

"And Keitarou himself?"

"The last time I saw him was when he took me to Father's grave. After that I was picked up by... by... by people of Endou-taichou, and..."

"I know about the Kitsune. You can speak of them before me — it was them who collected you, correct?"

"Yes, sir," Tenichi was startled, but he nodded. "After that I had no contact with Keitarou at all. Suzuki came to threaten me once, the morning that Souja-dono was discovered missing. He told me Fukutaichou had gone to Rukongai at about the same time the alert went out to search for him. The other time I saw Suzuki was the fight we had at Seventh, which one of the recruits partially overheard."

"And that's the extent of your dealings with Keitarou and his faction?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then, if I may put it bluntly, what on earth possessed you to do something as harebrained and reckless as release your *zanpakutou* in the heart of a division where it's a well known blade and threaten the life of an unarmed girl?" Kai demanded. "I've heard from Ukitake that the Kitsune were attacked by Keitarou — are you telling me your actions were coincidence, and you weren't sent by him to finish the job?"

"I thought the Kitsune were on Keitarou's side, and that they had deceived Taichou and Ukitake-taichou, because Souja-dono died after he went to see them," Tenichi shook his head. "I thought them cursed... they pretty much told me themselves that they brought bad luck. Fukutaichou went to the Rukon based on evidence they gave him, and he came back almost dead. I didn't trust their motives. I also heard that Keitarou had a spy in the Gotei, though Suzuki told me he didn't know who it was. I thought it was Izumi, because she had suddenly appeared as an out of season recruit and was assigned with my brother. It all seemed too convenient to be anything different... at least at the time."

"A spy in the Gotei?" Kai demanded sharply, and Tenichi nodded.

“And you thought this spy was the Ichimaru girl?”

“Yes, sir, though Ukitake-taichou explained to me clearly why she was not.”

“But you’re certain that Suzuki told you the truth?”

“Yes, sir,” Tenichi agreed. “He said that if he knew who it was, he’d kill them, because he wanted to be the only one reporting to Keitarou. I think he was jealous that there was anyone else involved. I got the impression only Keitarou knew the identity of his spy — nobody in the Rukon seemed to know about it, either.”

“But Keitarou’s ability to judge our actions has been extremely accurate,” Kai rubbed his chin. “It’s a pity you can’t tell me more about that... but today, for the first time, I believed you when you told me you didn’t care if you lost your life. You have nothing left to protect, and I’ve guaranteed you Ketsui’s immunity. Therefore I trust your word. Today I see honesty in your expression... so even if I were to recommend more forceful methods be used on you, I doubt I’d have any further joy.”

“I’ve told you everything I know, sir. Everything about Keitarou, and why I did what I did in Thirteenth,” Tenichi said quietly. “Those actions alone are unforgivable, so I anticipate being severely punished. If I am sentenced to death, I won’t object to the judgement. I don’t know or trust myself at the moment — maybe if I held a weapon again, I’d do someone some real harm.”

“Have you given up?” Kai asked him acerbically, and Tenichi started, staring at the officer in confusion.

“Kai-dono?”

“A wise person once said to me that the only time you can change things is when you’re alive. When you’re dead, it’s too late,” Kai said evenly. “If you regret what you’ve done, there are more useful ways that you can atone for them than simply for us to put you to death. It might be the easy option, suicide by Onmitsukidou squad, but I doubt your brother or your friends would be happy if you chose such a selfish, cowardly path from hereon in.”

“I tried to murder an innocent girl, Kai-dono!”

“Yes, yes you did,” Kai agreed bluntly, “and that is not something that you’ll ever be able to erase. There will be charges, you will be judged, and there will be a penalty to serve. That penalty might be that you remain unforgiven. Maybe even by the people you consider the most dear to you. Whatever the burden turns out to be, it won’t be

an easy or a pleasant one. You say that you don't know yourself any more — that's simply your denial. You do know yourself, but you've changed, and you need to understand and manage that change so that you won't hurt anyone else. It's not for me or anyone else to discipline self control into a grown man of your considerable Gotei experience. I told you once not to be pitiful, and I'll tell you again. On the evidence I've just heard, I think it unlikely anyone will hand down a death sentence. Your involvement with Keitarou was not by your own design, and your conduct since was irresponsible and reprehensible, but you have no direct guilt in any of the murders committed against Seireitei. Your act against Izumi was ill advised, but your motive is now understood and your reason to hurt her gone. Based on that, I think it unlikely you'll be killed. So, instead of mentally preparing yourself for death, try and prepare yourself for life instead. I think you'll find it the greater challenge."

Tenichi did not reply, an mixture of emotions on his face, and Kai tapped his hands against the bars lightly.

"Right now you present as a worthless idiot whose behaviour has shamed his family and his division," he said bluntly, "but that division has not forsaken you. Hirata has suspended you, he has not evicted you. That means that, pending judgement, he is considering taking you back. You may serve time incarcerated first — I think that's highly likely — but Seventh Division has not given up on you. Of all places in Seireitei other than this one, the Seventh best understand dealing with the impulse to kill. Maybe you came from the Thirteenth, but probably the Seventh is the only Division who might rescue you and make a reasonable shinigami of you once again."

"I don't deserve that," Tenichi whispered, his eyes glittering with tears once more, and Kai got to his feet, offering him a pensive glance.

"Maybe that will be your punishment," he said honestly. "If it is, though, I advise you to embrace it. Whatever it entails, you owe Soul Society — and in particular, Seventh Division — a far bigger debt than your life can ever fully repay. Make sure you repay it before you die. Otherwise Keitarou will have broken you — and all you'll ever be is an embarrassment to those you consider close."

Without waiting for a response, he moved to the main door, unfastening the catch and sliding it open, before slipping through to the corridor and stairway beyond. Without looking, he knew that his words had pierced right through to Tenichi's core, but he had no intention of staying to watch a grown man cry more tears of regret. It would be the making or breaking of the man, he mused to himself, as

he made his way back up the steps to the Second Division's main barracks.

If he returned to Seventh at some future point and betrayed Hirata's belief in him, the Wind Hawk is a quick and fairly painless form of death. At least, so long as Hirata is sufficiently angry.

He pursed his lips, considering this ruefully.

Given everything, I'm surprised he's taken the attitude he has. Seventh are under so much pressure, especially with the incident involving Ohara, and they have minimal officers of rank available to them. Tenichi's idiocy has created bigger logistical problems, and given Hirata's current temper, I'm surprised he's willing to be so understanding. Or maybe it's what he said in his message about Kikyue-hime... wanting to protect and keep the Seventh going, so that Keitarou doesn't take anything more from them than he already has. Losing Tenichi would be acknowledging a victory for the enemy... so perhaps that's the root of it. Still, the final judgement will be before the Council... and probably not till everything else is cleared up. Certainly not before the trip to the Real World — which I grow more and more leery of each day.

“Kai-dono!”

Saku's voice greeted him as he stepped out into the Second Division's courtyard, shielding his eyes from the glare of bright sunlight that accosted him. “Kai-dono, my sincerest apologies, but Ukitake-taichou and Kyouraku-taichou are here. They wanted to come and speak to you directly. I told them you were in a place they couldn't go, but they insisted on waiting. I took them to your office and was about to come and tell you their message.”

“Why are you apologising?” Kai looked wary. “Did they say what they wanted? Both of them together doesn't sound like a good sign.”

“I don't know, they didn't say,” Saku admitted, her cheeks pinkening slightly. “I... don't like to spend too much time around Kyouraku-taichou, in case he starts teasing me and acting like old friends. The recruits might see and it would be bad for morale if they saw someone talk to me like that. But I didn't want to disturb you, since I knew where you were and who you were talking to.”

“I'm done with that for now,” Kai assured her. “I've got as much truth as I think I'll get from Kotetsu on the subject of Keitarou and what happened at Thirteenth.”

“Is he what we suspected?”

“He's a prize idiot,” Kai reflected, “but, it seems, not as bad as I feared. I don't think he's a traitor, Saku, no. He's done stupid things,

but his motives are comprehensible, if idiotic. We'll leave him be for a day or two, on his own, to think things over. Make sure that food is prepared as usual, but ensure whoever takes it makes no attempt to communicate with him."

"I'll see to it myself," Saku promised. "I'll go make the necessary arrangements, but sir, if you can go..."

"Speak to the terrible twosome?" Kai's expression became amused. "All right, I'm going. Though it will be hard to pull rank on two Captains, even with my Onmitsukidou status, so I hope they aren't going to ask me to do something I'm not going to like."

Saku returned his grin with a wry one of her own, then saluted, disappearing into shunpo and leaving him to make the short distance across the cobbles towards the main Division barracks where the Vice Captain's office was located. Despite the darker nature of Kai's work and the secrets lurking below the ground, the studies belonging to both Captain and Vice Captain were deceptively bright and cheerful, offering no insight into the hidden realms several feet beneath. As he entered, he saw that his old friends had made themselves at home, Juushirou leaning up against the window to observe the surrounding area, whilst Shunsui was poking at one of the cushions that littered the floor with more than average interest. At the sound of the door, though, both turned, and Kai offered them a dry smile.

"Two Captains in my office at once," he said drolly. "To what do I owe this particular pleasure?"

"If only it was for pleasure," Shunsui pulled a face. "Kai, is your lovely sister anywhere around? We wanted to talk to you, but not necessarily to her... and well..."

"If she finds out you're here, she might become curious?" Kai's brows knitted together. "I knew it. You're going to ask me to do something I'm not going to like, aren't you?"

"It's not necessarily like that," Juushirou said cautiously. "Just that with Midori-sama going to the Real World... and well, we needed another opinion... and yours seemed to be... the logical one."

"Mine, but not Neesama's?" Kai pursed his lips, closing the door of his office and leaning up against it. "Well, you're in luck. Midori-nee is next door, currently, discussing plans for their trip with Nagesu-sama. The Onmitsukidou aren't going, so I'm not invited, and nor is Saku. I do have other things to do in her absence, however, so if you want to make it quick..."

“We think that the Real World trip is all wrong,” Juushirou met Shunsui’s gaze, and the other man nodded. “We’ve been adding up together the bits and pieces we have, and well, they don’t come out quite right. I’ve tried talking to Nagesu-sama, but because I can’t mention the Kitsune to him, it’s not really got me very far. He’s determined to go because he believes that Keitarou is there.”

“And you two don’t?”

“We don’t,” Shunsui agreed. “We believe he’s probably been there, but that he is unlikely to be making his base there.”

“And you think there’s something I can do to change matters that two Captains cannot?” Kai looked sceptical. “I don’t know what you think the Onmitsukidou do, Kyouraku, but I’m still only, officially, a Vice Captain. You both outrank me — so if a Council member isn’t listening to you, I’ve got no hope. You’d do better trying Hirata — who is at least a member of that hallowed body.”

“Hirata knows a lot of what we do, but not everything,” Juushirou looked troubled. “Kai, it’s not as simple as that. It isn’t just the Kitsune... there are more pieces to this puzzle than there at first appear. I’m not even sure how much I ought to tell you — since knowing might put you in a difficult situation. We believe Keitarou’s ultimate target is here, though. Seireitei. And that the Real World is probably a bluff to get Captains away from their posts.”

“Like he waited for the division of troops in the Spiritless Zone?” Kai’s eyes became slits. “In that instance he sent two agents — one to each campsite. We still have no lock on the whereabouts of either Suzuki Naoto or the mysterious Kohaku... and there’s always Keitarou’s own sword to take into account. Even if the Gotei did split, though, having people across a wider area could be seen as advantageous. It would mean the splitting of Aizen’s own forces, and the Captains of Soul Society are none of them weaklings.”

Shunsui arched an eyebrow at Juushirou, who sighed, rubbing his temples.

“We know where Kohaku is,” he admitted wearily, and Kai stared at him in disbelief. “I can’t tell you... won’t tell you... but we do.”

“You realise the penalties you could both face for concealing information like that from the Council?” Kai demanded. “I just drummed all of those things into that idiot in my cells downstairs, and now I find that people I thought had sense were keeping even bigger secrets?”

“It isn’t like that,” Juushirou protested, and Shunsui grimaced.

“It might be exactly like that — we don’t know yet,” he owned. “It is a risk, Kai. A big one, which is why we’re not involving you more than we need to. But about the Rukon, that’s another matter. We believe that Keitarou is coming here, and we believe he’s waiting for the departure to the Real World. We also believe his current base — his permanent one — is in Rukongai still. To be specific, we think it’s in the Spiritless Zone.”

“The Spiritless...” Kai faltered, shaking his head. “Even though we swarmed all over it?”

“Because of that, and because of the supplies that exist there,” Juushirou said gravely. “Ketsui and Izumi already put together scientific evidence that indicates the gate to the Real World was probably a red herring designed to do exactly what it did do. Keitarou has obviously travelled there, but there’s a big problem with the idea of him staying there longterm.”

“Which is?”

“The Plus Souls in the Rukon, who Keitarou and his family are currently protecting.”

“Plus souls...” Kai’s lips thinned. “Kotetsu said something similar when I spoke to him just now — Keitarou and his family were providing for starving individuals in the Rukon.”

“We’ve had it from another, different source, too,” Shunsui said simply. “There’s no way he’d take Pluses to the Real World, especially not ones who are already tainted with spirit power. Juu and I think he’s probably using this populace to test his current scientific theories, and so he would seek to protect them. They’d also know too much about him if they were to be caught and interrogated — so he can’t leave them behind. The only place he can move them in safety without anyone here noticing is from a part of Rukongai we consider abandoned to a part which we’ve already inspected and cleared of suspicious activity. By taking them there, there’s no longer a need to obtain food from outside to support them. He can continue with his own plans regardless.”

“I see,” Kai rubbed his chin, then he nodded. ‘It makes sense,’ he admitted. “If Keitarou does have such an entourage, then it’s logical. But listen, both of you. I understand how you feel about the Real World, but I think you ought to hold off. Let it happen as it’s planned.”

“Let it happen?” Juushirou stared. “But if it means splitting our forces...?”

“Kotetsu told me one other thing that bothers me, and it bothers me enough to make me think that we ought to continue exactly as scheduled, even if it means taking risks,” Kai spoke darkly, lowering his voice. “He said there was a spy in the Gotei, that Suzuki confirmed it, but that even Suzuki didn’t know who that spy was.”

“A spy... in the Gotei?” Shunsui’s expression became grim. “Hirata made that suggestion way back at the start of all of this, but with the discovery of Suzuki and his obvious insider knowledge and concealment skills, the line of investigation disappeared. Now you’re saying we should’ve fed Hirata’s paranoia and kept with it? Tenichi didn’t manage to tell you any more than that, I suppose? No hint as to what kind of rank this person has, or how long they’ve been here among us?”

“No. He said he didn’t know anything, and this time I believed him,” Kai sighed. “He’s pretty much shattered in terms of his defiance, but he’ll talk about things readily enough now he has no room to lie his way out any more. If that’s true, though, it means Keitarou’s been outthinking us for a lot longer than we realised, and we have to be very careful what we say and to whom.”

“I hope that you consider us above suspicion,” Shunsui offered his most innocent expression and Kai snorted.

“Even if you are both reckless, deciding on idiotic plans of your own that bend rules and confound the Council, I don’t think you’d spy for a man like that,” he said disparagingly. “This isn’t a joking matter, though. It’s very real, and it’s likely Keitarou’s had this in place since, probably, before the Spiritless Zone massacre. Certainly since before Souja-dono’s death.”

“We have good reason to believe that was an accident of timing,” Juushirou said thoughtfully. “Keitarou didn’t mean Souja to die, but he didn’t know it would happen before it did. We’ve focused far too much on his motives towards the Endou, but I think we need to start considering things differently. He’s always hated the Clans, so attempting to take control of one is probably unlikely. Killing Souja brought attention his way and confirmed his involvement, so I can imagine he wouldn’t have done it if he could’ve avoided it. We’ve spent too long thinking of that and not enough thinking about what else might’ve been going on in Rukongai... or here, right under our noses.”

“I imagine, if there’s a spy in the Gotei, it would have to be someone of considerable rank and influence,” Shunsui murmured. “A Captain or a Vice Captain, something of that nature.”

“Someone so high?” Juushirou looked troubled, and Shunsui nodded.

“Captains and Vice Captains have the most freedom and access around Seireitei, and know the most about shinigami plans of action,” he agreed. “Remember the document Nagesu-sama gave you? It stated there were no souls left outside of the Spiritless Zone — but what if that wasn’t a mistake or Keitarou’s sleight of hand? What if he’s had an agent in place since before even that happened, and that’s why there’s such a glaring oversight in the official records? It could be someone named or someone who isn’t listed... someone who removed themselves before publication, or someone who trusted their name would not be seen as suspicious even if it was recorded. I don’t like thinking it either, Juu, but if we believe Tenichi’s testimony, either one of our comrades, or one of Kai’s, is not operating on the level. Even if we rule out those like Enishi and Sora who would probably sooner slit their own throats than do anything dishonourable, and of course, Hirata himself, it still leaves plenty of suspects. The question is, do we believe Tenichi is right? Kai does, but do we?”

“If Kai does, I do,” Juushirou sighed heavily. “I’ll try and verify it later myself, if I’m able to. I might be able to find out more about it... if I ask the right questions.”

“Do that,” Shunsui nodded. “And whilst you’re at it, ask why, if he’s insisting on being so helpful and isn’t about to cause trouble, he didn’t mention it sooner.”

“He might not know,” Juushirou objected, and Shunsui snorted.

“Do you really believe that?” he asked, incredulously. “Be sensible, Juu. Of course he knows. He probably still knows things he hasn’t told you — and you need to be on your guard to them, even if you do believe his story.”

“This he you’re talking about — one of the Kitsune?” Kai asked quizzically, and Shunsui frowned, shaking his head.

“Better not ask,” he said succinctly, but Kai’s eyes became slits of curiosity.

“No, I’m asking,” he said softly. “I’m asking, because now I know about the Kitsune, I figure if it was to do with them, you’d tell me. And I spoke to both of them myself, and they didn’t seem inclined to

be furtive or secretive in my presence, not once they knew I was trusted by both Ukitake and Hirata. This is bugging me, though, given what you said earlier. It makes me think that you're... communicating with someone dangerous. Someone that the whole of Seireitei is looking for... but whose position, for some reason, you don't feel inclined to disclose."

Juushirou and Shunsui exchanged glances again, and Kai knew that he was right. He sighed, rubbing his brow.

"I knew it. When I called you the troublesome twosome to Saku, I was underestimating, as usual," he said heavily.

"You said such cruel things about us to Saku-chan?" Shunsui adopted a wounded look, but Kai was not fooled. He shook his head.

"You are talking to Aizen Kohaku," he said quietly. "I don't know how, or where, or why. I don't even want to know those things, probably, but I know that it's true. Aizen Sakaki is dead, Aizen Katsura was hunted and hounded from the Seventh and patrols are still deep into the District lands looking for him. Of Kohaku, though, we know nothing. Yet now, all of a sudden..."

"It's not really all of a sudden, Kai," Juushirou let out his breath in a rush of resignation, shaking his head. "I didn't want to involve you, but if you've seen that far, then I have no choice. You'll report the matter to Midori-sama, and I need you not to do that, at least for now. It's not the way you think it is — Kohaku isn't the person you think he is."

"So I'm right. You are in contact with him?"

"More than that," Shunsui spoke grimly. "Juushirou's been taking care of him for the past several weeks. Unbeknownst to any of us, he's been right here in our midst all that time."

"*What?*" Kai visibly whitened, and Juushirou nodded.

"I didn't know it myself till very recently," he said unwillingly. "I haven't been suppressing important information until these last few days, I promise. It threw me for six as much as it's probably throwing you — but Kohaku has been in Gotei custody... my custody... for some time now. It was Kohaku who brought Souja back from Rukongai."

"Your waif and stray," Kai looked perturbed. "He came back with Souja, so he seemed like an ally, but all the time..."

"Juushirou believes he's not Seireitei's enemy," Shunsui said

pensively. “He thinks that Kohaku’s motives are different from his kin, and that he wants to prevent people from dying, not cause it. He hasn’t offered any information on Keitarou’s location — claims he doesn’t know where his father is — and he created a disturbance to allow his brother Katsura to escape — but despite this, Juu’s decided to believe in him anyhow.”

“Shunsui!” Juushirou looked annoyed, and Shunsui spread his hands.

“I trust in Juu, so I’m going along with this,” he added. “I’m probably the bigger fool, but I figure it’s better to know what’s happening than not. Juu won’t turn him in, Kai, and if you or I did, It’s Juu who’ll get into big trouble. I don’t know if this faith is justified or not — or if Kohaku’s information can be trusted — but he *did* tell us about the souls in the Rukon, which you say Tenichi’s backed up. He mentioned nothing about a spy, though...” he glanced at Juushirou, who shook his head.

“I will ask him,” he repeated. “Kai, please. I know you don’t like it, I can tell by your expression, but the Council passed a dictum that Keitarou’s children can be killed on sight. I don’t know if Koku is really my ally or not, but to date, he’s not guilty of any crime, at least not so far as we can prove. He did bring Souja back here, and he did put himself at risk to do so.”

“That could’ve been a trap, you realise?”

“Yes, but he also broke Keitarou’s power over the Kitsune, Joumei,” Juushirou continued. “Joumei hasn’t spoke about this publically, but before he left Thirteenth for Seventh, I called him to my office and asked him about it directly. He said that he knew Koku was Kohaku — he’d picked up as much from being under Keitarou’s control — but that he also knew that Koku had broken the spell and set him free, so he chose not to say anything publically. He believed... no, he said he *felt* that Koku wanted to genuinely help him, and so protected him accordingly, because of the kill-on-sight regulation.”

“That rule is creating headaches for everyone,” Shunsui interjected laconically. “If not for that, we’d be able to open a lot more discussion, even negotiation, in more secure circumstances than Thirteenth’s makeshift sick bay. Koku completely is in the power of the shinigami, in an injured and sufficiently weakened state — right at the moment at least — which gives us significant advantage and may well be why he’s chosen to speak to Juu. *But* since neither Juu or I have Council rights or the power to repeal something voted on by a present majority of illustrious Clan individuals, right now, this is all

we can do.”

“None of us knew Koku had the power to break Keitarou’s control, either,” Juushirou added. “He could’ve just left well alone, but he didn’t. Even though Joumei killed his sister, Koku *choseto* help him. As Shunsui said, he’s currently a sick young boy. He’s clearly frightened, and I at least am certain he’s not a monster. Moreover, his ability to break Keitarou’s control without loss of life is something we may yet come to need.”

“Providing he can be convinced to use it in our favour,” Shunsui pointed out. “Right now revealing anything about him is too risky, so even though we’ve all heard the report about Ohara in effective kidou stasis in Seventh following the other day’s adventures, nothing has been done about it and Hirata doesn’t even know. In that light, Koku’s ability is a bit pointless, really.”

“But it is there,” Juushirou persisted, “and he used it once to help Joumei, so it’s not impossible to think he’d use it again, if we needed it.”

“And this power that can destroy the whole of Soul Society?”

“The power to see the future, as far as we can tell,” Shunsui said grimly. “Knowing your enemy’s every move even before they do is a pretty powerful strategy in its own right. Nobody said it was necessarily something physical. It appears to be something far, far more intricate and more suited to Keitarou’s preferred line of attack. Koku is without doubt the one who predicted Souja’s death. He’s also predicted other things.”

“He knew that Izumi was in danger at Thirteenth, before any of us could read the spiritual signals,” Juushirou agreed, “and he also saw Joumei and his people being attacked by Keitarou underground. On that occasion he begged me to go help them, and I know he was sincere. In all those cases, he sought to protect life, not end it. It’s also clear that Keitarou has been using this power — and roundly abusing the boy, from all I can tell, keeping him locked and chained in a hut and making him see horrific images over and over again — for his own ends, but that Koku himself has very little proper control over it. His *reiryokuleaks*, and he’s prone to slipping into dream states or trances on the least trigger. Mitsuki believes he’s genuinely unwell, and I agree with her. More, though, I’m a shinigami who trained to protect innocent souls from harm. So far all we know is that Koku is guilty of is being the son of a man Seireitei hates. We can’t justify killing him based on that evidence.”

“Juu’s of the school of thought that he’d rather a suspect commit a crime before he’s punished, though I can’t say I disagree,” Shunsui supplemented. “I don’t know what I think about the boy, but Juu’s shinigami rhetoric does make some sense. I don’t like the idea of the lad — or any other — being killed without a fair trial or hearing and right now, it’s clear he won’t get one. So for now, we’re saying nothing. If it backfires, and we’re still alive to answer for it, then doubtless we will — but in the meantime...”

“I see,” Kai pulled a graphic face, then nodded. “All right. I don’t like it, and it goes against my grain and my position, but all right. Find out from him what you can about the spy, and I’ll pretend we never had this conversation. And hope to God that your usual instincts to get yourselves into heaps of angst-ridden trouble aren’t firing at full power this time around.”

“We all hope that,” Shunsui acknowledged.

“Well?” Kai eyes them quizzically. “If you didn’t come here to tell me about Kohaku, and you don’t really think I have the power to change the Real World trip, what do you want from me?”

“We already figured we wouldn’t be able to stop Nagesu-sama and the others from going, and now you’ve mentioned the possibility of a spy, probably we ought not try any further,” Juushirou reflected. “Especially if we don’t know who we’re dealing with. But, of all the Vice Captains, you have a certain amount of autonomy of your own. Moreover, your Captain is going to the Real World... you and your people aren’t.”

“You’ve also already made a trip to the Spiritless Zone, and know it well,” Shunsui supplemented. “So, we wondered...”

“If, when Midori-nee goes to the Real World, I might take Saku and some others and pay a visit to the Rukon on your behalf?” Kai surmised. Juushirou nodded.

“Normally clearance would be required by a senior Captain or officer on duty,” he agreed, “but being that you are the senior commander for the Onmitsukidou, and that your Captain will be away... not to mention that Onmitsukidou can operate *Senkaimon* without giving an alert to any other sector of Seireitei...”

“You thought you could pull on old ties of friendship and convince me to bend rules based on your whims?”

“Something like that,” Shunsui grinned benignly. “Well? How about it? If Keitarou’s going to attack here, and the Real World is where he

and his base are not, then the Spiritless Zone is a good bet for rounding up evidence, witnesses and anyone else involved in what might be a much bigger conspiracy. You might find your missing Onmitsukidou turncoat, you never know, and it's an attack nobody on that side will be expecting. Even if Keitarou has been using Koku's power, Koku is with us right now, not with him. And there'll be nothing here to tip him off. We'll play along with the spy's expectations, and let the trip go ahead, so it seems as though we're all fooled into believing he's in the Real World. We'll pull out all the stops and make sure Keitarou doesn't get to have his way with us — Juu, Hirata and I will all be here, and the bulk of the Gotei will be left behind, whether the spy remains here or goes. It might even be an opportunity to unmask them, providing Koku can't tell us anything we need to know. If you and your people close off his escape route... he'll have nowhere to turn to. The Gotei will be everywhere, and, at last, we might be able to stop him in his tracks."

"That's a pretty sneaky plot," Kai observed, rubbing his chin, "but I see the sense in it, and it might just work. At least, if we close off all the escape routes, he'll have to show himself somewhere. And once that happens, we have a chance to nail him once and for all."

He nodded his head.

"All right. I'm in."

"A spy?"

Kohaku sipped his mug of green tea gingerly, setting the vessel down on the shelf beside his bed and casting Juushirou a wary look. "Now why would you think I'd know anything about that? I've been here with all of you — and hardly in a position to know all the dealings of a secret agent — if one should even exist."

"One apparently does exist, on the testimony of Kotetsu Tenichi, and the word of Suzuki Naoto," Juushirou sank down on the end of the bed, pushing aside the two new books that Kirio had brought from the library to make room for him to sit. "I know you don't intend on telling us where Keitarou is, Koku, but this is about people's lives, and I care about that. If you know something so important to the safety of my friends and comrades, then your not telling me could result in people getting killed. That's the reality of this."

"Seireitei is going to war with my father, isn't it?" Kohaku's expression became haunted. "I don't want that, Ukitake-dono. I don't want you to fight him. Please, promise me you won't fight my father."

You won't let... you won't let him. It'll come in waves, if you do... and I don't..."

He faltered, rubbing his eyes as though by doing so he could bring back his thread of rational thought, and Juushirou waited in silence for the boy to compose himself, noticing the faint trembling of his hands and the obvious skinny state of his body beneath the robe. The garment was an average slender size, yet it hung loosely over Kohaku's frame, and as the young boy met his gaze once more, the Captain was struck by how hollow his companion's features appeared to be.

"You look like you've lost weight," he murmured, genuine concern in his voice. "You're not eating properly again, Koku... you'll only do yourself damage if you keep that up. Mitsuki's mentioned to me how much you pick at your food, or how sometimes you refuse it altogether. Don't you realise how important good nutrition is? You'll never regain your strength otherwise."

"There's no point in rebuilding strength," Kohaku spoke matter-of-factly. "I don't know what my future is, Ukitake-dono, but I know I will die in Seireitei. I know that I have to die here. It's a fate I can't avoid. Allowing myself to take advantage of your kindness is wrong. I don't belong here... you're not obliged to do anything for me, and I don't want to be the reason you or your companions are killed."

"It's not taking advantage, if I insist on it," Juushirou pointed out. "Your prediction might be true, but it isn't confined to when, only to where. Like this, you'll only hasten that prediction, not stay it. There's even less sense in me risking my life to protect you if you're already dead — so do us both a favour and take better care of yourself. I know you're feeling rough, and you've had a lot of bad dreams lately — but your body can't recover without a proper diet."

"I've never really had one," Kohaku reflected. "I'm not sure my body would know what to do with proper food."

He sighed, glancing at his fingers, then,

"You asked about the spy, though, and this isn't answering that," he said, tiredness clear in his voice. "It's an easy question for me to answer, Ukitake-dono. I'm just not sure I ought to talk to you about any more than I already did. I am... betraying my family each time I do. But when you say such kind things to me... I know you mean them. I can sense it from you... and it makes me want to help. You're really not scared of me, even now you know who I am, are you? My brother aside, there's never been anyone like that... who knew me as

me, but didn't want to either use me or avoid me."

"I'm not scared of you," Juushirou assured him, 'and whatever your politics prove to be, so far you've committed no crime. So long as that's the case, I won't betray you. I don't agree with the Council's current decision regarding you. That is a knee-jerk reaction built of fear but it isn't justice and I believe in justice.' He grinned sheepishly, brushing the fingers of his right hand against the hilt of his sleeping sword. "My *zanpakutou*'s name is Sougyo no Kotowari. That should tell you that justice is important to me."

"Sougyo... no... Kotowari," Kohaku looked thoughtful, extending his fingers slowly towards the sheathed weapon, pausing about an inch from the black scabbard and offering Juushirou a faint smile. "I can feel them. I can't speak to them, or see them, but I sense... the two fish that live inside your blade. I can almost hear waves when I do this. It's soothing, somehow. Maybe that's why I want to trust in your kindness, Ukitake-dono. Your sword makes me feel at peace. Even though it's a weapon, and it's blade is sharpened so it can kill, it feels as though there are no dark shadows, and no ulterior motives here."

"Well, my motives are as I've told you. To prevent a war, if possible, and to protect my companions and anyone else who is in danger," Juushirou said matter-of-factly. "I carry my sword to defend and protect, not to shed innocent blood. Keitarou is my enemy, because he threatens those things. I can't change that — but it doesn't have to make you and I enemies."

"Maybe it does," Kohaku withdrew his hand, letting out a sigh. "All right. About Father's spy... all I know is that there is someone within the Gotei who has been giving information to him. I don't know who it is, and nor does anyone else. Mother, Katsu-nii, Sakaki, Kurotsuchi — we all knew such a person existed, but nothing about them. Father kept it that way. He didn't want any risk of this person pulling away from him... and I've never tried to find out."

"Could you find out?"

"Maybe," Kohaku admitted. "Why... is that what you're really asking me? Do you want me to try?"

"I had imagined you'd be unwilling, being that this is a person your father trusts in."

"I know," Kohaku rubbed his brows. "I'm not sure if I ought to even attempt it, or what kind of problems it might create if I did. But Ukitake-dono, there are things that are important for me to protect too. A lot is going on in my head right now, and I can't put it into

words, even if I wanted to. Pieces of things I've seen, things I've understood... the path I might have to follow, the choices I'm going to have to make. I've always tried to keep out of it, but that's in a way my fault. I can't do that any more. I don't know if telling you what you want to know is a help or a hindrance, but at least, maybe if I do something..."

He closed his eyes, a faint shiver running through his undernourished body, and Juushirou sighed, resting a hand on his shoulder.

"I don't want you to hurt yourself any more using power you can't control," he said softly. "You just said I didn't want to use your power, and I don't. I'm not interested in seeing the future — if we can't find out for ourselves, we're not very good shinigami. Our futures don't rest in your hands, you know. Even if you see things that haven't happened, they're still things we decide to do and they were before you came here. You need to be resting and healing... that's your job right now. I shouldn't have asked you... it was my bad."

Kohaku's eyes snapped open at this, and Juushirou was startled to see tears glittering in their depths.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, a note of something Juushirou couldn't place in his tones. "You're always so kind to me. I can see so many things, Ukitake-dono, but I can't... ever really see... why you care so much what happens to me. I hear every word you say, but it doesn't tally with anything I've ever encountered before."

He swallowed hard, then,

"Father has mentioned you to me before," he said uneasily. "Not in a lot of detail, just from time to time. When talking about the Gotei... sometimes your name came up. I knew he'd met you... and that you'd crossed in some way. You'd been under the control of his sword, correct?"

"Yes," Juushirou agreed, "but it was a long time ago and I wasn't as well trained as I am now. He couldn't do the same to me again."

"No, he couldn't," Kohaku shook his head, reaching out to grasp Juushirou's fingers in his. "Father's Bankai power only works on a person once. He couldn't ever control you again, even if he wanted to."

"I see," Juushirou's expression became thoughtful. "Did he tell you that?"

Kohaku nodded.

“He told me you were the first person he used Bankai on who lived,” he said softly, “so he didn’t know that limitation existed to begin with. He told me that he tried, once, to reestablish his power over you, but it failed. Still, he thought that was an exception, because the circumstances were unusual. When I was a child, he experimented with his spirit power a lot. He made a lot of improvements to his sword, but one thing he could never manage to do was utilise the Bankai release twice on the same soul.”

He sighed.

“The other day you talked about sacrificing innocent people in Seventh District,” he murmured, “and it reminded me of... things. I knew what you said was true, even if I hadn’t wanted to think about it. Father... experimented on people in the Rukon village... sometimes he’d bring them to my hut under his control — to a place they’d never dare go on their own. He chose it so Mother wouldn’t find out and get angry about what he’d done. He’d snare them, then release them, but no matter how he tried, he couldn’t repeat the effect. A lot of them... I think he killed them so they could never talk about his tests or about the fact they’d seen me, but that time is so soaked in nightmares I might..have imagined that as a real memory when it was not.”

“The hut was soaked in an aura of death,” Juushirou pursed his lips. “Shunsui said as much, and we had thought it was from your leaky *reiryoku* — your dreams of death. Maybe it wasn’t that at all. It’s true that since you’ve been here there’s been nothing like that from your aura. Even when you’ve made us see things... so maybe it wasn’t entirely your *reiryoku* Shunsui felt there. Maybe it was pieces of the people Keitarou killed in order to keep his secret — and maybe that’s why being in that hut continued to make you hallucinate so much, thus adding to the negativity in the atmosphere. A vicious circle, with Keitarou right at the heart of it. Somehow that sounds right.”

“Mm...” Kohaku frowned, shrugging his shoulders. “I don’t know. I don’t remember. All I know is that the sword Father made helped me to confine enough spirit power for me to retain longer periods of rationality and so I could leave the hut completely. My memories before that are all very hazy — but I’m quite sure I’m right about Chudokuga’s bankai. These were people who were far weaker spiritually than you or the silver fox, but he couldn’t ensnare them twice. Father physically can’t possess you again, Ukitake-dono... but that fact alone might bring you into danger. If he can’t control you, he might... he might try to remove you.”

“Meaning I might become a target?”

"I think you probably already are. Like Edogawa-san was," Kohaku bit his lip.

"Mitsuki was attacked on purpose?" Juushirou's expression registered shock, and Kohaku nodded.

"To drive you into distraction and despair," he said miserably. "He considers you a problem and he was looking for a solution. Mother was cross, though, about Edogawa-san, and Katsura didn't want to kill her, so Father hasn't tried to do it again since."

"Then everything that happened to Mitsuki is some way my fault, too."

"It's not your fault," Kohaku shook his head. "It's just that Father worries about the fact he knows he can't control you again, and he knows you had the potential to become strong. I think that means next time he'll try and hurt you directly... and probably... not just you."

"Shunsui, maybe?"

"I think so."

"Why are you telling me this? Your father would be angry if he knew you were."

"I know he would," Kohaku admitted, "but even though I love my father, I know what kind of a man he is and what he will do. And I... I don't want him to kill people here. Most of all, though, I don't want him to kill you. You've looked after me and trusted me and protected me even though I've lied so much. I don't want you to die because you shielded me... so I wanted you to be warned, just... just in case."

Juushirou was silent for a moment, then he grinned, patting his companion lightly on the head.

"I appreciate the warning," he said matter-of-factly, "but I'm used to being in positions of danger, and Keitarou doesn't scare me, either. I'm not as naive as I used to be where he is concerned, and I won't be killed by him. I'm not going to be so easily fooled, Koku. Don't worry. If I encounter your father, we'll be having serious words about his parenting skills, but I won't give him a chance to try and hurt me."

Kohaku looked troubled, then he shrugged.

"I've said all I can," he responded, resignation in his expression. "Ukitake-dono, I don't know anything about the spy, and even if I was to try and see it now, I don't know if I'm strong enough. Using my *reiryoku* on Joumei-dono took a lot out of me, and I'm not full strength yet... not by a long shot. Much of my spirit power is in the sword

Father made, and I don't know where it is, even if I wanted to retrieve it. But when you mentioned the subject, I did... I did have a flash of memory, about a dream... or something that I had not so long ago. I don't know if it means anything, and I don't remember it all clearly, but it was the night Sakaki died. I saw the fox kill her, but then, it all blurred into something else. It was like dead souls in the Rukon were calling out to my sister's, either in grief or in solidarity. And bit by bit they became clearer, like real people, with faces and minds. Little by little I was absorbed into one of them. There was rain, and a fight... and a man called Sakanoue. Does that name mean anything to you?"

"Sakanoue," Juushirou's eyes became slits. "Tsunemori mentioned you saying that, and I didn't have a chance to raise it with you yet. Sakanoue was once a Vice Captain here, but I never knew him. Why?"

"Sakanoue... Heiji?"

"I guess so, though I'd have to check for sure. Why?"

"A man who was killed by another shinigami?"

"Sakanoue was killed by Hollow creatures," Juushirou objected, and Kohaku reached out to touch the fabric of Juushirou's *haori*, giving a little shake of his head.

"The man who killed him wore one of these," he said softly. "It was just like yours, but I didn't see the number. It was blurry and wet and I didn't see the man's face. He had a sword, and he killed Sakanoue. Sakanoue wanted to be killed. He was in pain... he'd become a Hollow. The other man... killed him. And he was sad... very sad. I felt as though... he was drowning in sadness. As though the person he killed was important to him — maybe even his son."

Juushirou paled, his expression stricken.

"Killed by a man who might have been his father," he whispered. "Are you sure about that? All the official records say otherwise... but Koku, are you certain of what you saw?"

"Yes," Kohaku nodded his head, his eyes big at Juushirou's reaction. "What is it? Did I say something important?"

"Tell me, Koku, as far as you know, was your father doing experiments on Hollows in Rukongai twenty five years ago?"

"I wasn't alive that long ago," Kohaku pointed out, "but that would've been when he was injured. He almost died, Ukitake-dono. Mother had to nurse him, otherwise he would have. He wasn't able to do anything, let alone practice his science."

“So the thing you saw... it had no connection to your Father?”

“I never saw or heard of it before,” Kohaku shook his head. “The man with the sword... the shinigami with the white coat... he yelled out a name too. I don’t remember what it was, but it began with a ‘K’. It wasn’t Father’s name. It was a name I didn’t know at all.”

“Then the Urahara were right. What happened in Rukongai wasn’t Keitarou’s work, but something or someone else,” Juushirou’s expression darkened, and he got to his feet. “I don’t know if what you’ve told me is important or if it isn’t. Clearly it means something we’ve been told isn’t true, but there may be reasons for that and I don’t want to jump to conclusions without the proper proof. However, if Sakanoue died the way you say he did, it would explain a good deal. I have a strong suspicion I know who the man wearing a *haori* was. The only question is, why was that truth never reported? If things were as you say... if it wasn’t a case of murder, but of a subordinate officer beyond all help...”

“Sakanoue begged the man to do it,” Kohaku agreed. “The man didn’t want to, but he had to. It wasn’t murder, Ukitake-dono. It was... it was mercy. I don’t like death, but even I... understand that.”

He shivered again, and Juushirou sighed, moving to pull the blankets up around the young man’s hunched body.

“You rest now, and don’t think on this any more,” he said gently. “I’ll send someone with some porridge or soup and I want you to eat as much as you can, all right? For the time being, that’s the most important thing you can do. Leave the other stuff with me. I’ll keep your warning in mind, but right now I have to work out what to do about what you’ve told me, and how it fits into what’s happening here and now.”

Something was going on within the boundaries of the Shinigami heartland.

Minami paused at the edge of Haruna’s bustling market, turning to glance in the direction of the barrier, a frown of consternation crossing her features. Though it was not uncommon to sense flurries of spiritual activity from over the other side of the wall, in the past few days there had been far more than usual. The local farmers who came to the centre of the town to trade had complained of distressed livestock and trampled crops, and Minami herself had not tried to trade her weaving there for several days together, anxious at what might happen if she found herself trapped and unable to make a quick

escape when trouble hit. Although not all of the residents were as sensitive to spiritual signals as Minami herself had learned to be, from the buzz of conversation she had heard from other shoppers, she was not alone in sensing the change in the air.

Something was afoot.

Pulling her thin summer wrap more firmly over her shoulders to stifle the sudden shiver that ran down her spine, Minami turned her back on the market, making her way quickly away from the crowds of people before any of them could see the expression on her face. She did not know if it was Keitarou, nor if the recent activity were signs of the fight beginning, but she knew that she no longer wanted anything to do with it. The waves of darkness and death haunted her sleep, and she had realised with sudden, horrifying clarity how much power challenging the shinigami would really require.

Keitarou-sama might be able to think about it, but for ordinary folk like us... there's no chance. If they ever discovered how much we were involved in the abductions... it would be the deaths of all of us.

She drew breath sharply, stopping in her tracks as another, more terrifying thought crossed her mind.

But if Keitarou-sama finds out that nobody here is ready or willing to rise up against the shinigami when such swells of energy as that pour out from beyond the gates... what would he do? If he knew... what would he do?

She glanced down at the basket that hung over her arm, moving her fingers to twitch back the cloth just enough so that she could view the contents.

I never realised how much I came to hide things, because of that man. How much I'm now suspicious of people noticing changes... people who might be my friends, people who might be my enemies. People who might talk about things to the shinigami, or to Keitarou...

She pulled back the cloth, quickening her pace towards her home once more.

No, there's no other choice. Staying here has become too much of a risk. Keitarou-sama might be bringing a war, but if he is... I no longer want to be a pawn in it.

Despite her paranoia, nobody interrupted her journey home and it was with a sigh of relief that she let herself into the small dwelling, setting the basket down on the unit and removing the shawl from around her shoulders, hanging it on its usual hook. Though it was still a bright, sunshiny day, she crossed the floor quickly, moving to fasten the shutters so that only the thinnest lines of light pierced through the cracks into the wood, illuminating the chamber in an odd, twilight

gloom.

A noise from the doorway told her that she was no longer alone, and her heart leapt in her throat, relief coursing through her that she had taken the precaution of shutting the window slats before anyone outside had had cause to see in.

“Minami?”

His voice was soft, slightly hoarse and blurry, as though her coming home had woken him from a deep sleep, and as she turned to meet his gaze, Minami was able to make out the hazy expression in the confused golden eyes, his dark hair muzzy and sticking up all ways around his head. Despite her initial annoyance, her heart softened at the sight of him, and she tut-tutted under her breath, moving across the chamber to pat down the unruly mane before loosing and retying the piece of white ribbon that held it back from his face.

“I thought I told you that coming up here in the day was dangerous,” she spoke gently, her tones mildly scolding, and her companion frowned, rubbing his eyes as though trying to bring himself into a better state of awareness.

“You did,” he acknowledged at length. “I forgot. I’m sorry. I just woke up.”

“I should’ve woken you before I left, but you were sleeping so much more peacefully than you have done, and I wanted you to rest,” Minami finished tying the hair ribbon, resting a hand reassuringly on his shoulder. “I don’t like it when you have nightmares. I don’t know how to reach you and bring you out of them — I don’t know what you see, and you won’t share them with me.”

“I don’t even know myself,” the man admitted, running his hands through the hair that Minami had just neatened and rendering it almost as messy as it had been moments before. “When I wake, I remember nothing. Fragments... that’s all. Nothing that makes sense. Nothing at all.”

“But you remember me, don’t you?” Minami eyed the skewed ribbon in resignation, before meeting his gaze with a heartfelt one of her own. “You came back to me, so you must... mustn’t you? You know that you can trust me, so you must remember...?”

She faltered, remembering the shock she had had when, some weeks earlier, she had returned home from market to find him huddled and alone on her living room floor, staring up at her with the bewildered, wary eyes of prey awaiting a predator’s attack. Though he

had been robed exactly as he had been the last time she had seen him, it had been the expression in the golden gaze that had torn her heart from her chest and ripped it into shreds of both grief and overwhelming joy. The face was different, altered permanently by the mass of experiments he had undergone to save his life, and his clothing was foreign and stained with blood. His eyes, though, were full of life she had not seen there in a decade, and at the sight of him, all she had been able to do was fling her arms around him, sobbing pitifully into his chest. He had said nothing, and at first, had not even tried to move, but, little by little, Minami had felt his fingers close hesitantly around her upper body, and then, in a whisper so soft she felt sure she must have imagined it, she had heard the three syllables of her name.

“Minami.”

He sighed now, lowering his hands from his head and reaching out to take her fingers in his.

“I was wandering for a long time in a deep, dark tunnel,” he said softly. “I don’t know how, or why, or who led me there. Sometimes there’s a voice, but that is like a distant memory, drifting away and I don’t remember who it was who spoke to me. I know... bad things happened. Something happened so that I don’t remember them, but in my dreams... sometimes, I think that’s what I see. Although I don’t remember, it’s how I feel, when I wake. As though everything that was ever important to me was taken away.”

“I wasn’t taken away,” Minami squeezed the pale fingers in hers. “I was always here, Naoto. I’ve been here since the start, and I’ve never given up. A woman never does, you know, when she loves a man. Even if you don’t remember how we met, or when we became husband and wife, I don’t mind. So long as you trust me, and want to be here, with me, that’s all I need. Maybe the memories will come back, or maybe they won’t. I don’t know what happened to you to make you this way, so I can’t tell for sure. It’s all right, though. We don’t need to worry about the past. We need to look to the future, instead.”

“The future,” Her companion echoed the word as though it were filled with wonder and mystery, and despite herself, Minami grinned, reaching up on tiptoes to kiss him on the forehead.

“Yes,” she said lightly. “The future we always intended to have, before problems intervened.”

“Problems?” At this he pulled back from her, eying her in dismay.

“Did I... did I cause trouble for you, Minami? I can’t imagine ever wanting to do that, but if I did...”

“Men always cause problems for the women who love them,” Despite herself, Minami laughed, shrugging her shoulders. “It’s a burden we accept when we choose to marry them. It’s all right, Naoto-kun. All’s well now, and that’s all that matters to me.”

She slipped her hand into his properly, leading him across the chamber to the basket of food.

“I bought your favourite plums,” she added. “You used to take me to the river when we were courting, and you’d always bring plums, but eat most of them yourself. I thought it might help you remember times we spent together... those memories at least, I’d like you to retrieve.”

“Plums,” her companion said thoughtfully. “I don’t remember, but if you say I do, then I believe you. I’m hungry, anyhow. I haven’t had anything to eat today yet.”

“Well, you can help me prepare them,” Minami told him firmly, “and whilst we do, I’m going to talk to you about something else... about us leaving here and settling somewhere else, far from this place.”

“Leaving?” A look of consternation crossed his features. “But this is... our home. Isn’t it? We grew up here... didn’t we?”

“We did.” A look of bittersweet nostalgia glittered in Minami’s eyes, and she nodded her head. “We did, but I think it’s better that we don’t stay. You’ve been away a long time, and people here are superstitious. They don’t expect the dead to rise up again — and a lot of our old friends believe you died a long time ago.”

There was silence, then,

“Did I?”

“Did you what?”

“Die, a long time ago?”

“Silly,” Minami patted him lightly on the head. “If you had, why would you be here now? Don’t be stupid.”

“Maybe it is stupid,” Naoto rubbed his head absently. “Just, I feel as though I awoke from a deep sleep, and half of who I was was missing. I came here on instinct, but I don’t remember why or who sent me. If anyone even did. Everything is so jumbled up inside of me,

and I can't piece enough together to understand. I thought... maybe if I died... maybe that would explain..."

"Do you think I'd be married to a dead man?" Minami arched an eyebrow. "Don't say such stupid things again. You didn't die, but a lot of people thought you did because you were gone for so long. That's all, so don't dwell on it any more."

She pulled two small plates from the cupboard, setting them down on the unit with a thud, as if to affirm her statement.

"We'll eat, and we'll plan a fresh start in a new part of Seireitei," she continued. "I've heard of a lot of places where thread is cheap and plentiful and there are many more dye colours available at market, so it won't be difficult to find trade. Here it's getting more expensive to produce and with all the people travelling over the border, there is a lot of competition during the Spring and Autumn seasons. I've been saving my money, little by little, so we have enough to buy a little land, too. We could grow some of our own things, and then we wouldn't have to haggle at market quite so much. You used to be good with that kind of thing, when we were small, so you could do that whilst I focused on my weaving. Besides, this place here is too close to the past and too close to danger. I don't want you in danger any more, Naoto-kun. Your job before... it was very dangerous. I don't want that any more... I want to leave here and start anew, somewhere peaceful where nobody asks us any questions and we can just be as we were before. I don't want to be always worrying about you. I want to be a proper wife, have a family, do the things we intended on doing when we married."

"Minami," the pale cheeks flushed lightly with colour, and a genuine smile of pleasure crossed Naoto's lips. He nodded.

"If you say so, then I trust you," he said. "If you want that, we'll go somewhere else. I don't mind."

Minami let out her breath in a rush, her gaze flitting to the slatted window.

The Shinigami opened one of those yawning holes into nothing that usually spells nothing but disaster. It was a big one, too, and there was a lot of spirit power, which means a lot of individuals travelling through. I don't know where they're going or why, but I was the wife of an Onmitsukidou long enough to know what those things are for. Keitarou-sama's movements, and yours, were always through those things. I don't want you to be here if he or the shinigami come, and I don't want you to remember or recognise anything about them either. I want you to forget the

last ten years, and whatever it was Keitarou did to you to pull you away from me. I don't know how you came to be like this, but even with your memories half missing, you're more alive than you've been for so long. And... I want to keep you this way. Whatever lengths it takes, Naoto, this time I'm going to protect you. The shinigami, the Onmitsukidou and everything else is in the past. Let me remember the horrible times for you. When we leave this place, nobody will know where to find us, and that's for the best.

At least from Haruna, crossing the border is no challenge. We'll go deep into District Three, far from Shihouin land, and start over. Maybe even into District Four — who knows? I've heard that border is easy to cross, too, and District Four is meant to be both beautiful and peaceful.

She shot him a sidelong glance, watching him take a plum, glance at it, and then, clumsily, pick up the knife and begin to pare and peel it.

You're the only reason I did anything for Keitarou-sama. If I have you, I don't want anything to do with him. So I'll take you and I'll run. We'll go to ground. And then...

Her eyes narrowed.

This time Suzuki Naoto will really have died. I've called you Naoto since you appeared, so you answer to it now, but when you arrived, the only name you could remember was the one that man gave you. Much as I wish it were otherwise, it's the one that's ingrained in your heart and your memories now. Maybe accepting that is also accepting the Suzuki Naoto I married has died and gone... but even if I couldn't do that, he'll remain a wanted man. Naoto might not remember doing it, but I heard the rumours about the escaped prisoner who murdered a man called Kounou and fled into the night. I alone remember who Kounou was and what he did to you, so I knew it was you and it was his blood that covered you when I first found you. Suzuki Naoto might've been innocent then, but now, ten years on, they really would hunt him down and kill him. Better that he disappear forever... which means playing along with your delusion and accepting that from now on our name will have to be Kurotsuchi. Wherever we go and whatever we do, there's no escaping it. If that's who you believe you are, that's who I'll have to accept you as... even if it hurts every time I bring it to mind.

"Minami?" Naoto's sticky right hand brushed against her shoulder, adorning the soft pink fabric with plum fingerprints, and she turned, offering him a rueful smile.

"I was just thinking," she said thoughtfully. "When we find a new place to live, we ought to repeat our wedding vows. You don't remember them, and it's been a long time. It would be a nice way to

begin our new lives back together, don't you think?"

Author's Note: Suzuki/Kurotsuchi

Well, people poked me and said he needed closure, and I did have it in mind to do this at some point before the story ended. This will probably be his last appearance in the story, so the path from this point (whether he regains his memories, and so on), are for the reader to decide and imagine for themselves. Instead of writing a boring list of people going through a Senkaimon into the Real World, you got this scene instead ;)

Also, here's Kai, being mean to his prisoner and to Juu and Shun. ;) He's always so refreshing to write.

57. Kyouka's Message

Chapter Fifty Six: Kyouka's Message

The pathway was long and winding, taking him deep into the heart of a dense, rich forest of green.

Kohaku paused for a moment to catch his breath, glancing around him for any sign of a familiar landmark, but there was none. This was not Rukongai, nor was it the small part of Seireitei with which he was now familiar, but something else entirely, its ambience calm but innately surreal. He reached out a finger to brush it against the branches of the nearest tree, finding he could touch it, but the sensation felt odd and unreal, as though it were nothing more than a painted illusion into which he had somehow stepped.

He had never been here before, but something guided him forwards, ever deeper, along the deep, wooded path. It curved steeply, winding past things that, out of the corner of his eye he was sure he saw shimmer with light, but when he turned to glance at them, they were gone. Had he imagined them? Perhaps. They had been like ghosts against his awareness, but he was not afraid of them, and so he pressed on.

Was this a vision?

He paused for a moment, considering this. It was unusual for him to have such control of his mental faculties when in the grip of one of the psychic terrors that drove him to his knees, but there was something so strange in the aura here that he could not equate it with reality.

Could it be a dream?

He quickly discarded this thought. He did not dream. His dreams were reality, past, present or future — he did not see the chimeras of imagination that others did. Whatever this was, it was alien to him — but he did not feel in danger, and so he pressed on, through the ever thickening briars and ferns.

At the foot of the slope there was a door, a large, wooden construction nailed together from planks of oak. It too gave him a surreal feeling, for it appeared to have loomed out of the trees themselves, with nothing that it was obviously hinged to. The surface of the door was blank, except for a single brass plaque, into which were hammered two distinctively antiquated characters:

Future illusion?

He raised a finger to touch the tarnished characters, almost without realising he was going to, but as he did, a spark of something jumped from the plaque towards his hand, illuminating the frame of the door in a glow of eerie light. The divide creaked and swung away, revealing a pathway beyond, cloaked in pitch darkness. Whereas the outside world he had walked through had been daytime, this world beyond appeared to be night, but no stars or moon illuminated the sky, and in the gloom it was difficult to make out even the most basic shapes.

Kohaku faltered, unwilling to go through the door, and a sudden chill wind whipped through him, freezing him right to the core of his bones. It was not ice that had frozen him, but a spasm of fear, momentarily paralysing his heart.

Step forward, coward, else I will rip your limbs from your body and toss you inside in pieces myself.

Kohaku's eyes widened in dismay as from the left and right, the branches of the trees began to stretch and merge together, their twisted ends appearing like fingers reaching out to penetrate his upper body. They bent and swung in an attempt to snare his wrists and ankles, and the snags and dips in the trunks seemed suddenly like the scowling, screaming faces of demons. Before he knew what he was doing, Kohaku had darted through the open doorway into the blackness beyond.

There was no going back, for the door disappeared into nothing as soon as his feet touched the soft earth on the other side, and sweat beaded Kohaku's brow as a fresh wave of fear pervaded his young body. Although the surroundings were new to him, the voice had been all too familiar.

Kyouka? This is your doing, isn't it, Kyouka? Where are you? Why... why are you here? What do you intend to do to me now?

There was no response, just the warning ripple of the freezing wind at his back, encouraging to take first one step, then another forward into the unknown gloom.

Reluctantly Kohaku obeyed, finding that as he moved further, his eyes began to become accustomed to the dim light. Where at first he had seen nothing, he could now make out the reaching arches and domes of an unfamiliar building, its turrets and peaks set against the velvet canvas of the night sky. The lack of moon and stars reminded him of nights in Rukongai, and he set his teeth, realising that this odd shadowy structure was where he was meant to be heading.

I wish you'd tell me what you intend to do. I'm fed up of being treated like your toy. You delight in tormenting me, so it makes me even more suspicious that this place is so quiet.

At length he reached the building, resting his palms against the unfamiliar stone walls and feeling his way across towards something that might resemble a door or window through which he could gain entry. From here he could faintly sense the presence of something inside, but with the cold, warning breeze still lingering around him, he did not dare hesitate a second time.

Although it was still too dark to see, on touching the stone, images flashed through his mind and he realised that the building he was now standing outside was some kind of mediaeval fortress, yet not built in any style he had ever seen, not even in his wildest delusions. The windows were narrow and flanked by thicker stone, some of which were covered with long bars of iron, resembling a jail. This reminded Kohaku of his cage in the Rukon, and he shivered back, inadvertently tripping over his own feet and stumbling on the uneven ground. Putting out his hands to stop himself, he felt wood for the first time, letting out a yelp of surprise and dismay as it gave way beneath his touch. A second door creaked open, and Kohaku tumbled over into the entrance hall, dazed and confused.

Despite the darkness of the outside, this place was lit with torches in sconces dotted around what was a huge stone chamber, with high ceilings soaring up and up. The strange, musty smell of burning dust and cobweb told Kohaku that his entrance had somehow triggered flame in these alcoves, yet the place as a whole had been left in a state of severe neglect. Heavy tapestries hung against the wall, their embroidered surfaces so thick with dust and detritus that their bright colours had dulled and their images were all but concealed. Spider webs hung from every imaginable orifice, the dessicated remains of several scattered on the floor. Gazing at them, Kohaku was reminded of his father's sword spirit, and a sense of unease curled up inside of him.

"What is this place, Kyouka?" he demanded. "Why did you make me come here? What does it mean? All these spiders, all this dust... what does it mean?"

"Why are you asking me that?" the response was sullen and defiant, echoing out from nowhere into the stone chamber. "You were the one who chose it. This mess is yours, so don't complain to me about it now."

"Mine..?" Kohaku faltered, then moved towards one of the tapestries, touching it lightly with his fingers. The dust darkened his pale fingers, but as he brushed some of it away, he was aware of the curls and colours that lurked beneath. He rubbed away a little more, revealing a horse's legs, and

then, a little further up, the beast's head, tossing and proud in the morning light. It was as though the prancing creature was stepping free of the fog and mist of a thousand years of neglect, and despite himself, Kohaku felt guilty.

I don't understand. I don't understand.

No, you don't.

The voice was once more inside his head, bitter and dark as ever it had been.

You are by far the most stupid soul I've ever had the misfortune to linger within, in all my long history. I have known cowards and heroes and men of particular might... but never have I known one as stupid to the world around him as you.

There was a snort of derision, then,

I don't know why I even brought you here. When you spoke to the shinigami, I thought, at last, you had begun to understand. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe I am the truly stupid one... allowing myself to be confined inside such a dull youth.

Are you going to tell me to kill people again?

Defiance flared in Kohaku's brown eyes, and the chill of cold air rippled around the chamber once more, emphasising Kyouka's clear disapproval.

I don't need to tell you to do that. You are the one who insists on doing it. If I encourage you, so what? At least if you decide to slaughter people, it proves you can decide on doing something.

Why are you always like this with me?

Follow Keitarou's plans, do as he tells you. You're clearly too weak to be anything other than another of his puppets. You don't have a will of your own... so become his and do as he tells you. Kill people. Slaughter them. Cut out their hearts. Show them no mercy, and bring this whole world down around the shoulders of the shinigami.

Why do you keep saying things like that!?

Because you're a coward and a weakling. I despise that in you. You have such potential. Such strength. I have tried every conceivable method possible to change your outlook. I have shown you horrors. I have threatened you. I have sought to steal your body, and yet you still conceal yourself in darkness. This place is *you*, shut away and coated in your father's cobwebs. Every inch of this place is covered with him and his presence. All life is shut away from it... and from you. You have done this to me and to yourself. So become the killer he expects you to be. If

you can't even understand the consequences of your choices so far, then there's nothing to be done but make you the monster people expect you to be.

I am not a monster!

Really?

There was no mercy in the response.

You told the shinigami you were. You have always believed you were. You've lived your life hiding under another name, never standing up for your real identity. Worse, you even disdain it enough to treat your true self as a stranger.

There were... that was because...

Your brother named you "Koku" as a nickname, a shortened version of the "Kohaku" you were born with.

Kyouka continued relentlessly.

Knowing this — *understanding* this — you deliberately chose another character with which to write your name. More, you chose the character for *black* — the complete, direct opposite of Kohaku's "white". Still, you wonder why this place is steeped in darkness? You steeped yourself in it when you chose to write your name and consider yourself that way. Nobody else made that decision. That was *you*.

Koku...?

Kohaku glanced at his hands, suddenly feeling guilty.

Why do you expect me, who knows you the best, to consider you differently? You are a monster. You are a coward, a fool and a liar. You hide and you retreat and you deny to yourself your true purpose in this world.

"I don't have to listen to this. Let me go, Kyouka. Let me go!" The words burst from Kohaku's lips, his emotions no longer allowing him to keep the conversation merely inside his head.

"Why?" Kyouka's retort was terse, echoing around the chamber once more. "When, in all of the past twenty one years have you ever let me go? When have you ever shown me the mercy you demand for yourself?"

"What?"

Kohaku's brows knitted together in confusion.

"Kyouka, where are you? If you're here, show yourself to me. Let me see you, face to face. Tell me what you mean, and stop talking in these stupid

riddles. You've done nothing but torment me for as long as I can remember. Why should I trust in you, when I've never even seen your face?"

For a moment there was silence, and Kohaku felt certain that the voice had once more drawn back into the recesses of his mind, but then, the entire room became filled with a dull, hazy glow of bluish energy, spreading out from behind one of the many tapestries that hung around the walls. This one was as dusty as all the others, but, unlike them, it bore no central image across its surface, simply a faded border which had become frayed and worn at the edges. The border was a floral motif, a flower which, had Kohaku known it, was the Yuukirin, a blossom from District Eight well known for its ability to bloom the year round, regardless of the weather. It appeared faded and wilted in this damaged state, however, as though its courage had failed it and it had submitted to some greater, darker power.

Slowly, and not without misgivings, Kohaku approached the tapestry, pushing it back so he could see beneath. For a moment, the eerie blue light dazzled him, but as he shielded his gaze with his free hand, he saw that it was not just a light, but the metallic surface of what appeared to be a mirror, grand and gilted with a petal design across the edges. These petals too resembled the ones that adorned the tapestry, and though the mirror appeared old and somewhat battered, the surface was smooth and clear, without a single scratch. Mesmerised, Kohaku took another step towards it, allowing the tapestry to fall back over him as he stretched out his right hand to touch the glimmering surface.

At the contact, the blue light dimmed and energy prickled through his skin as, in the depths of the mirror, his own reflection began to take form before him. The image became more and more clear, and Kohaku let out a little gasp, drawing his hand back, for although he could now see himself in full focus, robed in exactly the same way as he currently stood, his entire body was swathed in thick, heavy chains, and, across the palms of both hands were the unmistakable reddish smears of blood.

"So at last, you see it for yourself."

Kyouka's voice was less echoey now, as though the speaker was very close, but to Kohaku's horror, it was the lips of his own reflection that moved, his own brown eyes staring into him with accusation in their depths.

"I don't understand," Kohaku whispered, and the apparition in the mirror reached out a blooded hand, its spectral form penetrating through the glass and closing in a vice grip around Kohaku's wrist. Kohaku struggled to pull away, but it was too late, for the apparition had him in a tight hold, and as the air around him became more difficult to breathe, a

sense of deep foreboding began to seep into every inch of the young boy's body.

"Then let me make you," the lips of the reflection moved once again. "What you see in this mirror is your soul. Every link of the chain that surrounds you is a link of fear, hesitation, regret... of cowardice. The blood on your hands is the blood of those you have killed."

"I don't kill people! I hate killing! I hate death!" Kohaku was angry, and the apparition smirked.

"You don't do anything," he replied disparagingly. "You sit and hide and pretend you don't have anything to do with what else goes on. The people killed by your father, your sister, your brother — how many of those have you managed to save? How many have you even tried to?"

"Souja-dono!"

"Really?" The apparition shook his head. "Don't be foolish. You killed that shinigami vice captain. The Endou. You didn't save him."

"I did no such thing!"

The apparition's eyes narrowed, the ghostly grip tightening around Kohaku's wrists.

"This is what I despise about you," he said blackly. "You know, deep down, why the shinigami died. He didn't die because your sister slashed him apart, nor because your father wished him dead. He died because you, the only person who could have saved his life, did not. Everything that has happened since has been your fault. The war you want to prevent, you are causing, because you refuse to choose a side. What else can I do to make you move in one direction or the other? You try to keep out of it, and claim you have no right to intervene. I'm telling you that you, of all people, have to interfere. Your life, your soul, all of it is more powerful than most of those insects you scuttle away from. You could've killed the Onmitsukidou, and protected your father, but you didn't. You could've captured him, and given him to the shinigami, but you didn't. You let him run home to his widow, where neither side will ever find him, and erased his memories, so nobody will put together the truth.

"The march to war continues, because nothing comes to a conclusion. Your sister died. Your brother will spend what remains of his life an outlaw, hounded into the ground — but you acted neither to protect him, nor to incriminate him. The shinigami seek him, but it wasn't you who saved his life and prevented him from bleeding his last in Seireitei. You pretend you haven't seen, but you have and you do. All these things you know give you power. It is power great enough to control and create the

world from its barest roots, to dominate it and subjugate it as you see fit, yet you run and hide like a shadow from the sun. I am part of that power and if you won't see these things for yourself, all I can do is make you, even if it breaks you."

Tears glittered on Kohaku's lashes, as images of his brother's reckless flight through the District lands flooded his mind, followed by the attack of Hajime's sword and the subsequent healing performed by Mitsuki on his fallen body.

"Edogawa-san saved Katsu-nii," he murmured. "She went after him and saved his life, where I didn't."

"No, you didn't. You never do. You take one step, but never finish the journey. You leave things open and uncertain, and when you do, the people whose lives you claim to value, die."

Kohaku closed his eyes, the tears trickling down his cheeks. Slowly, he felt the spectral hand pull away from his wrist.

"So do you see, now, why you killed the shinigami? Nobody but you killed him. Your indecision. Your cowardice. Your ability to prevent it wasted."

Kohaku did not respond, unable to muster the words to form a reply.

"You haven't even the strength to cut your own throat," Kyouka's voice continued, cold and judgemental. "The last one I knew, when he feared me too much and could no longer handle me, he took his own life rather than let me dominate his soul. I despised his weakness, but at least he set me free. You lack even that conviction... you confine me to this dark, dusty prison, letting me tarnish and rust with disuse, yet you don't even think of letting me out. Why should I give you the slightest bit of kindness or respect, when you have treated me in the exact same way your father has always treated you?"

Kohaku's eyes snapped open at this, dismay glittering in their depths, and the apparition nodded its head.

"My name is Kyouka, but it is not my whole name," it said gravely. "The mirror into which you now gaze is my true form. The images reflected there are truth as seen through my eyes. I have lived many existences before I came to know you. Only the strongest souls with the most prescient skills of awareness and understanding are capable of bonding with the strands of my power. With each incarnation, my nature changes. The second part of my name changes depending on the soul I bond with. The piece of it you do not know lingers within you and your spirit. Only your resolve can forge it, therefore I cannot tell you what it is. Your ability to

come here means you already know it, but you haven't bothered to think of using it."

"A... but... I don't know anything about you. I don't know any name, just Kyouka, that's all I've ever..." Kohaku's protests petered out into incoherence, and his ghostly reflection twisted its face into a scornful scowl.

"You know it, but you are not ready to recognise it. Or you are too stupid. One or the other," it responded unsympathetically. "I told you, I can't tell you what it is. I can only tell you what it has been before, names that are dead and as useless as broken keys to this prison door. Without my full name, I am helpless — shut away here in this godforsaken place of dead spiders and dust."

It stretched out a hand again, a thin finger pointing towards the frame of the mirror.

"Kyouka means 'Mirror of Flowers.' it added." You've realised that now, though, haven't you? The flowers that glitter at my edges are the flower of courage... the symbol of the warrior Kyouraku of generations past."

"Kyouraku?" Kohaku repeated the word numbly, an image of Shunsui flitting across his features, and the apparition lowered his head.

"You are not an Endou," he said simply. "You are not an Urahara. You are a mixture of many bloodlines, but Aizen is originally a Kyouraku name. In the long distant past, the Kyouraku rose to become a family of significant spiritual power and military influence across Seireitei. Long, long ago, in the time when zanpakutou themselves were still a newly crafted art, I was first forged in the spiritual heart of a soul whose descendents would one day take the name of Kyouraku. That first soul chose these blooms to adorn my frame. With time, they became Kyouraku flowers, and they symbolise the ability to bloom in adversity. Some of your greatest ancestors did exactly that, but you are a pale shadow in comparison to their determination and resolve. But even if you turn your head away from it, your bloodline is still theirs. In the coldest, deepest winters, the Yuukirin flowers across District Eight. And even here, within your hopeless, sorry excuse for a soul, they can bloom — because you are not an Endou. You are not an Urahara. You have the brown hair and dark eyes of the Kyouraku. Your spirit power comes from a different, sleeping genetic line. Your father is not ignorant of that fact, either. He was born Urahara, but he knows that his mother was part Kyouraku, and he understands far more about me — and about you — than he's told you thus far. More, probably, than even the modern Kyouraku do today."

“Who are you?” Kohaku whispered. “What are you, really, and why are you telling me these things?”

“I can’t tell you that,” Kyouka said matter-of-factly. “If you’re too dense to work it out, I suggest you start giving it some proper thought. This is the first time I’ve brought you here. It’s the first time you’ve been able to see the forest, and the first time you’ve reached the door that separates this place from that. Whether it be the last is up to you. I’ve given you the final warning I ever will. You of all people understand your destiny. You know, deep down, why you were born. Why you connected with me. Why you were given the power you have. You have a choice. The only one who can make a difference in this war is you. You have to decide once and for all, where your loyalties lie.”

There was a pause, then the reflection in the mirror’s smooth surface began to blur and distort, forming a sequence of other images, broken and bloody before Kohaku’s horrified eyes.

“Make that choice,” the voice echoed out of nowhere once more. “This is the last chance you have. People will die. They must die. But if you don’t make the choice, they will all die. It’s up to you. Take control of this, or I will take control of you. And if that happens, you will find out exactly how much of a monster you really are.”

Kohaku’s eyes snapped open, his breath coming in heavy, ragged gasps and his pulse racing wildly through his body as he struggled to bring his thoughts and his vision into clear focus.

He was back in the little chamber at the rear of the Thirteenth, and the familiar plain walls and ceiling of the small sickroom were suddenly more reassuring than they had ever been before. Whether it had been a dream or a vision, he did not know, but the raw, empty sense within his heart was all too real, the memories of what he had seen vividly burned into his thoughts.

Kyouka.

He pulled himself into a sitting position, dragging his blankets over his shoulders as a shiver ran through his thin frame. The room appeared empty at first glance, but as he adjusted his position, he caught sight of Mitsuki, curled up in the corner of the room, fast asleep. The sight of her struck him for a moment, remembering afresh the images Kyouka had shown him within his dream.

Edogawa-san. Now I understand why Katsura told you so much about me. I knew he cared for you... but I didn’t know why your presence in his life was so significant. I misjudged — I thought you a threat. I was wrong. You saved him, instead. Because of you, my brother is somewhere out there,

alive. Even if I can't reach him... I know he's there. You did that... regardless of what you must now know he did to you and your friends. I'm sorry I doubted in you at all. And I'm sorry if you got into trouble because of it.

Mitsuki stirred slightly, uttering a faint murmur, but she did not wake up, and Kohaku watched her for a moment, comforted by the soft sound of her breathing. If he had wanted, he knew, he could've woken her. He could've told her that he'd had a dream, and asked for something to help him sleep more deeply, but though he knew that he could now trust in her, he made no attempt to stir her from her sleep. Instead he sat back against the wall, a pensive expression in his dark eyes as he considered everything Kyouka had told him. Though he did not want to believe it, he knew he did. For the first time, the voice had taken on a different approach, talking to him and remonstrating with him rather than terrorising him into submission, but deep beneath those words he had sensed the undertone of the other's frustration and pain.

Kyouka said he had infested other souls. Only the strongest souls could bond with him. The last one that had had killed himself, cut his own throat because he had been frightened — maybe in the way I've always been frightened of Kyouka's bullying. He said he was old... far older than just this lifetime. And that that power originated... not in Father's Urahara, nor mother's Endou. It originated in another place. In the third genetic line that I had forgotten my family claimed... that of the Kyouraku.

His eyes became slits as he drew an image of Shunsui to mind. *That's why that man is so important. That's why, when I saw him, I realised who and what he was. It didn't make sense then. It does now. The only question is... how...*

This is the last chance you have. People will die. They must die. But if you don't make the choice, they will all die. It's up to you. Take control of this, or I will take control of you. And if that happens, you will find out exactly how much of a monster you really are.

Kyouka's words echoed through his thoughts again, and he shook his head, pushing back the blanket and using the wall to pull himself carefully and silently to his feet. Picking his way past Mitsuki so as not to stir her from her slumbers, he tried to open the door, but realised that it was once more locked, and he frowned, resolution glittering in his dark brown eyes. Glancing once more at the sleeping healer, he pressed his hand to the door in a clumsy imitation of how he had seen Souja force entry into the locked hut in Rukongai, closing his eyes and willing any spark of spirit power lurking within him to come forth. Though he had read about many kidou spells, he had never had occasion to fire one, so it took a couple of minutes before a brief,

ragged flare of energy spat out from the tips of his fingers, melting the lock and almost setting the whole of the door on fire. The divide slid open, and Kohaku glanced at the scorch marks searing up the seam of the wood with a pensive expression on his face, before stepping out into the corridor and closing the door behind him.

I guess I really don't know how to use my spirit power at all. If that's what Kyouka means, maybe he's right. Oh well.

He turned, closing his eyes once more and using his senses to root out where Juushirou currently was.

I don't know how to find Kyouraku-dono on my own. I can sense his presence, if I try, but it's far from here and I'm not strong enough to walk so far on my own right now. Besides, leaving Thirteenth is dangerous. If I spoke to Ukitake-dono, though, surely he'd know. He said they were friends, so surely he'd find a way... that I could speak to that man. I won't let you make a monster of me, Kyouka... so I guess, for now, this is what I've chosen to do.

Well, that was the last.

Anabomi stood in the entrance to the Ninth Division, his gaze following the retreating shadows of the two neat patrols of officers as they disappeared in the direction of Inner Seireitei's barrier gate. A faint flicker of resentment stirred in his normally peaceful grey eyes — he had obeyed Guren's instructions, but it did not make him any happier about the need to do it.

It was just past dawn, and several hours earlier had seen the departure of the various Captains and squad representatives through Third Division's big Senkai gate, bound for the Real World. It had come about more quickly than anyone had expected, leaving the remaining divisions in something of a flurry to get their drills and replacement schedules in place and activated as soon as possible. On reviewing Hyakken's paperwork the night before, Anabomi had seen for himself that more than half of the Division's strength would be required to cover all the areas currently under Sixth Division's auspices, and, as Sixth was a larger Division by far on account of its direct Clan connections, the burden was far heavier than the Ninth Division Captain would have liked.

He let out a heavy sigh.

But it must be done, God help me. Whatever I think of it in private, the Ninth cannot be seen as lacking.

He leaned up against the gatepost, folding his arms across his chest

and watching the final members of the deployed patrols vanish from his line of sight. They would not return until summoned, not until Guren himself gave the order, Anabomi decided pettily, then frowned, berating himself for such a childish reaction.

It is not Guren-sama's fault. This is just the way Inner Seireitei works. I cannot complain about what I have so far failed to change.

"You look like the weight of the world is on your shoulders, Anabomi,"

The sound of his neighbour's voice, cheery and upbeat as ever hailed him from across the other side of the thoroughfare, and he swung around in surprise, casting Hakubei a look of confusion.

"Hakubei-dono?"

"Who else?" Hakubei grinned, shrugging his shoulders. "I'd be worried if anyone else was prancing around wearing my *haori*. It still fits me — quite well, I think, given everything."

"It appears that Tenth are rather without duties, if you can spare time to make such light humour about your *haori*," Anabomi's lip curled slightly in censure. "May I suggest that, if you have no pressing business, you look to see how your men might assist other areas which are not so well covered as your own?"

"Ah. You got a summons from the Boss too, huh?" Hakubei's expression became one of sympathetic comprehension.

"Too?" Despite himself, Anabomi looked surprised, and Hakubei nodded.

"Kanshi and I have spent most of the night trying to make mathematical problems that don't add up slot into squad patrols we don't have enough people to fill," he said with a weary sigh. "Not much you can do when the order comes but try and make it fit, right? From the look on your face you've been having the same problem — and, maybe, about the same amount of sleep."

"Oh, I see," Anabomi's expression relaxed slightly into a wry smile, and he inclined his head slightly. "Yes, you might say that. I'm sorry, I was terse with you. This business is preying on all our nerves — and Ninth are a lot more diminished in numbers than I should like. But what else is there to be done? The duties must be filled, and apparently we must fill them."

"Does Guren-sama know you're stretched like this, covering his absence?"

“No, but what’s the point in reporting it?” Anabomi shrugged his shoulders in graceful resignation. “The job must still be done, and it would look bad if Ninth claimed they could not handle it alone. I do not wish to ask for other squads to cover Sixth’s territory, not if I can help it. The Real World trip bothers me, too. I do not know if Keitarou will be found — but I do believe he is very dangerous and ought not be handled lightly.”

“I don’t think sending Guren-sama, Okaasama, Midori-sama and Nagesu-sama is taking anything ‘lightly,’” Hakubei mused. “I did wonder if Tenth might be deployed over the border, but it turned out not. I can’t compare to Okaasama in a battle of swords — she’d still slice me to ribbons without needing to catch her breath, so she is the more logical choice.”

“Mm,” Anabomi’s expression clouded slightly, and he sighed again. “I believe I am in the same position. I am no spiritual match for Guren-sama, nor will I ever be, no matter how hard I work. I just... worry about this trip a lot more than perhaps I should. Keitarou has caused such damage in the past. He killed Guren-sama’s son... and loss of life can make one reckless in seeking revenge. Moreover, my Clan leader and Shirogane-sama and Ryuu-sama, the only men of blood good enough to succeed him are at his side, in the same amount of potential peril. I do not want any more corpses at his hands, Hakubei-dono. It reminds me too much of twenty five years ago... and I dislike remembering that past.”

“Twenty five years ago?” Hakubei’s eyes narrowed. “You mean the Rukon? The deaths there? But nobody has ever proven Keitarou’s involvement in that, and Nagesu-dono and Sekime believe...”

“I know what is believed,” Anabomi held up his hand, effectively cutting off his neighbour mid-speech, “but I do not subscribe to it. Keitarou is a horrific, dangerous individual and he cannot be underestimated. He threw my Clan into disorder and distress, and was somehow able to survive the attack of an extremely powerful shinigami sword — something that no normal being ought be able to do. Then, such a short time later, the Rukongai incident occurred. Shougo was killed by Keitarou, Hakubei-dono. I am sure of that. There is no firm evidence, that is all.”

“Shougo-dono, huh,” Hakubei’s expression took on a look of understanding. “I’m sorry. I’d forgotten — you were friends, weren’t you?”

“We grew up training together, in one way or another, mostly at my family’s estate,” Anabomi turned his head, shielding his eyes from

the sun as he gazed up at the bright, cloudless sky. “Yes, we were friends. There is little I would not have done for him, but I could not do anything to help him in the Rukon. He spoke of it, before that final trip — how he believed Keitarou was there, somewhere, even though he didn’t know where... and it seems he was right.”

“Shougo-dono said as much?” Hakubei was startled. “Did you not report that at the time? I don’t remember...”

“I went to the Rukon myself, and so did many others, following the incident,” Anabomi shook his head. “No evidence was found. No evidence means nothing can be done, Hakubei-dono. My friend died, life moved on. It doesn’t mean we forget. I believe it was that man, or his satellite — the girl, Endou Eiraki. Somehow, through some evil design... they killed him and the others so horrifically cut down. Shougo-dono was killed by sword wounds. The official reports all say so. Do you think a Plus Soul, even a mutated one, could kill a Captain with a dead blade? I think not.”

“Well, up till recently, no,” Hakubei admitted, scratching his head, “I’d be all for your point and backing it up all over the shop. But the fact is, we do know that kid Souja was killed by a dead blade, wielded by a girl who was little more than a Plus soul in spiritual power. So if it’s possible she could kill a Vice Captain of pretty good calibre... perhaps it’s possible a Hollowed Plus with stupidly deformed spirit power and some serious killer instinct could take a blade to a Captain and strike a lucky blow.”

“Perhaps,” Anabomi looked doubtful, “but I do not think so. I do not believe in coincidences, and I do not want any further death.”

“Well, we all hope for that,” Hakubei agreed frankly. “Stretching our forces thin here is a small price to pay if it resolves the problem overall — but it’s never easy to wait behind. Going into the fight is a more positive, proactive form of defence, and the one I’m more suited to following.”

“It is very hard to argue with a Clan leader,” Anabomi said softly, and Hakubei let out a rueful laugh.

“You’re fine,” he said ruefully. “You try arguing with a Clan leader who happens to be your mother. Believe me, it’s worse.”

He raised his hand in a wave.

“I must get back to duty. I was taking a breather, but Kanshi will be ready to cut off my head if I don’t go help him finalise the deployments.”

“I wish you luck with your conundrums,” Anabomi offered him a faint smile. “I too ought to return to my office. It will be a fraught few days, Hakubei-dono. I trust we will be up to the task.”

“We’d better be,” Hakubei rubbed his chin absently, “else it will be hell to pay when the head honchos get back!”

“Well, Nagesu-dono, you definitely made a mess of that volcano.”

Midori let out a low whistle, turning to survey the black-slicked, scorched remains of what had once been a green and lush mountainscape. The shinigami had passed through the *Senkaimon* smoothly but, on account of transporting so many people to such a dangerous location, it had taken longer than usual and, as a result, the sun had already begun to sink over the horizon by the time they were all assembled in their agreed meeting place. Despite fervent patrols and alert lookouts throughout the night, there had been no surprise attack from the enemy, and so, as dawn had broken, each Captain had set their subordinates about specific tasks in preparation for their first proper advance into the wider local territory. At present, within the ring of stones that marked the boundary of their makeshift camp only the four Captains were present, but every one of their officers was within sight or vocal reach, for nobody was taking any chances on an ambush.

In the dark, it had been hard to perceive the true state of the previous site of battle, but now, as the sun had illuminated their surroundings, the other Captains had seen for themselves exactly how desperate Nagesu’s struggle to stop the eruption had been.

“If that’s what Sekizanha does when it’s angry, remind me not to get in your way too often in Council debates,” Midori continued now, sending her neighbour a rueful glance. “Perhaps I ought to be strengthening Second’s borders with Third, just in case. I knew you’d kicked up an elemental fuss, but I didn’t realise you’d reshaped the region’s whole geology.”

“It’s not very pretty, I admit,” Nagesu adjusted his spectacles, letting out a heavy sigh of acknowledgement. “I wasn’t really thinking of aesthetics at the time, however. I wanted to prevent a full-scale eruption — the only way I could do that was to release as much of Sekizanha’s seismic *reiryoku* into the base and hope it would counteract the tremors. Real World mineral deposits are different from Seireitei ones... and volcanic eruptions much more difficult to halt.”

Midori pursed her lips, cocking her head on one side as she

considered the scene once more.

“As much as possible, huh,” she mused aloud. “In which case, if you should encounter Keitarou... would you be able to repeat the effort?”

Nagesu hesitated, then he sighed, shaking his head.

“I have been told that those who train and use their bankai regularly are capable of such feats of power, but I am not yet among them,” he admitted sadly. “I only brought my sword to that level two or three years ago, and, given its nature, my possibilities to experiment with it have been limited. I pushed Sekizanha to a level beyond anything we’ve ever trained to do before, in an environment that is naturally resistant to spirit power. I am recovered quite well in myself, and I am sure I can use my shikai if need be. My bankai, however...”

He shrugged his shoulders.

“Before we left, Retsu-sama advised me strongly against risking it,” he admitted. “Following my last attempt, she thinks it would be an unwise move. It could prove fatal.”

“I see,” Midori clicked her tongue against her teeth. “But I remember your shikai packs a punch. Hopefully it will be enough. I don’t have bankai — Akekage won’t even listen to me on the subject at present, but Kyouki-sama and Guren-sama both do. Keitarou is one man, and it sounds as though the creature you fought with last time isn’t a match for a Captain. With any luck... it should be enough.”

“I am willing to use my bankai, should the need arise,” Nagesu said grimly. “I won’t say this before Shiketsu, because he frets too much over the future, but nobody lives forever. If I die here, but my doing so brings Keitarou to heel and allows him to be removed from the equation, so be it. I am not a coward, Midori-dono. And I wouldn’t have come here if I thought I could not fight.”

“I suppose I didn’t doubt that,” Midori admitted. ‘But,’ she gestured to the mountain. “If that’s what your bankai does, I’d like you to refrain from using it if at all possible. It hardly looks as though you left it in a stable state, with the top blown off, the slopes black and warped out of shape, and debris and ash scattered all around.”

“The rest of the landscape seems fairly stable, however,” Guren stepped up to join them, white *haori* flapping in the gentle breeze. “Mountains are usually pretty substantial — even volcanic ones. Probably the damage is not as bad as it looks.”

“I trust not,” Nagesu admitted. “It will be difficult to break through

the hardened pumice and stone, but I am sure the girl I saw before had some connection to that mountain. I intend on taking Third to investigate it in more depth — and I imagine Sekizanha will be up to the task of splitting open a pathway, if nothing else.”

He patted his sword’s hilt, and Guren offered him an approving smile.

“No doubt,” he agreed levelly. “As for the rest of us, we should waste no more time in getting our bearings and dividing our forces. This might have been the place Nagesu-dono saw Keitarou the last time, but it doesn’t necessarily follow that we’ll find him waiting for us out in the open.”

His eyes became slits.

“It’s an acquaintance I much hope to renew,” he added darkly. “I have a spiritual postscript to add to my uncle’s message of twenty five years ago.”

“Then we should see to splitting terrain, before Guren-sama decides to unleash his blade here as a signal to Keitarou of our intent,” The final member of the group, Shiba Kyouki pulled a rolled up map from her *obi*, crouching down on the ground and spreading it out before her. “If we consider the mountain to be literally south of our current position, that leaves north, east and west to be covered. I’m not particularly bothered which angle the Fifth take... it’s all the same to me. The terrain seems pretty standard. To the north, more mountain land. To the east, forest. To the west, a river and what used to be a settlement, though I’ve checked the records and it’s not recorded as an inhabited area, so we needn’t worry about involving any local residents in our business.”

“Second are a smaller force, so we’ll take the mountain track,” Midori decided. “We will probably need to divide to cover it, and that suits a small, compact force of officers.”

“Then Second and Third are responsible for backing each other up,” Guren glanced at Nagesu, who nodded. “And that leaves Fifth and Sixth to operate the same. Sixth will take the river and the marshland surrounding it, if you don’t object, Kyouki-dono. My sword isn’t really designed for a closed environment like a forest, and if I should need to use it, I’d rather have open space.”

“I don’t mind,” Kyouki shrugged, rolling up the map. “Fifth will go east. With that settled, I’ll go speak to my son and prepare to move out immediately... and I suggest you all begin to do the same.”

Author's note: Kyuujitai (Old Character Forms)

Those savvy with Japanese may have picked up on the first of the two kanji characters being the traditional form of the character 来,(来 as it appears in modern Japanese). Well, this is an antiquated story, so kyuujitai appeared appropriate. Plus, I think the old form is kind of pretty. I have a thing about doing this — if I had my way, Sougyo no Kotowari would be written 雙魚理 instead of 双魚理, because both given Juushirou's vintage and the Edo Bleach setting, it OUGHT to be the old character. But this is a modern manga, so bleh., all bets are off.

Technically 来 means “come”, rather than ‘future’, but it appears in the word “未来”, which means “future”, and I felt it was a bit more ambiguous this way.

Kohaku's name

I mentioned it in an earlier chapter, but to save anyone having to track back, Kohaku's name is written with the characters for “river willow” (杞) and white (白). His nickname, Koku, however, he explained to Tenichi as being written with the character for black 黒. Kohaku is also the word for ‘amber’ in Japanese. I didn't choose to use it's characters, firstly because I wanted Keitarou's children to all be trees, and secondly because I wanted Kohaku's name to be written using the character for ‘white’ which can also be interpreted as “innocence.” However, having a name homonymous for ‘amber’ seems appropriate for one who, sealed deep within him, has something originating from a far older age. That, of course, is Kyouka. Finally, the use of “koku” as his nickname, apart from being diametrically opposite to “haku” also implies darkness. In Japanese, if you want to say something is pitch black, then you say it is “makkuro”. Kuro is an alternate reading for 黒. Anyone who has read Mirror, Flower, Water, Moon will also find the setting in the first part of this chapter eerily familiar, but with a few SMALL alterations...;)

And...

The Yuukirin (Flower of Courage) is a made up flower. But it's a made up flower with Meifu provenance. I think it first got mentioned in Third Chronicle. Which just proves that even tiny, apparently throwaway details might ultimately prove to be important...;)

58. Kohaku's Plea

Chapter Fifty Seven: Kohaku's Plea

Breaking through the thick crust of cooled volcanic rock was proving more difficult than he had originally thought.

Nagesu wiped sweat from his brow, resting the tip of his weapon against the ground as he surveyed the scene. Sekizanha's blade still glittered with energy, as if telling him that it was far from exhausted, but although Nagesu felt certain that one proper, full scale release of his weapon's shikai would probably create the crevasses needed to properly break through to whatever was underneath, it would be all too easy to set off another volcanic eruption. The last one was still very fresh in his mind, as well as the desperate tactics he had been forced to resort to to prevent a much bigger ecological disaster. Despite his desire to locate Keitarou, his natural, cautious temperament had slipped back into dominance, and, in consequence, he had forced his weapon to crack the outer layer only as much as was absolutely necessary, dispatching groups of his subordinates to use kidou and, in one or two cases, their bare hands, to pull away the folds of hardened rock.

"Taichou," Yunosuke's voice at his right hand made him turn, casting his dusty and dishevelled Third Seat a rueful look.

"Any joy?" he asked, and Yunosuke shrugged.

"Some of the officers think they've found a layer of compacted earth beneath the hardened lava flow," he said cautiously. "They're not sure whether it's information of any use, but it seems... different to what we've been breaking through so far. Nobody's found any sign of a proper entrance to the mountain, though — are you quite sure there's something deeper within this place?"

"Mm," Nagesu turned his gaze back to the mountain, nodding his head. "The girl was here, and I can't think that was a coincidence. Keitarou was here, too — and he made it clear that he'd chosen this location because he knew the nature of my sword and sought to confound my ability to use it. Realistically, that makes the most likely place for any kind of base point to be somewhere only my sword can reach — in short, within a place like this mountain. Seismic caves are not uncommon... providing, of course, that the previous eruption didn't destroy any passages and tunnels that had been dug into deeper

rock.”

“I suppose we have to prepare for that possibility too, don’t we, sir?” Yunosuke looked resigned, and Nagesu nodded his head.

“We do, but in this respect, I don’t want to use too much power unwisely,” he said with a sigh. “I’m sorry, Yunosuke. It means a great deal more work for everyone, but I would sooner play it safe and return with a full compliment of men, preferably without causing a massacre of the Real World people. Such a thing would be hard to explain to the rest of the Council.”

Yunosuke’s lips twitched into a wry smile, and Nagesu knew he was remembering their last visit.

“Very true,” he acknowledged. “I’m sorry, sir. I should have known better than to question.”

Nagesu was silent for a moment, then he shrugged.

“Sometimes questioning is a good thing,” he said cautiously. “It tests my convictions and sounds them out for how strong they really are.”

“Sir?” Yunosuke was taken aback, and Nagesu lifted his weapon, adjusting his grip on the hilt.

“I will begin cracking the earth some more,” he responded. “Perhaps, if I try to do so in the area your men have found, we might have more joy. I doubt that anyone would try and use the most volatile part of the volcano as a shelter. Go back to them, Yunosuke, and convey my message. I will bring Sekizanha shortly and we’ll see what we can find.”

“Yes, sir,” Yunosuke saluted, disappearing into a swift, concise shunpo step, and Nagesu sighed, gazing at the slightly smudged blade of his sword.

We’ve come this far, Sekizanha. Why am I thinking of Ukitake and his questions, when we have other things to seek out?

You said it yourself, Nagesu. Sometimes it’s good to question.

Sekizanha’s voice came back, easy and reassuring to the Captain’s nerves.

At present, we ought to focus on finding the answers that we can. I can sense there are hollow structures beneath this volcano. Even despite the eruption, they have not collapsed. Whether they have any material use or not, I can’t say... but if they are there, perhaps you ought to find out.

Hollow chambers?

Nagesu's eyes narrowed.

Then that's what we'll do. We'll open a way into those areas, and see exactly whether or not my cousin has been using this place as a base.

He turned, ready to head off in the direction Yunosuke had gone, but a faint sense of something on the wind made him pause, lifting his gaze to the top of the rise. Though he could not say what instinct had drawn his attention that way, his breath caught in his throat as he registered the slender, red-haired figure standing, watching him from not two or three yards away. She had not been there a moment before, he was sure, nor had he properly sensed her coming — but she was there now, and more, before he could react, she had drawn even closer, near enough to extend a finger and brush it curiously against the edge of Sekizanha's unsheathed blade.

Blood splattered across the silver surface, the sharp edge slicing through her pale, delicate skin, but instead of registering pain, the girl's expression merely reflected amusement. She laughed, glancing at the trickle of crimson liquid that now ran across her palm and down into the sleeves of her *hakamashita*, before lifting the wound to her lips and licking it clean with unmistakable relish.

"Aki," Now Nagesu found his voice, Sekizanha's blade glittering afresh with energy, but even before he had swung the weapon, the girl had withdrawn several steps back from his range, disappearing and appearing in the blink of an eye. She had used this technique before, Nagesu remembered numbly, the ability that was shunpo but not shunpo, but otherwise, her mode of approach was completely different from their previous encounter. Though her eyes glittered with something that could only be described as madness, there was no sign of the Hollow mask, nor could Nagesu sense the earlier fluctuation in her spirit.

At the sound of her name, the girl let out another peal of laughter, and in that moment, Nagesu saw her eyes change, little by little into the reptilian, golden gaze of a predator eying her prey. He tensed, expecting her Hollow transformation to follow, but it did not.

"Urahara," At length she spoke, her voice soft, yet Nagesu was not fooled by her apparently docile demeanour. Her reiatsu had picked up, little by little, yet she was still controlling it, and a sick feeling stirred in the Captain's stomach as he began to realise exactly what must have happened.

Keitarou took her from the scene. He fixed the flaws in her spirit

power, and sent her back out to fight and kill for him. Then, she was no match for me and my sword — but that was before I released my zanpakutou into full Bankai to stop an eruption, and before he used whatever skills and arts he's devised to put her back into one piece. This is why Keitarou wanted her, even broken and half-dead. He knew he could do something with her... and her apparent, unexplicable hatred for anyone Urahara. Maybe he even instilled it in her — using the fact he doesn't look like one of us to his advantage yet again.

He sighed.

Well, no hesitation this time. I must kill her, and quickly, too. There are too many shinigami here to do otherwise... young as she appears, I must not let that distract me.

“When Keitarou told me you'd come back, do you know how happy I was?” Aki tilted her head coquettishly, her expression's innocence marred by the glittering eyes that bored into Nagesu's own. “I made him promise that I'd be able to come fight you. My brother didn't want me to, but I begged and I pleaded and Keitarou said I could. He said I had things to settle with you and so I should. So here I am.”

“What did Keitarou do to you?” Nagesu demanded, and Aki snorted derisively, twisting a lock of hair absently around her finger.

“He healed me,” she said simply. “He healed all of us. I couldn't kill you before, Urahara, but I can now. I can. I know I can. I'm stronger, and you're weaker. Keitarou told me so. He told me that, if I came here, I'd find you. I knew it would be you.”

She blurred and disappeared, reappearing directly in front of the startled Captain and making him jump, flinching back from her bloody touch against his cheek.

“You look like him, but you're not him,” she murmured, her words cryptic and impossible for Nagesu to understand. “Still, it's enough. I hate all the Urahara. I hate them and I want to kill them. All of them. You're an Urahara, so you'll do to begin with. I don't know your name, but it doesn't matter. You belong to that Clan, and that's enough.”

“You couldn't fight me before, and you shouldn't assume you can do me any damage now,” Nagesu recovered his composure, slapping her arm away and putting a sword length between him and her. “I'm stronger than you. We proved it once, and just because you're a woman doesn't mean I will hold back. I will kill you, this time. You should have run with your life when you could.”

“I don't think so,” Aki gazed at Sekizanha's blade thoughtfully for a

moment, then shook her head. “Keitarou told me that your power was to move the earth. I saw it, too. I know it’s true. But he told me that you don’t like to kill innocent people. This place has lots of them — innocent, stupid people who can’t see or hear us, but walk on the same ground we do. If you use that sword too much, they might end up getting killed. So might all your people — but like I said before, I want to kill them, too. Just, I figured I’d start with you.”

She pressed her palms together, as if about to say a prayer, but as her lips parted once more, Nagesu saw the familiar white sheen of the mask begin to slip over her features. It was not the surge of malevolent energy he had felt before, but a slow, gentle process, rippling and controlled, and as she met his gaze once more, Nagesu felt a cold hand close around his heart. The girl’s reiatsu, once raw and unmanageable, even destructive was now stifling him, rather than eating away at her, foxing his reactions and penetrating his senses, digging deep into his brain. She parted her hands, and Nagesu saw the glitter of energy forming between the delicate fingers.

Cero.

Somehow, Nagesu managed to move his heavy body, dropping to the ground to avoid the explosion of energy as it seared past him through the landscape, colliding with the obsidian face of the volcano and shattering the hard crust into pieces as it drilled deeper into the earth below. Anxious for his subordinates, Nagesu struggled to turn his head, but even before he caught sight of them, he sensed the dulling in their reiatsu and he knew that, one by one, Aki’s encroaching aura had rendered those within immediate range unconscious.

Dimly Nagesu remembered the reports from the Kuchiki estate twenty six years earlier, when Kuchiki Seiren’s sealed spirit power had exploded, and in that instant, he understood Guren’s description of the world disintegrating into grainy black and white. His breathing became heavier, for something was suffocating him, an unseen enemy pressing against his ribs and preventing them from drawing in enough air to feed his brain.

Nagesu!

Sekizanha’s voice was faint and blurry, but Nagesu clung onto it, gritting his teeth against the dizzy swirl that had become his vision and forcing himself back to his feet. A second blast of spiritual energy cannoned into the volcano on his other side, and, as he blinked the world back into focus, he could see the remnants of crimson energy around Aki’s hands, her face now once more swathed in the Hollow

mask, horned and fanged and watching him with the eyes of a killer.

Well, not if he could help it.

Nagesu felt his resolve tighten inside of him.

I will fight, even if I die here, Sekizanha. What other reason do we wear the haori, but to protect our subordinates from enemies like this?

She is strong, Nagesu, much stronger than she was before — and you and I are not back to full power. Moreover, even if we were, using it here would be far too dangerous. You know already what my skills can do... and the danger it will pose for innocent life nearby.

Even so, we have no choice but to fight.

Nagesu dismissed his sword's concern swiftly.

As Captain of Third Division, and Head of Third District, this is my will. This time, we must kill this girl... before she causes genuine harm.

“And that’s all he told you?”

Shunsui set aside the dog-eared copy of the book Juushirou had obtained from Nagesu’s office, casting his friend a startled look. “Your waif and stray suddenly decided he wants to widen his social circle, so you come running over here — but you don’t even know *why*?”

“Koku wouldn’t tell me,” Juushirou sank back against the wall of Shunsui’s study, a weary expression on his face. “I know, it sounds mad, but Shunsui, that look was in his eyes again. Whatever it is, I think it’s important. He said it’s something he can’t say to me, only to you — and asked if there was a chance I could help him speak to you. I couldn’t bring him here, for obvious reasons, so...”

Shunsui let out a heavy sigh.

“When a Captain can be sent running errands by a refugee, there’s a problem in the hierarchy,” he said reprovably. ‘Juu-kun, I know you want to believe in this kid, but I hope he doesn’t think you’re going to answer his every whim like this. Whatever it is, you could have sent a messenger. There wasn’t a need to come in person, and it looks odd, if you’re dashing in and around Eighth on random errands like this. I thought we were trying not to excite the S-P-Y,’ he lowered his voice, spelling out the word in exaggeratedly slow tones, “and let them know that we know they’re there.”

“Since when is it odd for me to come here?” Juushirou arched his eyebrow. “I come here all the time, or you go to Thirteenth. Of everyone that could’ve come here, I’m probably the least suspicious,

and even Sora expects me to turn up with a random whim to put before you. Besides, I came myself for another reason. This is the first chance I've had, but Koku talked to me some more. Off his own bat, he mentioned Sakanoue... and talked about his death."

"Oh?" Shunsui's eyes narrowed, then, "and? What of this sudden desire to be chatty? Something useful, or...?"

"Koku doesn't know who the spy is," Juushirou began, and Shunsui snorted, shaking his head.

"Doesn't know, or won't tell?"

"Doesn't know," Juushirou's expression became irritated. "Shunsui, please. Innocent until proven guilty, isn't that what we agreed? Besides, he was willing to use his power to try to find out for me. I wouldn't let him. He's clearly not well enough — and besides, I don't want to use his ability. It's not right and it's not under any kind of training or control."

"And using it is what Keitarou is doing, so you don't want to appear like him," Shunsui buried his head in his hands. "I don't know which one of you is worse, but all right. I'll bite. What did the kid say about Sakanoue?"

"His death wasn't how we think it was," Juushirou was still irritated, but he swallowed his annoyance, muting his tones instead. "Something did happen in the Rukon, twenty five years ago. Something that turned Sakanoue Heiji into a Hollow... and forced him to be cut down... by one of his own allies."

"What?" Despite his earlier annoyance, Shunsui's eyes widened at this particularly juicy tidbit of information. "Turned into a... was that Keitarou, or the Something Else we're still trying to get a handle on?"

"Something else," Juushirou said decidedly. "I only have Koku's word for it that it happened this way, but he believes that Sakanoue Heiji died by Minaichi's blade, because he had turned into a Hollow. And that it wasn't Keitarou's doing. He said Minaichi yelled out some name, but he couldn't remember what it was. It was a name he didn't know, and so he didn't remember it."

"Minaichi Atsushi..." Shunsui's lips thinned. "I can see why he wouldn't want that to be public knowledge. I also can't think why Koku making up something like that about a person who died before he was even born would benefit him or Keitarou, either, so probably the kid's telling you the truth. It certainly is an interesting slant to consider. If something happened to infect Sakanoue, then he was

presumably beyond all help. Minaichi cut him down, but then reported otherwise. I wonder what else that implies about the report from the Rukon — because, as we already discussed, the only survivors who would've been able to report on what happened to Sakanoue and Shougo-dono would be the ones in the near vicinity when things occurred."

"I already went to the archives to check," Juushirou fumbled at his *obi*, pulling out a dogeared document and handing it out. "After Koku told me what he'd seen, I figured I ought to see what I could verify before putting it to your cynical judgement."

"Heh," Shunsui grimaced, and Juushirou offered him a benign smile, dropping the booklet onto the desk.

"We can put that with the one you're already reading," he continued evenly, "since it contains witness depositions from the survivors from the Rukongai expedition. Ikata, and a couple of others from Eleventh, a few from Twelfth gave testimony about there being more creatures than they expected, and this one report... a man called... Yamaguchi? He said that they appeared to be acting with some kind of design — as though the shinigami appearing had triggered their attack."

"That sounds vaguely familiar," Shunsui pressed his lips together. "Who else do we know who controls Hollows and makes them act by design?"

"Yes, I thought that too, but we're talking about a time before Katsura was born," Juushirou shook his head. "While it's absolutely for certain he was responsible for the most recent incidents in that regard, in terms of these..." He shrugged his shoulders. "Eiraki-hime was pregnant with Katsura when we went to the Real World for the first time as Seniors. She probably hadn't even given birth to him at the time Sakanoue and company passed away."

"I suppose so," Shunsui conceded. "It's a nice, shiny connection, but you're right. Okay. Go on."

"Mm," Juushirou's glance returned to the document. "There were also deaths among the Rukon people during this incident... Ikata reported a household essentially savaged before he reached a village and — singlehandedly, of course — he wiped out the threat."

"Of course," Shunsui said dryly. "Go on."

"Well, I read through those reports, and I realised pretty quickly that they were all reports of different parts of the Rukon district,"

Juushirou reflected. “Ikata and the others, whatever their names were, were not in the same area or reporting on the same encounters. They’d clearly been dispatched by their Captain, and probably didn’t see their Vice Captain’s death, since none of them mention Sakanoue in their reports.”

“And *Minaichi*’s report?”

“That’s the most interesting bit of all,” Juushirou flipped open the book to a particular page, setting it down on the desk before his friend, and Shunsui’s eyes widened, for the page in question had been creased and torn across the middle, removing more than half of the entry. It had been done in a rough, haphazard way, as though it had been torn out in anger, and Shunsui traced a finger along the tear line, squinting at a character that had been ripped right through.

“Does that say... early? Quick? They attacked quickly? Something like that?”

“Not sure,” Juushirou admitted, swinging the book around and examining it himself. “In any case, *Minaichi*’s deposition is more or less missing. It’s not the only thing that’s been removed from the archive copy, either. All the depositions remaining in this book... make no direct reference to the actions or deployment of Sakanoue or Shougo-dono, nor any detail of their deaths. They’ve all been torn out, or they were never here in the first place. I’d guess the former, rather than the latter. *Minaichi* is potentially the only witness to the deaths of his Vice Captain and the former Twelfth Division Captain — but someone didn’t want us, or anyone else, to read his account.”

“But if it’s full of untruths, why not?” Shunsui’s brow creased in confusion. “Even from the little bit remaining here, it seems pretty standard and uninteresting. Maybe he did lie, but if he did, nobody’s known it until now. Why remove a completely harmless report?”

He flicked through the pages.

“What about *Mareiko-chan*’s deposition? She was there too — is hers included?”

“It is,” Juushirou pointed to a particular section, and Shunsui ran his gaze over it briefly. “It’s pretty much what she already told me, though — obviously, in less emotional language.”

“Yes,” Shunsui drummed his fingers absently against the discoloured pages, his lips pressed together thoughtfully. “Short, sweet and to the point — but essentially useless, since she was injured early on and therefore taken out of the battle. She’s not a witness to

Sakanoue's death, nor does she mention her Captain except to report that he was killed by the enemy during the expedition."

"Second-hand information, received after she returned here, and was undergoing treatment," Juushirou sighed. "At the end of the report are the accounts of people here — the one who took the alert message that something bad had happened, and the officers of Fourth who had responded most quickly to the scene. Eriko-dono gave a long and highly scientific breakdown of all the injuries her division treated as a result of this adventure."

"In summary?" Shunsui looked hopeful, and Juushirou pulled a graphic grimace.

"You assume I've read it," he said pensively, and Shunsui arched an eyebrow.

"If you haven't, I'm not going to," he said matter-of-factly. "You raised the subject, so you must have skimmed over it at the very least. You were the one who wanted to substantiate my cynical mind — or something to that effect — so report. Pour into my ears thy pearls of wisdom and I shall listen to them, all agog."

"Idiot," Juushirou snorted, swiping his friend playfully across the head, then he sighed. "I did read it. I had Mitsuki go over it with me, after she had done with Koku, to make sure I understood all of Eriko-dono's terminology. I figured, given how much she already knows, that using her skills would be of benefit — though I haven't mentioned to her specifically the possibility of a Gotei spy. Any road, the report is not particularly interesting and largely confirms the things we know. Several individuals were killed, and several mutated corpses were also brought back. Sakanoue and Shougo-dono were examined and found to have sustained wounds consistent with swords, which fits in with Nagesu-sama's dead blade theorising and other witness statements. The morass of reiatsu at the scene made it impossible to distinguish if an individual, identifiable blade had been used — which means that even if Sakanoue was killed by Minaichi, there'd be no lasting way to prove it. The highest number of mutated corpses were found in the region where Minaichi and Sakanoue were fighting. There's no report about Sakanoue being Hollowfied, either, but I'm prepared to believe Koku is right, and that something happened to him that we don't really understand yet. In terms of other officers, Minaichi himself sustained two wounds to his body, neither of which were fatal, and he was found unconscious at the scene after calling to Seireitei urgently for help. In his report, he said that Sakanoue and Shougo-dono were down, and Sekime was injured.

Sekime was also unconscious at the scene, and suffered damage to the ligaments of her right shoulder — again, by a dead blade wielded by a half-hollow, Sekime's own report states as much. Ikata and company sustained minor wounds, bumps, bruises and gashes here and there but nothing serious. One or two other officers lost limbs and were forced to retire from service."

He shrugged.

"End report."

"Minaichi sent the alert to Seireitei for help," Shunsui mused. "Minaichi did that, and Minaichi's statement is suspect, but the only person up till now who knew that, presumably, was Minaichi himself. Otherwise, why hasn't more been made of it in wider circles?"

"I suppose Minaichi might have torn out his own statement in a fit of grief," Juushirou rubbed his chin pensively. "If he knew he'd lied, and it was bothering him, maybe he'd do something like that... deface the record so that nobody could ever read it. Although... it doesn't seem like something he would do for no reason at all."

"Juu, do you suspect Minaichi of being the Gotei spy?" Shunsui glanced up from the booklet, and Juushirou shrugged.

"I'm not sure," he admitted. "I don't like Minaichi, and I don't want my personal feelings to influence my judgement in a matter as serious as this. Koku's evidence is all I have to go on, too, and I already told you that I didn't want to rely too much on that without proper substantiation. I'd thought of going to Minaichi and asking him directly what he remembered, but if he was the spy, well, that might frighten him into doing something we don't expect. If he's not the spy, I don't want to suspect him irrationally, nor cause him further distress. Even Koku's vision doesn't provide any evidence that he's done anything wrong. All it tells us is that he didn't report the truth about Sakanoue's death. Koku said that the whole incident really upset him — he said that Minaichi was traumatised by having to fight his own adjutant in such a way. Grief might be the reason he lied... we've seen adequate evidence just recently that he still feels very strongly about what happened to his Vice Captain, and in light of this evidence, his behaviour makes more sense."

"Grief could also be a cause for resentment," Shunsui pushed the book back across the desk. "Take it and keep it at Thirteenth, for now. There's probably an intact copy somewhere in some Clan vault — probably Nagesu-sama's — but with them away, it's not exactly accessible and we can't go looting other Divisions, sadly. In this state,

this copy's not much use to us, and you're right, approaching Minaichi when we're short on Captains isn't a good idea. Either you'll put him on his guard or give him a nervous breakdown, neither of which is conducive to defending this place from attack. Let it lie and see what happens... for now."

"Do you think he could be spying for Keitarou?" Juushirou asked quizzically, and Shunsui shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't like to believe anyone is spying for Keitarou," he said heavily, "and like you, I have no time for Minaichi Atsushi. I don't know, Juu. I think that people who tell lies about things lay themselves open to other people's suspicions... but sometimes it's the ones who tell the truth who are the ones you really have to beware of."

"Meaning Koku, I suppose?"

"No, I didn't," Shunsui shook his head. "Not this time, at least. I was thinking of Keitarou himself. Given that he had Suzuki, and was using Koku's abilities to see things, it makes me wonder if he even needed a Gotei spy."

"You think that was a ruse? An invention?" Juushirou looked doubtful. "Koku said that he, Eiraki, Katsura, Sakaki and Suzuki all knew there was a spy, but not who it was. Do you think that's because there isn't a spy at all, and Keitarou is just trying to create tension?"

"It can't be ruled out," Shunsui admitted, then paused, shaking his head. "No, it won't do. That's what I want to believe, it's not what I really believe. Much as I hate to say it, I believe there probably is a spy. More, that spy will make a move at some point, in a way we don't expect. Whether it's Minaichi or it isn't, the same rules apply. We have to be on our guard for anything unexpected — and as informed as we can be."

He got to his feet.

"Beginning with seeing what your lad wants to say to me... and hoping it doesn't lead us into further blind alleys."

It was just his luck that he'd happened to choose the muckiest path.

Shirogane raised his left leg up slightly from the squelchy soft ground, gazing with resignation at the mud now caking his sandal. Each step he and his officers made along this pathway sank their feet at least an inch into the unforgiving greenish black goop that Guren had referred to as 'marshland' but which, privately, Shirogane had

already relabeled “swamp”. As a result, the snow white of his *tabi* was now no more than a distant memory, and the sensation of wet cloth against his toes was enough to make him shiver, despite the relative brightness of the day.

Still, an order was an order, and there was nothing to be done but continue.

Since the divide of the Gotei forces, Sixth had made good progress in the direction of the river, though despite careful study of the map, it had not appeared as soon before them as Guren or Shirogane had expected. Blaming the deceptive lie of the Real World landscape, Guren had divided his members into three working patrols, taking one himself and handing the others over to Shirogane and Ryuu respectively with the instruction to ‘take no prisoners’ and to send urgently for backup if they were to encounter the exile himself. Though the land was relatively flat, here it divided into shelves that suggested they were much higher above sea level than they appeared, and as a result both Ryuu and Guren’s patrols had soon disappeared from Shirogane’s line of sight, leaving him and the ten or twelve officers assigned to his side to trek through the swampy goop.

Though why the exile would choose to come here is anyone’s guess. I know he’s reputed to be unhinged, and he truly must be, if this is the kind of place he wishes to call home.

With another sigh, Shirogane returned his foot to the ground, suppressing a shudder at the squelching sound it made on contact, and turning his attention instead to his immediate surroundings. The shelf they had chosen appeared fairly flat and for a while, Shirogane had half suspected they were going nowhere, fast, but as they had progressed, it had become clear that they were actually on a gentle slope, leading down towards what must, surely, be the river valley. There they would reconvene with the rest of Sixth Squad and share notes — though so far there was little to report except soiled uniforms. Birds in the sky overhead wheeled and squawked as though aware of the presence of unexpected guests, and, rising like a ghost out of the marsh haze, Shirogane began to make out the first silhouettes of the abandoned village plotted on the map each senior officer had been furnished with before leaving Seireitei.

“Fukutaichou, I think there’s a dip in the path up ahead!” One of the Sixth Division’s lesser officers hurried to his side, splashing globules of the mucky substance all over the hems and lower legs of his *shihakushouin* in his hurry to reach his Vice Captain’s position. “It looks as though we’ve reached something at last!”

“Mm. The abandoned village — or one of them, I believe there may be others in the vicinity,” Shirogane closed his eyes briefly, drawing on his memory to reconstruct the map he had spent most of the previous night memorising by Kidou light. “If so, then we must be a good two thirds of the path towards the river. We should continue in this direction. Everyone remain alert! I don’t want strays.”

“Are we to pass *through* the village, sir?” after acknowledging the instructions, one of the other division members raised a hesitant question. “It looks like a good place for an ambush, and picking up any kind of spiritual energy in this atmosphere is hard work.”

“We’ll try to go around it, if we can plot a decent enough path through this swamp,” Shirogane agreed. “I don’t like abandoned villages. They always contain ghosts, and not always of the kind we can bury. Our target aside, there’s always the possibility of Hollows in places like this. Abandoned settlements often lead to spirits with unhealthy attachment issues... and whilst we must deal with any threats we encounter, I don’t want to waste *reiryoku* or alert anyone to where we are unnecessarily. We shall begin by walking around the edge, and see whether our presence here excites any kind of spiritual reaction from within. I imagine that a Hollow would sense our being here and come to attack without any thought to stealth or discretion, and it would be as well to face them in more open ground — if indeed we must.”

He raised his hand, gesturing to the left of the shadowy structures, and though he noticed a couple of his men exchanging looks with one another at the thought of wading through even deeper slime and muck, as one they fell into alignment, following their senior officer as he skirted carefully around the far edge of the settlement. Even from this distance, and through the mists, Shirogane could make out what were clearly rotting timbers, and he pressed his lips together, remembering his Real World deployment as a Senior at Genryuusai’s hallowed Academy. On that occasion, he and his fellows had slept in a place similar to this one, and had been woken late one night by an incursion of bats, disturbed by their presence in the empty huts. Shirogane had not liked the bats, their beady, glittering eyes gleaming in the moonlight and he had been unwilling to find out whether these odd, Real World creatures had teeth sharp enough to draw blood from a soul. Still, his pride had refused to allow him to admit his fears, and he had staunchly refused to move to another location. His fellow Seniors had not been fooled by his bravado, and, all of them being his elders in all respects, had taken great amusement in teasing him about his “mousy housemates.” Though it was daytime, the sight of such a delapidated dwelling place brought back the less pleasant memories,

and he stifled a shudder.

Hollows are one thing, but if any of those creatures are sleeping the day away in one of those hovels, I have no intention of renewing our acquaintance. Confounded beasts... how they managed to avoid every one of Ginkyoujiki's petals in the dead of night is still beyond my comprehension.

His attention returned to the path ahead, as the land dipped into what was clearly softer earth, and he carefully side-stepped it, raising a hand to beckon his fellows around it.

"This is a thoroughly unpleasant place, isn't it, sir?" The officer who had spoken earlier voiced Shirogane's own opinions at this juncture, and the Vice Captain's expression became rueful. He nodded.

"The Real World is such a place," he ruminated. "At least, I have heard there are thriving settlements and bright farmlands and paddy-fields... even radiant forests. Unfortunately I have never had the luck to be deployed to one of these mythical locations. In all my trips here, this is precisely the atmosphere I have come to anticipate."

"I think it might rain," another officer raised his gaze to the sky, and Shirogane followed suit, clicking his tongue against his teeth as he registered the growing swell of greyish clouds.

"That would be the final piece in a spectacularly miserable trip," he murmured, more to himself than to his companions. "Very well. If we are to appear as drowned rats before Guren-sama, we might as well ensure we have done our job to the utmost beforehand. I said we would track around the village, but as our being here as alerted no Hollows thus far, I believe we must search the dwellings themselves for any sign of recent residence. The mist makes it impossible to discern life signs, but I feel Guren-sama will send us back to double-check, and I should rather do the inspection now than in the driving rain."

"We might be swallowed up by the ground if it rains while we're still here," another officer tucked thick dark hair behind his ear, curling his hand around his sword. "The village is probably less muddy, sir. If people lived there once..."

"They had to have a reason to leave, though," another officer pointed out. "Flooding could well be it."

"Either way, avoiding the issue will not locate our prey." Shirogane drew his sword from his sheath, turning to ensure that all his companions were following suit. "We will stay together, and not give an enemy the opportunity to pick off any of our number. I think it

highly unlikely that the exile we seek is concealing himself in such a distasteful place, bearing in mind that, whatever his other flaws, he is originally a man of Clan birth — but we may discover some clue to his current whereabouts.”

He glanced at his blackened, mud-soaked *tabi*, and sighed.

“Real World mud is so much more difficult to eradicate than that in Seireitei,” he murmured under his breath, tightening his hold on Ginkyoujiki’s hilt, and marching with a mixture of purpose and resignation into the gloomy clump of derelict structures. Many of them were lacking in roofs, he noted as they picked their way along what had once been a main street, but was now waterlogged, sprigs of green pushing up between split cobbles and packed earth. On either side, broken timbers were thick with different kinds of mould, and the atmosphere was fetid with the smell of damp and decay. Almost instinctively, Shirogane covered his mouth and nose with the sleeve of his left arm, and from the sounds behind him, he knew his men had done the same. It was a different kind of decay to that which they encountered in Soul Society — there was no spirit matter here to be returned and recycled into something new and useful. Only a couple of the houses appeared to still have their roofs, and Shirogane peered cautiously in through the doorway of one, his gaze scanning the upper rafters for any sign of the small, black creatures that he so loathed. They were empty, though, no sign of life nor recent residence by either man or beast, and he stepped back onto the central path with a heavy sigh.

“It appears this place has long since been left to rot,” he reflected. “There is nothing of value to us here.”

“I wonder if Ryuu-dono or Guren-sama have had any more luck,” one of the other officers remarked, and Shirogane nodded.

“I am sure they are being quite as thorough as we are, but there have been no signals of distress, so perhaps with just as little reward,” he reflected. “I think we should...”

The sound of something, faint but definitely not imagination caused him to stop mid-sentence, tension suddenly coursing through his body. He glanced from left to right, trying to make out anything unusual or dangerous in the mists that hung heavy over the village, but try as he might, he could see nothing.

“Fukutaichou?” the officer’s voice sounded apprehensive, and Shirogane’s eyes narrowed to near slits.

“I heard something,” he responded softly. “Something that wasn’t

one of us. Be on your guard, all of you. I am certain I did not imagine it.”

“I heard it too,” a second officer confirmed. “It came from the edge of the village — towards what looks like an old market-place.”

“Then we progress,” Shirogane said darkly. “Prepare for fighting at a moment’s notice, and stay close together.”

Within the heart of the Clan, and before the ladies and the expectations of the noble court, Shirogane had long since proven himself capable of the highest level of proper etiquette and courtly accomplishment in all the most cultured arts. Here, in the field, however, with Ginkyoujiki in his hand, he was a military officer, and his companions knew that an order given was to be obeyed at once, without a moment of hesitation. As a result, it was a compact group of Kuchiki fighters who pushed forward towards the deserted, lumpy ground of the former market-place, the odd splinter of wood or broken cartwheel indicating that it had once been a place of thriving trade. At a gesture from Shirogane, the officers fanned out around the perimeter, looking for any sign of danger, but there was none. The place remained silent, and Shirogane pursed his lips in annoyance.

Maybe it was one of those annoying bat things. In which case, I do not need to see it, let alone try to battle with it.

“Nothing at all, sir,” the final officer reported, saluting and returning to the centre of the ground. “We’ve searched the village, and there’s no sign of life here.”

“Then I suppose we ought to leave it, and make our way forward to rendezvous with Guren-sama and Ryuu,” Shirogane let out his breath in a rush. “Do not let your guard down — we have a little way to go yet, and this atmosphere is oppressive.”

“It’s enough to make one sick,” a junior officer remarked fervently, his complexion somewhat green, and there were murmurs of assent from his companions. Shirogane cast the youngster a rueful glance.

This is the advantage of Academy education over that conducted within the Clan. As rigorous as Guren-sama attempts to make the training course, there are always ways to get around the most unpleasant duties by insisting on training at home. Only at the Academy does a student truly learn the depth of unpleasantness involved in becoming a shinigami.

Out loud he said,

“As I believe I said, this is normal for deployment to the Real World. If you have not been here before, I trust you will take this and

remember the experience, as it will doubtless come again.”

“Must it, sir?” the officer looked crestfallen, and Shirogane nodded.

“We are Clan,” he said pragmatically, “but in this environment, we are shinigami. You must not confuse the two, for I assure you, the enemies shinigami face will not be so confused. You are a target, and you are also the one line of protection between the enemy and your family, back home in District Six. If you wish to survive, you must learn to acclimatise to this kind of mission, regardless of its unsavoury nature.”

“Yes, sir,” the boy bowed his head, defeated, and Shirogane turned his gaze back to the path ahead.

Perhaps I will speak to Guren-sama about making it compulsory for lesser sons of the Clan to attend the Academy as a matter of course, if they fancy themselves as future shinigami. Squeamish stomachs in this kind of deployment are undesirable to say the least.

The village settlement was not large, and presently they reached its far borders, stepping out beyond the stone boundary and back onto the slick marshland once again. The sky had become more overcast, though it had not yet begun to rain, and Shirogane frowned, realising that the mist that had enveloped the village was slowly beginning to clear. As he led his men cautiously forwards, some prickle up his spine made him pause, turning to look back.

The village had been empty, and yet...

A screech from one of the officers at the back of the pack, followed by the yell of another confirmed Shirogane’s worst premonition and, without pausing to think, he charged back towards the rear of his patrol, sword already glittering with light as he prepared to release. As he drew closer, the mist that had cloaked his vision parted, and he saw for the first time the shadow that he now felt certain had been watching their progress through the village.

Two of the Sixth’s younger officers lay sprawled across the ground, their bodies bloody and broken by some tremendous force, and, embedded in the mud beside them were the remains of one shattered *zanpakutou*. One of the youngsters was twitching the fingers of a shattered arm helplessly towards the hilt of this weapon, but Shirogane had no time to be relieved that the young man was still alive, for in the centre of the chaos was the attacker, the second man’s *zanpakutou* grasped between thick fingers. As Shirogane had reached the heart of the scene, the attacker snapped the weapon clean in two across the blade, tossing the fragments of the spirit weapon aside as

though it were no more than a piece of dead wood.

“You brought *children* here to fight me?”

The man spoke, his voice dark and full of derision, and his eyes met Shirogane’s for the first time, boring deep into the Vice Captain’s gaze. He appeared a man of Shirogane’s own years, or a little older, though taller and much more substantially built, his reddish gold hair thick and wild across his shoulders like a lion’s mane and his murky dark eyes full of censure. He was robed in the casual dress of any peasant man, but Shirogane could sense his *reiryokunow*, and he knew that this individual was far from what he seemed. More, the lack of a chain at his chest indicated that he was not a Plus Soul awaiting Soul Burial, and a chill crept up Shirogane’s spine as he put these facts together.

“Who are you?” He demanded, stepping forward and gesturing for his officers to give the unknown attacker a wide berth. “How can you see us — and why are you attacking us?”

“Well, I imagine you came here to fight me,” the man folded broad arms across his chest, a challenge in his eyes. “Your babes aren’t dead — yet. I simply wanted to get the attention of the officer in charge.”

His gaze flitted to the badge on Shirogane’s arm, and he nodded, apparently satisfied with what he saw.

“I imagine that would be you,” he added. “I’ve been waiting for you, but you were taking far too long to find me. I thought I’d give you a clue — and well, here you are.”

“Answer my question!” Shirogane demanded. “Who are you and what do you want with us?”

“Tell me who you are, and I’ll decide whether it’s worth my answering,” came the reply. “I want to know if there’s any point naming myself before people I intend to rip into shreds.”

Indignation surged within Shirogane’s proud heart, and his grey eyes became cold.

“Sakurai,” he spoke without even glancing towards his fellow officers, but at the sound of his name, the nearest individual stiffened, a look of apprehension crossing his features. “Gather together everyone and take them back away from here, out of range. I shall settle this, and I do not wish to kill my own squad members by accident. Uranabe, take care of the wounded and do what you can. You need not worry about a threat — I am more than a match for such an arrogant individual.”

“You call *me* arrogant?” the stranger’s eyes sparked for a moment, and he snorted. “Ah, let me guess. You’re from the *Kuchiki* Clan. Am I right?”

“Fukutaichou!” The man called Sakurai raised his voice in protest, but Shirogane dismissed him with a flick of his left hand, his focus entirely on the battle at hand.

“Kuchiki Shirogane,” he said softly, “Vice Captain of the Sixth Division, and heir to Seireitei’s most noble Clan.”

“Well, I have done well,” to Shirogane’s annoyance, the man seemed pleased, nodding his head. “Well, Kuchiki Shirogane, I suppose we’ll see whether all that pride is worth anything out here, in a spiritually dead wasteland. I snapped your subordinates’ swords as though they were twigs — I could snap each one of them the same, but I wanted your attention, first. I want your head, first. Your minnows can run and hide wherever they like... I’ll come and retrieve them later on.”

“*Saite, Ginkyoujiki!*” As soon as he was sure that his subordinate officers were out of his line of fire, Shirogane thrust his weapon forward, the silver blade fragmenting into shards of razor-sharp metal that sped through the misty atmosphere towards the interloper’s broad throat and torso. The man made no immediate attempt to counter, then, the next moment he disappeared, reappearing less than a foot away from where Shirogane was standing.

“Do you think that I’ll stand and wait for you to kill me?” he asked quietly. “You are naive. Of course not.”

“That was shunpo!” Shirogane swung around, darting away from the reach of the man’s thick paws as he resummoned his weapon. “I answered your question, but you haven’t answered mine. Who are you?”

“Ah,”

The man’s lips twisted into a cold, humourless smile, and the arm which had come flying out in Shirogane’s direction in the form of a punch suddenly stopped mid-flight, the fingers opening one by one to reveal something small and silver against his skin. The edges were bent, as though he had crushed it with the force of his fist alone, and Shirogane’s heart twisted in his chest as he realised what the object was. His gaze strayed to his reformed sword, eyes widening in disbelief as he realised the tip of the blade was still missing. His gaze flitted back to the stranger in dismay, and the man’s smile widened. He turned his hand, allowing the fragment to drop onto the muddy

ground, where he compacted it into the slime with the toe of his sandal. There was no sign of a mark on the man's palm, no indication that the piece of metal had cut through his skin, and despite himself, Shirogane took a step backwards.

He grabbed a piece of my sword out of thin air. He grabbed it, held it in his hand, and it didn't even cut him. More, he did it so quickly that I could not see him move. Was that really shunpo? Was it, or... something... else?

"You look confused," the man dusted his hands together absently. "Well, let me explain things to you properly, shall I?"

He raised his hand to his face, and Shirogane's heart stilled in his chest a second time as he registered the slick covering of white that had begun to seep from the man's eyes and ears, spreading across his face until his features were all but concealed.

"Hollow..." he whispered, and the man shook his head.

"No, not a Hollow," he said matter-of-factly, his voice becoming tinny and eerily distorted by the mask. "You wish that's all I was, but I'm something far, far worse. My name is Haruya, and I'm going to be the man who kills you, Kuchiki Shirogane."

"Well?"

Shunsui stepped over the threshold of the small chamber, a wary expression on his clever features. The room's sole occupant was huddled in blankets against the wall by the window, his face ash pale and his dark brown eyes like smudged shadows in his face, but at the sound of Shunsui's voice he turned. There was a mixture of relief and resignation in his expression, and he extended a thin arm from beneath the warmth of his wrappings, gesturing for the other man to come into the room proper. Shunsui hesitated, then did as he was bidden, pushing the door shut with a soft click before coming to perch his lithe frame on the end of the youngster's bed.

"Juu said you asked for me," he said, by way of preamble. "If he hadn't asked, I probably wouldn't have come — so whatever it is, it had better be important."

"You really don't like me, do you?" Kohaku's observation was weary, and Shunsui shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't know," he admitted. "I don't know what your motives are, and I don't know if Juu is right to protect you. If he's caught, he'll be in trouble... probably we both will, but I'm less bothered for myself than I am for him right now. He's the one who's been keeping the

biggest secrets — and though I don't intend on betraying him, I'm not happy with how things are."

"I see," Kohaku pressed his lips together, then lowered his head in an apologetic nod. "I thought he would have told you about me. I'm sorry. I know you're right."

"Did you call me out here just to tell me that?" Shunsui arched an eyebrow, and Kohaku sighed, shaking his head.

"There isn't much time," he murmured, more than half to himself. "I don't know how to persuade... but... even if you don't trust me, I can tell that you trust Ukitake-dono, don't you?"

"We've been friends a while, yes," Shunsui was on his guard. 'Don't think you can use the fact he trusts you to win me around, though. The fact remains that you're the son of someone Seireitei wants, and there's an order for your head on a plate to be delivered first class to the Council of Elders. I haven't come to kill you,' as Kohaku flinched back at his words, "and I understand Juu's reasons for protecting you from them, but if anything were to happen to him, I'd be a lot less forgiving. You need to understand that... Juu means a lot to me, and I won't sacrifice him, not to protect you or anyone else."

Kohaku's eyes narrowed slightly, then a faint, half-relieved smile touched his lips.

"That's what I thought," he observed. "I'm glad I was right. It doesn't matter about me. I don't want you to protect me, not if you don't think you can trust me. It's not important that you do. If you think I'm such a threat to your friend, then if you want to kill me, even, I won't fight. But I can't... die yet. Tomorrow... I need... before this... I..."

"You're not making any sense," despite himself, Shunsui was alarmed at the slightly glazed expression that was creeping across the young man's gaze, and he grabbed Kohaku by the shoulders, giving him a short, sharp shake. "Snap out of it and come back to the world of the living, please! It's not the time for one of your visions — things are complicated enough, without..."

"Kyouraku-dono, I need you to help me," Thin fingers suddenly clamped themselves around Shunsui's wrists, and the Captain faltered, aware that those strange brown eyes were now watching him intently, as though trying to see right through his body. "There's nobody else who can, only you. I thought if you came, I might... be able to tell you."

“Koku?” Shunsui was worried now. “If you’re unwell, then let me send for Mitsuki or someone. You’re meant to be taking it easy, and Juu won’t be pleased with me if you hurt yourself. You’re shaking like a leaf, and I’ve seen better colour on a Captain’s *haori*. Whatever’s bothering you, I’ll listen — but don’t disappear into your own world on me. If you do that, I...”

“I need you to understand,” Kohaku’s voice was soft, and a sudden jolt of energy shot through Shunsui’s body, momentarily paralysing him as Koku’s *reiryoku* surged through his skin. A morass of pictures flooded his senses, jamming his usual thought signals, and panic began to surge up inside of him as he struggled to fight himself free. As he did so, the images came into sudden, sharp clarity, and he drew in breath sharply, finding the strength at last to push Kohaku forcibly away from him.

“What the hell was that?” he demanded, getting agitatedly to his feet and putting space between him and his companion. “Dammit, what are you playing at? What did you do to me? Why... why would you...”

“You saw it?” Relief filled Kohaku’s tired tones, and he sighed, rubbing his temples. “I wasn’t sure you would. I’m not that strong right now. A lot of my strength isn’t here, and I need to save it. I need to be able to... tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” Shunsui echoed, and Kohaku’s head shot up, emotion in the dark brown eyes.

“Tomorrow, Father will come here,” he said unevenly. “I’ve known he was coming for a while. Probably I knew before I even came here, that he wouldn’t walk away. I’m important to him, so he won’t leave me. He needs me. I’ve been expecting it to happen — I just didn’t know for certain when... or how. When he does... bad things will happen. He’s coming to find me... he’s coming to begin a war. A proper war. A war in which people will die.”

“Keitarou?” Despite himself, Shunsui felt a chill run down his spine, and Kohaku nodded jerkily.

“You don’t trust me, and there’s no reason you should,” he said sadly. “I’m such a terrible person... terrible in every respect, and I’m going to make my sins worse, talking to you in this way. But I thought... you might understand. You’re the only person I can talk to about this. What I showed you... was truth that hasn’t happened yet. It’s as vivid to me now as though it was happening right in front of me. I could only show you a little bit... only a portion of what’s inside

my head, but I hoped... that little bit would be enough.”

“Truth..?” Shunsui’s throat suddenly felt dry, and he forgot all about putting distance between himself and the young prophet, grabbing him hastily by the wrists. “What do you mean, truth? Are you just saying that that... that what you just made me see... that’s going to happen? Like Souja... tomorrow... and I... I can’t... why would you? Why would you put an image like that into my head? Why would you make me see..”

“Because I can’t stop it. Not that,” Kohaku’s tones were laced with regret. “I’m not very strong, Kyouraku-dono. I don’t know how much I can do. I need your help.”

He touched delicate fingers to the sleeve of Shunsui’s pink *haori*, gazing at the Captain with apologetic eyes, and Shunsui was taken aback to see the tears glittering in the young man’s depths.

“I knew the first time I saw you, that I needed to ask your help,” he said brokenly. “I knew, though, you didn’t like death. You didn’t want to kill people, and I... I hadn’t found my resolve. I didn’t understand exactly why, not then. Not till now. I know now that it’s tomorrow, everything will happen. Otousama will come here. Sakaki is dead. Katsura acted outside of his expectations. He’s got no other paths to take now — he’s going to come to retrieve me. It’s me he believes he needs most, so he won’t hold back this time. He’s going to attack Seireitei while it’s weakened, and render it in ruins. People... will die as a result. You can’t stop that, and nor can I.”

“Then why would you make me see something like that?” Shunsui’s uncharacteristic temper flared, frustration glittering in his brown eyes. “Why did you bring me here?”

“Father thinks I’m his secret weapon,” Kohaku did not answer the question, his words half-dreamy and his eyes unfocused as he spoke, turning to gaze out of the window. “He thinks my power will help bring Soul Society to its knees. It can. Maybe it will... but I don’t want to kill people. I don’t want to destroy Soul Society. I thought that, because I knew I didn’t, it would never be a problem. But I was naive. I understand now... Father’s misapprehension and... and mine.”

He sighed, glancing at his hands.

“My greatest power is doing nothing, when something needs to be done,” he said bitterly. “I let bad things happen, and I don’t get involved. Because of that, people have already suffered. Tomorrow, Father will come here and attack. He will come seeking me, and I will have to go with him.”

“And that connects to this vision, how?” Shunsui demanded, his tones a little sharper than normal. “You’re not answering my question, Koku. You’re not telling me why you’d make me see something so horrific, taunt me with it and then tell me nothing can be done. If you’re going to run off after Keitarou, if that’s what you’re intending, then...”

“I will go with my father, when he comes,” Kohaku said simply, raising his gaze once more, and Shunsui was horrified to see tears trickling down the young man’s cheeks. “I have to. I know you can’t trust me, but everything I’ve shown you is truth. I have to go with Father. I can’t explain to you why, just that... nothing can begin at all if I don’t. Because I must, there are things I can’t protect. Things I want to protect.”

Shunsui’s brow creased in consternation, as he realised what his companion meant. He muttered a curse.

“You mean... Juushirou?”

Slowly Kohaku nodded his head.

“You don’t want him to die. I don’t, either,” he said brokenly. “You might hate me, and maybe you can’t trust me. Maybe it’s right to be suspicious of me — I might yet make everything a lot worse and you have no reason to believe a word I say, when I’ve lied so much already. But that man... Ukitake-dono... he’s been kind to me from the start. I don’t really know how to respond to kindness like that from a stranger. I’ve never had it from anyone before. My brother was the only one who ever treated me like a person, but he’s family and he can see inside my head. Ukitake-dono can’t. He has no way to know anything about me... and there’s so much he doesn’t. Yet he’s kind to me and he trusts in me. He listens to me. I don’t want him to die because of me. And you... you care for him. So I know... you don’t want it either.”

“Well, on that we agree,” Shunsui said darkly. “Not that Juushirou is a weak touch in his own right. He might slice your father into two pieces on first sight with Sougyo no Kotowari.”

“No...” Kohaku shook his head. “Sougyo no Kotowari has never taken a life. He tried to take my brother prisoner, rather than really moving to kill him. And though... I can always feel Ukitake-dono’s strength, I don’t think... in this situation... he could easily defend himself. Because he’s been kind to me, I know he has a weakness. That weakness... is... not being able to easily hurt those he cares for.”

“I don’t think he cares for your father much, you know.”

“No, but I believe he cares about me, now.” Kohaku said simply. “Otherwise, why would he protect me? Because he does, I don’t know if he is in a position to fight my father. More importantly, though, nor do I know if... he could fight against others. There’s someone in the Gotei who you can’t trust. You know that, don’t you? Ukitake-dono asked me about it, so I know you must. I don’t know who it is and I can’t find out. I don’t know how they intend to act, or what Father has promised them in return for their cooperation. But whoever it is... may be someone Ukitake-dono trusts and likes.”

“You don’t know who the spy is, yet you don’t think it’s me?”

“I know it isn’t you,” Kohaku dismissed this with a flick of his hand. “I’ve met you.”

“And? I might just be a very good actor.”

“No. I read your aura, and besides, I saw who you were the first time we met,” Kohaku managed a wan smile. “I am not strong enough, right now, like this, to try and see who is spying on you all, but I think... it is probably someone I have never met. If I had met them, I would... probably... have sensed it from their aura, that they’d been in contact with Father. I haven’t felt that at all, so I don’t... I don’t know. I only know who I’m sure it isn’t... Ukitake-dono and you top that list.”

“Hrm,” Shunsui considered for a moment, his conversation with Juushirou fresh in his mind. For a moment, he debated raising Minaichi’s name, then, just as quickly, decided against. Whether Kohaku was trustworthy or not, he would not complicate matters by raising new questions and risking his companion disappearing into another of his dreamlike trances.

“Unfortunately that doesn’t rule out many people,” he continued aloud. “I’m already certain nobody at Thirteenth or in my own division would be fool enough to play spy, and I don’t particularly suspect Mitsuki or anyone at Seventh, either. We decided it was someone of rank, in any case... but you won’t have met anybody of rank except the people here, and me. So it still leaves it wide open.”

“It does,” Kohaku nodded. “Father knew a lot of things that I didn’t tell him — and probably still does. It probably is someone important, but I don’t know who it is. Ukitake-dono might be friends with them, though. You might too, but I think... you could fight it, if it happened. You understand... betrayal in a different way to Ukitake-dono. I think he might want to talk, to get answers, and it could make him hesitate... so I don’t know whether he would be so quick to fight.”

“Maybe that’s true. He can be an idealistic idiot,” Shunsui acknowledged. “Well? I’m listening. I don’t see how all this sticks together, but I’ll hear you out till the end at least.”

“Thank you,” Kohaku hesitated for a moment, then, “I’ve chosen to speak to you because as much as I want to, I *can’t* change that image. My ability is to see the future. It’s not necessarily ever been to change it. I can’t do that... not on my own. In the past, I’ve tried to handle everything on my own, but doing that... has probably cost people lives and made things worse. This time, I don’t want that to happen. I can’t do anything about the thing I showed you, but you... *you can*.”

He sighed.

“I don’t even know if my telling you this now is right or wrong, or whether it might make the end result worse,” he admitted. “I don’t know if I’ve made the right choice, or if the things that happen tomorrow will still result in terrible things. I had to try, though, this time. In the past, I haven’t tried, but I can’t keep running from it forever. *I can’t* prevent what I showed you from happening, but *you can*. *You can* change it, Kyouraku-dono. You’re probably the only one who’s able.”

“You’re saying that I can protect Juu?” Shunsui’s eyes became slits. “Meaning that Keitarou intends on targeting him directly? Maybe by using that spider of his to weave a web?”

“Father can’t,” Kohaku shook his head. “Chudokuga’s Bankai can’t take control of the same soul twice.”

“Then how?”

“I don’t know, precisely,” Kohaku admitted, “but I do know one thing. Father can’t use his ability on me, either. I didn’t ever know why that was, but I think... now I do. Or I’m gambling... guessing that I do without any absolute proof of it.”

He reached up to brush the ends of his straggly hair.

“I have dark hair and eyes,” he continued. “I don’t have the Endou killing spirit, and I’m not scientifically inclined. I’m the odd one out, the black sheep in my family. Father told me a long time ago that I had his mother’s eyes, but I never understood the significance until now. I... I realised recently that it’s not just those elements of my appearance that are different. They’re not random. They’re from a different strain of the family completely. They’re... they’re Kyouraku. Aizen is a Kyouraku name, isn’t it?”

“It is,” Shunsui looked stricken. “Are you trying to tell me that that

means something in this? That your spirit power — your strange ability to see the future — is somehow Kyouraku in origin?”

“I don

’t know what it is, or if I even understood right, “Kohaku sighed, rubbing his temples, and Shunsui was aware of how weary the boy looked.” I don’t know if there will ever be time to explain, even if I come to understand. But... what I think is... that it’s that element of my spirit power that Father can’t control. I think he could have controlled my sister... maybe even my brother, and I know he used his sword on my mother, once. He’s used it on members of other Clans — but never on a Kyouraku. And you’re a Kyouraku from the central family line, aren’t you? A direct descendant from the first Kyouraku lord?”

Shunsui nodded.

“My brother is Head of the Clan,” he agreed.

“I thought so,” Kohaku nodded, as if confirming something to himself. “When I saw you, that first time, I knew... you were someone my father hated. I knew you were someone he had tried to kill in the past... someone who had scarred him, somehow.”

“I suppose you could say he gave the scars first,” Shunsui’s fingers strayed absently to his right arm, then lowered. “Well? What are you implying? That Keitarou’s sword can’t manipulate me, even though it never has?”

“Your sword manipulates things too, doesn’t it?” Kohaku responded with a question of his own, and Shunsui nodded warily.

“It does, but don’t expect me to trot out a full and detailed explanation of its strengths and weaknesses to someone whose motives I still can’t read,” he said softly. Kohaku smiled faintly.

“I don’t need to know that. I don’t want to, even. But my *reiryoku*... it can influence people, too. The things I see can make people react and take action, even if I don’t intend it. I don’t think our spirit power is alike, Kyouraku-dono, but I do think that because it manipulates, it can’t be easily manipulated. And if that is the nature of Kyouraku spirit power... then probably, given how pure Kyouraku your blood is... Otousama can’t use his sword to manipulate you. Your sword is descended one hundred percent from that pure Kyouraku line, whereas his spirit power is a meshing of three different Clan families in one. Even given everything he is able to do, I think if he came up against your weapon, well, his blood just isn’t Kyouraku enough to

compete.”

“But yours is?”

“My *reiryoku* was impacted by father’s drinking *reidoku* before I was conceived. I have more spirit power than he does,” Kohaku said matter-of-factly. “That’s why he needs me, and why he will come for me. I’m more powerful, potentially, than he is... more than my brother or my sister could be. It’s why I wasn’t sure if I could make you see... the thing I needed you to see. I wasn’t sure if my spirit power could touch you like it does other people... it’s an unknown quantity, but I hoped I could at least make you see, even if I couldn’t... influence you to act. I’m glad I could do that, because explaining it any other way would’ve been hard. Spirit manipulation is a matter of strength, though, isn’t it? One of the old books I often used to read talked a little about that. My Kyouraku blood is muddier than Father’s is, but if I’m right and my *reiryoku* is fundamentally Kyouraku in nature, then because my spirit power is greater than his he can’t, even with his power as it is now, use Chudokuga on me. He won’t use it on you, because your sword is more Kyouraku than Chudokuga can counteract. And he can’t touch Ukitake-dono again, because he already did, once, and it got broken.”

“So say you’re right about all of this. If you are, what did you call me here for, really?” Shunsui’s eyes became thoughtful. “There’s a reason behind this whole discussion, and if it relates to Juu’s safety... I want to understand more. If Juu is in danger, but not from Chudokuga, then I need more information than you’ve given me so far. If I can do something to change what you showed me, even if you can’t forcibly influence me to act, I’m pretty sure I’m game to find out what on my own account.”

“You can change it.” Kohaku agreed. “But to do so, I have to ask something unforgivable. Unforgivable for me and unforgivable for you. It’s not something you can consider lightly... even if you did act, and do as I told you, it would probably remain with you forever. It might haunt you... for a long time to come.”

Shunsui gazed at Kohaku for a moment, then he sighed, the tension draining out of him as he read the pain in the young boy’s eyes. He rested a gentle hand on the young man’s shoulder, casting him a questioning look.

“Explain as clearly as you know how,” he said quietly. “I’m listening.”

Author's Note

Shirogane is afraid of bats... xD

59. Battleground

Chapter Fifty Eight: Battleground

If you ask me, this whole place looks highly suspect.”

Kyouki stood at the edge of the small forest clearing, her keen gaze sweeping over the tree stumps and broken rocks which appeared to circle around the remains of a dying campfire. Three hours trekking through the Real World woodland had ultimately brought them to this spot, and though there were no immediate signs of activity, the lingering traces of reiatsu in the air coupled with the obvious remains of a human woodcutter’s resting place told the Fifth Division Captain that this was almost certainly the base camp they had been seeking.

She sighed, running fingers absently through dark, curly hair.

“It’s rather a let down, finding such a blatant space like this, carved into the woodland,” she added regretfully. “Nagesu-kun was so hot on the idea of it being within that mountain, somewhere — but there’s no mistaking it. This place is thick with reiatsu, and whilst I can’t identify a single presence I know, that doesn’t mean it’s not something we ought to ignore.”

“The embers in the fire are still warm, Kyouki-sama,” One of the division’s lesser officers knelt down beside the pile of ash and charcoal, holding his hand above the fine black dust before touching it gingerly with his fingers. “Someone was here recently — perhaps as recently as last night.”

“These were cut down by humans, though,” Ryuusei ran his fingers over the smooth surface of one of the felled trees. “How can we be sure it’s not still a place used by them? There’s nobody about, but that doesn’t mean...”

“Use your senses, Ryuusei,” Kyouki admonished lightly, shaking her head. “Can’t you feel it, lingering on the breeze? Humans don’t leave those kinds of traces of their presence, and Hollows are far too aggressive to be able to conceal themselves in the presence of so many nice, juicy shinigami. No, this is suspicious all right — and it’s emptiness makes it ever more suspicious. It’s so nicely laid out, so ready for us to find it... that it makes me uneasy.”

“Do you think it’s a trap, Taichou?” Arai, Fifth Division’s Third Seat asked apprehensively, and Kyouki nodded.

“Absolutely no doubt that that’s what it is,” she said frankly, raising her hand and gesturing to the surrounding forest. “Up to this point, the trees have been spaced — probably as a result of the human woodcutters — but beyond, the land is dense and dark, full of heavy foliage and not much sunlight. This is the perfect place to use as a lure... or to seclude oneself ready to launch an ambush. We can’t drop our guard for a moment — just because nobody appears to be here now, it doesn’t mean that they can’t return here once they realise we’ve arrived.”

“We ought to secure the scene and take whatever evidence we can from it, for later review,” Ryuusei suggested, and Kyouki inclined her head in agreement.

“A trap or not, people have definitely been here, and they seem likely to have been people of interest to us,” she agreed. “Whether they want us here for their own ends or not, I don’t think it can hurt to see what they left for us.”

She cast another pensive glance towards the thick darkness of the forest beyond, then sighed, drawing her sword.

“Taichou?” Arai cast her a questioning look, and Kyouki offered him a wry smile.

“It never hurts to be prepared, not when dealing with an individual we know has already killed many, many people, of both high and low rank and birth,” she said pragmatically. “Having Gekkoushin drawn now means saving time later, when she might prove to be needed.”

“There’s really not a lot here, Okaasama,” Ryuusei knelt down beside one of the large stones, tilting his head so that he could examine the earth around the base. “Maybe there’s the faintest sign of footsteps, but they barely make an impression. The land here is soft, but not settled enough to leave any lasting imprint. I can sense reiatsu too, now, but like you, I can’t identify it with someone I know. I think there was more than one person here, though.”

“Keitarou and his family?” Arai suggested, and Kyouki shrugged.

“Eiraki-hime’s presence is negligible — in this atmosphere, sensing her aura would be hard, if not almost impossible,” she reflected, striding around the far perimeter of the makeshift camp and turning to view it from a fresh perspective. “Of course, we don’t know exactly how many children this man has spawned, so we can’t rule out the chance there are more than we think.”

She hesitated for a moment, then,

“Ryuusei, I’m leaving you in charge, with Arai to back you up,” she said decidedly, and Ryuusei raised his gaze in surprise.

“Leaving me?” he echoed. “Mother, what are you planning to do? Surely you don’t intend on abandoning us and going hunting for Keitarou and who knows how many associate officers all on your own?”

“I don’t think I’m in danger of doing that,” Kyouki shook her head, licking her finger and holding it up to test the direction of the wind. She nodded, apparently satisfied with what she felt. “Yes, I thought so. This was a place where more than one person was located, but we’re talking in the past tense. They went their separate ways from here — we can only hope that means they’ll encounter unexpected surprises from our other division parties along the way. At least one of the reiatsu traces I can sense here is consistent with what I expect from Urahara shinigami, so it’s more than possible that’s Keitarou. I can’t tell what direction he took, nor specifically pinpoint any of the others — the atmosphere here is too thin and spiritless. However, if they separated, the chances are one or more are still in this vicinity. I will sweep the edge of the forestland with Gekkoushin. It’s a good place to hide, and I’m capable of defending myself. Light and dark are within my capabilities, Ryuusei, so don’t look so worried. You won’t be inheriting the Shiba Clan just yet — I give you my word.”

She winked, offering him a grin, and Ryuusei sighed, shaking his head in resignation.

“Whatever you say,” he said reluctantly. ‘If that’s Taichou’s orders, I guess we can only obey them. Arai!’ He raised his voice, and the Third Seat got to his feet, dusting the residual ash from his uniform. “Take second patrol and skirt the right hand perimeter of the camp, collecting anything and everything that appears out of place or significant. First patrol, you and I will take the left hand side. Nobody else is to leave the confines of the campsite under any circumstances until Taichou returns — understood?”

There were immediate calls of assent and salutes from the officers present, and Kyouki eyed them approvingly before nodding her head.

“I’ll see you shortly,” she said briskly. “I’ll stretch my legs and, if you hear crashes and see bright lights, don’t worry too much about them. Gekkoushin is restless and I imagine that a few trees might become sacrificed if it cuts an easier path to the enemy.”

“Well, don’t create too much of a furore,” Ryuusei warned her, amusement flickering briefly in his own characteristically sober gaze.

“We’re not here to re-landscape the Real World, Mother — and especially not to get the attention of the human citizens who live here.”

“Sometimes I wonder if you think you’re already Captain of this squad,” Kyouki bantered back. “Very well. I’ll leave the others in your capable hands, and be off.”

Before Ryuusei could find a response, she ducked beneath the branches of a nearby tree, plunging into the forest proper and blinking as her eyes struggled to acclimatise to the dim light. As she had surmised, this area of woodland had been left largely untouched by the human natives, and only the faintest rays of sunlight threaded their way through the thick leafy canopy, a multitude of branches vying for the light of the sun. At her feet, grass grew in patches, longer in areas blessed with more sun, and yellowed and struggling around the roots of the powerful tree trunks. Ferns and other low-lying plants made it difficult to see where one tree root ended and the next began, and Kyouki found that she had to work hard not to trip over the uneven forest floor. Slicing through the lower branches of some of the most densely packed trees with Gekkoushin’s blade, she was able to make her way more deeply into the woodland, disturbing nesting birds and angry, rodentish creatures who darted up into the higher branches with indignant swishes of furry tails.

Real World forests were much fuller of life than those in Seireitei, yet despite the number of living entities watching her from the shadows, Kyouki knew that there was far less to confuse her spiritual wits in a place like this. None of the small creatures lurking in dens below her feet or in holes cut into the trunks of trees created even the slightest spiritual murmur, and, though she was certain they could see her as well as she could see them, with the weapon in her hand, none of them attempted to launch any kind of attack. They had clearly encountered humans with similarly sharp blades, she reflected, wondering if this land was used for hunting and poaching and so had been left in its natural state, in order to coax out rabbits and birds which were a supplementary part of the living world’s diet. As if to confirm her thoughts, traces of a wooden trap poked up above the level of the overgrown grass and, a little further on, a young rabbit whose body had been caught in some kind of snare. It was dead, the flies already buzzing around the creature’s eyes and bloody, raw throat, and Kyouki wrinkled up her nose in displeasure at the scent of decay.

You’d think that, if people left traps like this, they’d remember how to find them before the food went bad. Such a waste of life and energy and...

hey, wait a minute. That's funny.

She frowned, bending to examine the rabbit more closely, and as she did, a sense of unease washed through her body. Though most of the creature's corpse had been concealed in the long grass, the sheer number of flies buzzing around what was clearly still quite a fresh body attracted her attention, and, gingerly, she pushed back the blades of grass, her brows creasing in consternation as she realised that the beast's rear legs were entirely missing. They had been ripped away or, no, maybe chewed through by some other beast of the forest, for the edges were ragged and had gone straight through the bones as well. The sticky, congealing mess of blood told Kyouki that whatever had come for the creature, it had done so recently... and more, she realised with a jolt, had perhaps bitten the creature in half before the cruel snare had managed to complete its job.

Hunting of this nature was the way of the wild in the Real World, and Kyouki, in her years as a shinigami, had encountered more of the Real World than many, having come here on many missions in the dim, distant past alongside Shunsui's long-dead father, Matsuhara. Yet there was something about the savagery of this desecrated corpse that struck genuine disgust into her stout heart. It was not just the action of a wild animal, but something else, something more... sinister, and, as she hovered her hand hesitantly above the body, disrupting the nesting flies into a buzzing swarm of protest, she felt her worst fears confirmed.

Whatever had attacked this rabbit, it was neither human, nor real world predator. It was something else... something spiritual... with an unmistakeably potent, pungent reiatsu.
Something I felt near the campsite, but not in such a clear, noxious way.

Kyouki stood upright, turning her back on the rabbit in disgust and raising her gaze to scan the upper branches for any sign of the killer.
Whatever it was, it came here, it chewed up the rabbit, and then... it disappeared. The creatures here are hiding because they witnessed it... and who can blame them. They probably see me as exactly the same as what came before. Animals are so much wiser to our presence than humans, and they are less easy to fool. If they are scared, it means there is something to be scared of — something that hunts them and rips them into shreds. They were afraid before I came here... but what of, exactly? What are we hunting for, in that case?

"Fukutaichou!"

A desperate, terrified scream from the campsite sent all other thoughts from Kyouki's mind, her maternal instinct galvanising her

into immediate action. All idea of stalking the predator through the thick woodland had fled in the moment she had realised her son was in some kind of danger, and she slashed and smashed her way back through the trees, paying little attention to the damage she was causing in her hurry to get back to where she had left the remains of her division.

As she stepped into the clearing, she felt a wave of noxious, pungent reiatsu wash over her once more, fresh and familiar from her examination of the rabbit, and her heart almost stopped in her chest as she saw her eldest son's body flung through the air, a spray of blood from an unidentified wound spattering like red rain down onto the earth below. Scattered around the camp were other members of the Fifth Division, some unconscious or worse, others dazed, bloody and struggling to regain their balance, but in that moment Kyouki could not focus on how many members of her squad had been taken down. All she could see was Ryuusei, his limp body twisting through the air before plunging towards the ground like a dead weight.

"Ryuusei!"

The Vice Captain met the ground with a cracking thud that sickened Kyouki to her core, and her son's name escaped her lips as she darted forwards, her duty as a Captain almost forgotten in her urgency to reach the side of her injured child. Before she could, however, something loomed out of the shadows, lurching before her with a muffled snarl, and Kyouki's features drained of all colour, her eyes widening with genuine horror as she registered the creature that now squatted before her, hunched and bloody on the ground.

From the neck down, he appeared as any other soul, though his spine appeared to have an unnatural curvature to it, as though he had spent a good amount of his life in a hunched position, rather than standing upright. From the neck up, however, his face was swathed in white, the smooth, ghostly surface split through in only three places. Two slits provided enough light through which Kyouki could make out the beady, blood-red eyes of the hunter who had killed the rabbit, whilst the mouth, already thick with red, opened to reveal canine incisors sharp enough not to shame any wolf or hunting cat. The creature held something in its thick, clubby fingers, and Kyouki swallowed hard as she realised it was the bloody remains of an arm, still dressed folornly in torn *shihakushou*, the badge of the Fifth Division hanging free from it at a precarious angle.

Ryuusei's... arm.

Despite all the horrific scenes she had encountered in her long

years of service, Kyouki felt physically sick at the sight before her. For a moment she found herself unable to react, helpless to do anything but watch as the bloody, grotesque mouth opened wide, a long, curious tongue darting out in anticipation of its snack. The teeth closed around the elbow of Ryuusei's severed arm, sending the remains of the Vice Captain's badge tumbling to the ground with a clatter, and the sound of bone crunching between the Hollow-man's teeth sent fresh shudders of maternal distress through Kyouki's body.

"Taichou!" Arai's voice sounded very far away, but at the sound of it, the faintest slither of Kyouki's self-awareness and military mentality began to return, and, as anger surged to replace the fear and horror that had overwhelmed her, she tightened her grasp on Gekkoushin's hilt, preparing to release her weapon. She did not know, yet, if her son was alive or dead, but out of the corner of her eye she was aware of a young, frightened figure hovering hesitantly beside the fallen body, tearful and panicked, as though unsure how he ought to behave. This was Seikyou, Ryuusei's eldest son and Kyouki's first grandson, a lad of barely sixteen who had only begun to work with the full squad two or three months earlier, and the stricken, guilt-ridden expression on the young boy's face told Kyouki all she needed to know.

Ryuusei got hurt protecting his son from that monster, and now it's my turn to finish what he tried to begin. Pull yourself together, Kyouki — this is no time for sentimental weakness, not when lives are in danger. This is clearly one of Keitarou's creatures — one like Nagesu-kun reported to the Council. They're far, far more terrible than we ever imagined — a creature who can consume others is barely deserving of life. Come, Gekkoushin. Whether Ryuusei is dead or not can wait till later.

"Arai, take charge!" she raised her voice, the familiar commanding tone returning to her words. *"Everyone who's able, gather up the wounded and follow Arai as far away from here as you can!"* At the sound of her command, the shell-shocked Arai seemed to shake himself back into focus, and Kyouki was dimly aware of the Third Seat bellowing orders left, right and centre as a measure of order began to return to the near-hysterical divisioners. The Captain did not let her own concentration slip away from the enemy at hand, however, her blade beginning to glimmer with an angry red light. Gekkoushin was as furious and indignant as she was, and together they would make the creature pay for the insult to the Shiba Clan. Kyouki's lips parted, and, syllable by syllable, the release command dropped into the open air, every word infused with the fire of the day sun whose power she sought to summon.

“Yo ga aketemo, ten ni nokotte, Hitsuki!”

Ryuu and his patrol had been in the midst of examining a set of mounds and ditches a stone's throw from the riverbank when they had first sensed Ginkyoujiki's release. At first little more than a brief flurry on the wind, Ryuu had quickly picked up on the edge in his cousin's reiatsu. He had paused in his investigation of a particularly odd and lumpy mound of earth, scanning the skies for any sign of the alert kidou all of Sixth had been briefed to release in the event of finding danger. Despite the clear pique in Shirogane's attacking *reiryoku*, however, the sky remained clear and blue, and the Third Seated officer frowned, processing this in his usual, methodical manner.

“Ryuu-dono?” One of his subordinates cast him a questioning glance, aware he had stopped his own investigations, and Ryuu frowned, shaking his head.

“Ginkyoujiki,” he said briskly. “Fukutaichou has clearly run into something — though there's been no flare, so I don't suppose it was Keitarou. We should finish up quickly here and progress to the river. Guren-sama and his patrol are already in that vicinity, and these are little more than human burial remains. They might have acted as clues or places of concealment, and it seems probable someone untoward was in this area at some point, laying a trail to confuse us, but there is nothing here of value to our investigation. Keitarou is not with us, so we should move on.”

He turned away from the mounds, raising his hand to gesture to the furthestmost of his companions.

“We're moving on!” he raised his voice so that they could all clearly hear them. “Remain on your guard. I think...”

He faltered, a fresh surge of *reiryoku* distracting his senses, and despite himself, his gaze flitted once more in the direction he knew his cousin's patrol had gone. His brows knitted together in consternation as he once more picked up on the intensity in Shirogane's fight pattern. If it was merely a Hollow who had stumbled across the Vice Captain's path, one release of Ginkyoujiki's petal cloud would have quickly put the beast to rest. Ryuu had trained with Shirogane on many occasions since joining Sixth Squad, and the two of them had worked together enough for him to have a good understanding of his cousin's usual fighting pattern. Shirogane was a confident fighter whose carefully honed skills rarely required him to push the boat out, but as Ryuu processed his cousin's *reiryoku* once more, he realised that this was more than just a simple fight against a random Hollow.

“Sir?” A hesitant junior officer ventured the question this time, and Ryuu’s eyes narrowed. He turned his attention back to the alternative direction, reaching out his senses cautiously across the thin, spiritless air to where he knew his Captain’s patrol should be, and, at length, nodded. He let out his breath in a rush, then,

“Guren-sama is at the river,” he said briskly. “The bank is within sight of us now, and if you continue in a direct line with no deviations, you will join up with his forces presently.”

“You... will?” the first officer who had spoken echoed this, a startled expression in his eyes. “But sir, aren’t you coming with...?”

“I want you to take charge, Touma,” Ryuu turned to the officer in question, ignoring the look of dismay that flooded the other man’s gaze. “Take everyone and join up with Guren-sama. Explain to him everything we’ve done and investigated and apologise to him on my behalf for our lack of overall progress. Also...”

He curled his hand briefly around the hilt of his *zanpakutou*, then,

“Apologise to him on my account for abandoning my patrol and running to the aid of a superior officer without a command to that effect. I shall expect his discipline later — but even though there has been no Kidou flare, I do not like the sense of Shirogane-dono’s sword release. More, there’s something else in the atmosphere — and I believe I would regret it for some time if I did not go and investigate. Since Guren-sama is so close by, you will be in no danger. Please, hurry to join his group at once, and make report as I have instructed. I shall return to the river presently.”

Touma’s jaw dropped even further, his eyes almost bugging out of his head at the idea of the organised, obedient Ryuu disobeying Guren’s patrol commands and risking Shirogane’s wrath all in one go, but he somehow managed to raise his hand in a salute, and Ryuu offered him a faint smile, relieved that the man would obey his instructions, however crazy they might appear. Guren’s group were close enough that he felt certain his men would not suffer any ill effects from his absence, but the swirling darkness from Shirogane’s direction was troubling him more and more, and he did not dare delay any further. With a brisk nod in Touma’s direction, he slipped into shunpo, pushing as quickly as he could through the streams of light and energy towards the place he knew his cousin was fighting.

It was wet and soggy underfoot as he dropped out of his flashstep on the far side of the abandoned village, his feet sinking into the blackish goop, but there was no time for him to be houseproud about

his footwear. Almost the instant he had emerged from his shunpo, he had sensed the undercurrents of malevolent *reiryoku*, the sensation acrid and twisted, but, to Ryuu, unnervingly familiar. Though he had tried to tell himself otherwise, he knew that his senses were too good to have been easily fooled. He had deliberately entered the scene at a point not immediately visible to his cousin's position, wanting to preserve the element of surprise for as long as possible, but as he picked through the abandoned village, he encountered a group of frightened, huddled officers, two of which were bloody and one quite clearly badly hurt. At the sight of him, Sakurai — clearly the officer in charge — had let out an exclamation of surprise and relief, and another officer — Uranabe — raised his head from where he had been tending to the most injured of the two junior officers, his expression becoming one of hope.

“Ryuu-dono!” It was Sakurai who spoke, but Ryuu did not give him time to speak any more.

“Fukutaichou told you to retreat,” it was a statement, not a question, but Sakurai nodded.

“Yes, sir. An enemy attacked us — an enemy with a Hollow mask, but a body like a man. He attacked two of our men, and broke their swords. Fukutaichou challenged him and told us to get out of Ginkyoujiki's range. Only we didn't like to go too far, sir — we've the injured to think of, and well, we were just thinking of sending a messenger when you arrived, sir.”

Ryuu's lips thinned, the clouds of conflicting *reiryoku* even clearer now, despite the mist that still lingered in patches around the village. In a moment he understood Shirogane's decision.

These officers would be no more than fodder with an enemy as powerful as this one feels to be. Senpai would've realised it quickly, and sent them away to protect them from being killed. Whether he is enough for this opponent, I wouldn't like to say — but I can imagine his feelings when he saw the juniors on the ground. It must've reminded him of Ribari-sama — and how little he wants to have any officer under his command killed again.

Out loud he said,

“Stay where you are and do as Fukutaichou instructed. Tend to the young ones. Guren-sama and my patrols are at the river, and I will go assist Fukutaichou. I believe we will manage adequately, but if something amiss should occur, take the boys and go to the river at once. Do not come back for us. Go there and report. Understand?”

“Yes, sir,” Sakurai nodded, “but are you sure...?”

“I’m sure,” Ryuu drew Shizurugi from its sheath, the hilt already glittering faintly with purple light. “I have encountered a creature such as this one before, I believe, and I am quite certain that Fukutaichou and I will be successful if we work together. Do as I instruct you, and follow Fukutaichou’s orders. The lives of every man here may depend on it.”

“Yes, sir,” Sakurai’s expression became grave, but he nodded. “I will do so sir. You have my word.”

Ryuu nodded curtly, then turned his back on the gathered shinigami, making his way purposefully through the remains of the village towards the area where the battle was in full flow. As he reached the edge of the settlement, Ryuu could see his cousin for the first time, blood and mud splattered over his clothing and his cheeks, and his sword, glittering with silver energy, clutched resolutely in his hands. Ginkyoujiki’s blade was not whole, however, and as Ryuu appraised the scene, he realised that this was not because of how Shirogane had chosen to release it. On the contrary, faint specks of silver dotting the sticky, muddy landscape told another story, and as his gaze flitted towards the attacker, he felt his worst fears confirmed.

It was a man with a hollow mask, just as Sakurai had reported, brawny and well built with an angry mane of reddish gold hair flowing around his shoulders. Though he could not see the man’s expression, Ryuu was sure he could feel the rage and resentment boiling up within the creature’s soul, and his heart stilled in his chest as he remembered his father, lurching and shrieking across the ruins of their family manor as he sought to tear apart anyone who threatened his son. It was a painful memory, but Ryuu had steadfastly turned the recollection into a positive learning curve and, as he reminded himself that his father had recovered and lived to tell the tale, so his past experience gave him an advantage that, in this fight, Shirogane lacked.

No, perhaps *two* advantages.

He glanced at Shizurugi, remembering the way its pure beams of energy had broken through Keitarou’s sword release, and how his weapon’s protective presence had allowed him to penetrate kidou barriers and his father’s swirling *reiryoku* to reach the ailing Seiren’s side.

Sensei said then that Shizurugi was a purifier. Well, that seems appropriate, in muggy, tainted air such as this.

“*Tatte, Shizurugi*,” the words were barely more than a whisper, but his sword immediately hummed with obedient energy, its surface aglow with purple light. Shizurugi’s guard elongated into the elegant petals that pressed against the delicate blade, and almost before his sword had completed its release, Ryuu had swung it in the direction of the monster’s back.

“*Junkouhou!*” he exclaimed, and a beam of laser-bright energy shot out across the murky atmosphere, searing a clear line through the mist. It seemed certain to strike the creature directly through the heart, but at the last minute the monster appeared to sense the danger, and cursed, dropping and rolling out of the line of fire. Ryuu’s attack grazed against his arm, creating a long scorch mark across the man’s skin, and he cursed again, huddling his body into a defensive ball. He swung around, trying to locate his attacker.

“*Ryuu!*” Shirogane’s voice broke the silence first, and Ryuu stepped out from the protective shelter of the village, bowing his head apologetically in his cousin’s direction.

“I sensed Ginkyoujiki, and disobeyed my orders to come and assist,” he said simply. “I realise you have not asked for my help, Fukutaichou, but I have previous experience of matters such as this, and felt Shizurugi might be of use, somehow.”

Shirogane’s gaze flitted to the creature’s scorched arm, noticing the burnt flesh and red, rawness of the wound, and he pressed his lips together thoughtfully.

“Perhaps you’re right,” he said at length. “Ginkyoujiki hasn’t had any luck breaking through his skin, but it seems Shizurugi is a different matter.”

“What the hell kind of attack was that?” The creature had recovered himself by this point, getting to his feet and lunging in Ryuu’s direction, but Ryuu held Shizurugi’s blade out between them, censure in his silver gaze.

“The questions to be answered will be mine,” he said coldly. “If you take pleasure in hurting youngsters, my Vice Captain and I will be forced to show you no mercy.”

“You have no idea what I am capable of doing,” Eyes glittered angrily from behind the mask, and Ryuu snorted, shaking his head.

“On the contrary, I have crossed paths with your kind before,” he said softly. “I have not only encountered your... deformity... but I understand *how to counteract it*. Then, I was too young to make enough

of a difference, but now, I am fully competent and aware of my sword's skills."

He smiled coldly.

"You are not one thing, nor another, but your aura is tainted and impure," he added. "My sword is a purifier... its entire nature is to neutralise foreign reiatsu. Particularly reiatsu like yours... which puts you in very grave danger. You will not attempt to do to my sword what you appear to have done to my companions'...not unless you wish to lose all the fingers on your hand."

The man hesitated, the thick, brawny paw that had come out to grab Shizurugi's still glowing blade faltering for a moment, and Ryuu nodded.

"You have rationality," he reflected. "I suppose that's proof that Keitarou developed a scientific principle based on the unfortunate nature of that day in District Six."

In the interloper's sudden anger at Ryuu, Shirogane had been largely forgotten, and out of the corner of his eye, Ryuu could see his cousin retrieving the severed fragments of his own sword from where they had been trampled into the mud. An argent haze surrounded Ginkyoujiki's blade as he reassembled his weapon into its original pristine state, and he met Ryuu's gaze for the briefest of instants. Though no words were exchanged, in the field Ryuu knew Shirogane better than almost anyone else, and he understood from that glance what his cousin had wanted to say.

A little more time, and then we can fight. A little more time to fix Ginkyoujiki, and then we can deal with the problem at hand.

"Keitarou," the hollow-man spat the word out derisively. "You don't understand a single thing, but you do seem obsessed with 'Keitarou'. That's all your friend here kept bleating on about — who are you, who *made* you, where is Keitarou. Well, let me tell you once and for all, I'm no slave of Keitarou. I may be his partner, but I am not his 'creation'. I am not a 'thing', or a 'creature', and of course I have rationality. I am able to think and right now I am thinking about destroying you. Doing so is of personal benefit to me, and also, I have a lot of anger to work off. True, my anger isn't against your people — but it's reached a point where any shinigami is as good as another when it comes to the long term goal."

"Which is what, exactly?" Ryuu arched an eyebrow, and the man smiled, revealing a row of razor sharp teeth.

"Destroying all of you," he said simply. "I told your friend, and I'll

tell you, too. My name is Haruya, and I will kill you too, Kuchiki Ryuu.”

Ryuu hesitated for a moment, startled by the use of his full name, and Haruya’s mocking smile widened.

“You see, not only rational but capable of connective thoughts,” he said, his tone amused. “Your friend called you ‘Ryuu’, and you are a Kuchiki. Hence, Kuchiki Ryuu. Well? Am I right? Do I get points for correctly identifying Clan inbreeding when I see it?”

“*Saite, Ginkyoujiki!*” Before Ryuu could respond, a cloud of silver petals shot out across the clearing towards them, the razor sharp edges of Shirogane’s *zanpakuto* making a bee-line for Haruya’s white-chalk mask. Taken off guard, Haruya could only take a quick step back, raising his hands to once more bat away the fragments, but Shirogane had anticipated him this time, and he twitched the sword hilt up at the last minute, causing the edge of the blade shrapnel to carve lines in the edge of the mask itself. A chunk of white broke free, crumbling and dissipating into ash, and Haruya turned to glare at his attacker, annoyance clear in his eyes.

“In the Kuchiki Clan, we don’t like being ignored,” Shirogane was still blooded and mud-spattered, but there was a sense of stability in his *reiryoku* pulse now that told Ryuu he had regained his composure. “We also don’t care too much about knowing the name of each individual Hollow we fight and kill. If you aren’t going to tell us about Keitarou, there’s no reason to go easy on you. And, whilst we generally believe in honourable fights of one versus one, since you seem keen to sate your anger on both of us, I’m sure you won’t mind if we don’t hold back, either.”

His gaze met Ryuu’s across the swampy marshland, and Ryuu nodded, raising his weapon once more.

“As you instruct, Fukutaichou,” he said softly. “Let’s go.”

“*Ake no Odori! Mae e!*”

Before Nagesu could open his lips to speak Sekizanha’s release command, a surge of crimson energy suddenly broke through the grainy landscape, illuminating the entire surroundings in its blood red glow. At first anticipating a fresh Cero attack, it took Nagesu a few minutes to register what had been said, the greyish, unstable atmosphere steadying and becoming more real with every passing moment. His opponent, whose hands had been glittering with fresh light, had suddenly gone pale, her eyes wide with a mixture of shock

and fear, but it was not her expression that had caught Nagesu's gaze. Although she had been Hollow from the neck up, her body had shown no outward signs of Hollowfication. Now, however, a hole had opened up across her left chest, the edges scorched and glittering with energy. It took the dazed Third Division Captain another moment or two to realise that it had not been an evolution of Aki's spirit power that had caused this, but rather, the advance of an outside force, and, as his eyes blinked blankly behind his glasses, the haze of dust and ash began to clear, revealing a familiar, slender figure standing three or four feet behind the Hollow-girl.

Though it seemed as though an hour had passed, it was really a bare matter of seconds between the explosion of light and energy and the faint gasp that passed Aki's lips, the body crumpling to the ground with barely a murmur of protest. Around where she fell, Nagesu could make out the tell tale fragments of smouldering kidou ash, and he raised a bewildered gaze to meet the golden eyes of his Divisional neighbour.

"Midori-dono?"

At length he found his words, and Midori offered him a rueful smile, giving the crimson rapier in her hand a little shake to re-seal it. It glittered and shrank, taking the innocent appearance of an ornamental knife, and she slid it into her *obi*, coming to stand over the corpse of the dead Hollow-girl with a pensive expression on her face.

"I trust you'll forgive my interruption, Nagesu-sama," she said matter-of-factly, bending down to touch the girl's neck and nodding in satisfaction at what she felt. "Good, she's dead. I wasn't sure whether Akeage's technique would work so effectively on one who had entered some form of Hollowfication... but it seems she wasn't Hollow enough for her heart to have transferred its power fully to her mask."

"Barely Hollow at all," Nagesu murmured absently, removing his glasses and wiping them against the sleeve of his hakamashita, before returning them to his nose. "Forgive my asking, Midori-dono, but what... exactly... are you doing here?"

"I believe I said before that it would be better if Sekizannya wasn't released," Midori dusted her hands together, getting to her feet and meeting the Urahara's gaze face on. "You could've beaten her easily, I've no doubt — but I had the element of surprise, and I felt this was a quicker resolution to the problem. She seemed quite oblivious to my presence, so I took advantage and removed the threat."

She patted her *obi*.

“It was presumptuous of me on all levels,” she added, “but we’re not sent here to wreak havoc on the local residential population. Sekizanha could’ve killed her, but Akekage did so without the risk of seismic consequences. Besides, you’re not fond of killing women. I, on the other hand, have no problem killing anyone who happens to be in the way.”

Nagesu stared at her for a moment, then sighed, the tension draining out of his weary body.

“Sekizanha was wary about releasing into full shikai here, anyhow, so I suppose I can make no complaint,” he admitted. “Her reiatsu was intoxicating, and whilst I was beginning to become accustomed to it, I’m afraid not all the members of Third were able to manage it so effectively.”

“So I see,” Midori cast a cursitory glance around at the unconscious division members, letting out a little tut-tut of disapproval. “Still, they’re only babes, most of them. I suppose they can be forgiven.”

She turned her gaze back on Nagesu questioningly.

“Your son isn’t here?”

“He’s patrolling on the other side of the mountain,” Nagesu shook his head. “I gave him firm instructions that if he felt Sekizanha’s release, he was to stay well away. I told you that I wasn’t afraid to die — but that doesn’t mean I’m willing to sacrifice Shiketsu’s life here, and so I told him that it was an absolute order of the highest importance.”

“Well, it seems he obeyed you,” Midori clicked her tongue against the roof of her mouth, glancing back down at the dead girl once more. “I assume, by the way, that this is the individual you fought on your last visit?”

“Yes,” Nagesu knelt at Aki’s side, turning the body over with care to avoid the blood which, without either heart or heartbeat to pump it, was oozing slowly and languidly from the gaping wound in the girl’s scorched chest. “Midori-dono, I was under the impression that Akekage was a discreet weapon capable of leaving few marks on the body. This...”

“It’s a bit messy,” Midori looked apologetic. “The truth is, I’ve never fought against a creature in a mid-transformation stage before. Not like this. Akekage’s tip is coated with a lethal poison, it’s true, and her blade is so fine that it leaves barely a mark — but I wasn’t sure whether either of those things would be effective in this case. Her

reiatu was highly toxic and potentially mind-numbing — I didn't have time to think about what to do about it."

She grinned sheepishly, running her charcoal-dusted fingers through her thick violet hair.

"I'm not a Bankai shinigami like you are," she added self-effacingly. "You withstood her spirit power and I could sense that you were going to release. I came here for that reason — to prevent you from using Sekizanha and protect everyone else, not to protect you from this creature. I have no idea how long I would've been able to maintain coherent thought if all that *reiryoku* had been aimed in my direction — so I essentially had one shot. Getting close enough to impale her..." she shook her head. "Far too risky."

Nagesu let out his breath in a rush, brushing the girl's reddish hair out of her face and noting how the mask, which had been so smooth and even moments before had begun to crack and crumble, disintegrating on the breeze.

"I suppose your actions were just," he said at length, but there was regret in his tones. "I admit, if I had used my sword, it's likely there would've been less left of her than there is now. As a scientist, however, I cannot condone the destruction of potential evidence. The heart is such a significant organ in the study of Hollowfication... and she clearly had one, even despite her mask. Which means... her *saketsu* and *hakusui* were probably at least some way intact. We will never know for sure, though... there's nothing left."

"Taichou?"

Before Midori could respond, the dazed and bleary sound of a division member's voice attracted the Urahara Clan leader's attention, and he turned, seeing one of his junior officers staggering towards him. "Taichou what... what happened? What is... that girl? Midori-sama?"

"It seems the immediate threat is past," Nagesu cast Aki's body another resigned glance, getting to his feet. 'If you are quite recovered, I want you and two companions to prepare this corpse for return to Seireitei. We will take her with us this time and see what her body yields under closer examination. Midori-dono,' he turned to his fellow Captain. "Where are Second at the present time?"

"Further into the mountains, awaiting my signal," Midori admitted. "The area we had to canvas is not of a great size, and we found no evidence of activity there at all. Encountered a couple of bears — but nothing serious. That's when I sensed Sekizanha and the flurry here,

and came back down.”

She gestured to the body.

“If you want, my men can help with packaging that. They’re mostly used to death and destruction, and those who aren’t could use the experience.”

“Thank you, but I think this task I would prefer to leave in the hands of my own men. I would like the evidence preserved as best as is possible,” Nagesu shook his head. “In the meantime, though, I think it would be best for you to summon your subordinates. We do not know how many further enemies are out there, and with the aura here so thick with Aki’s *reiryoku*, it’s hard to make sense of any signals from other areas. My Third Seat was working on an area on the other side of the mountain, however, and Sekizanha believes there are hollow chambers beneath the crust.”

“A potential base camp? Even a lab?” Midori was not noticeably put out by the gentle snub, her young features becoming thoughtful. ‘You realise that Keitarou himself might be within the mountain, Nagesu-sama. This girl,’ she nudged her foot against the corpse’s ankle, “might’ve been set here to defend him.”

“Maybe,” Nagesu agreed grimly, “but that makes it no less important for us to find out. I will use Sekizanha on its lowest level to break through the rock, but I would appreciate your accompanying me within the mountain. It strikes me that Akekage might have further applications... the last thing I want to do is create an eruption or earthquake that I don’t have to.”

“All right,” Midori inclined her head. “If that’s what you want, I’ll bring my forces down and join up with yours. Well, who knows... if Keitarou is inside that mountain, it may take all of us to track him down and corner him, once and for all.”

Seireitei had taken the bait.

Keitarou dropped out of shunpo onto the roof of the archive building, tightening the seal on his *kyokkouspell* and reducing his reiatsu to its lowest possible level. Closing his eyes, he could pick up the flurry and bustle of the shinigami going about their duties and, as he registered the flustered edge to their activity, a smile twitched its way across his lips. As he had expected, then. The Council had gone to the Real World to chase ghosts, leaving him free reign over the areas that remained.

It was just after dawn, and he had left the Spiritless Zone before it had been light, kissing his sleepy wife goodbye before disappearing into one of the many subsidiary gates he had rigged up precisely for this purpose. They had been deliberately misdirected in order to disorientate anyone who attempted to follow him, but it had added a good twenty minutes to Keitarou's journey and, as a result, the sun had risen over Seireitei's roofs by the time he arrived. This meant that the residents of Inner Seireitei too were up and out of bed, but in his current state, they could not see him even if they looked straight at him, and Keitarou was unafraid.

He opened his eyes, glancing down at the bundle clutched tightly in his arms. It was thickly swathed in grimy, dusty fabric, but despite his precautions, carrying it through the gates from Rukongai had been difficult and uncomfortable. He would not be able to travel with it any further, not if he was to properly achieve his ends, and he leapt deftly down from the roof of the building, examining the landscape around him for a convenient place to lodge his burden, out of sight from prying eyes and senses. Concealing it with kidou was impossible, and so he took his time to locate the most hidden alcove around the back of the aging building, sliding the parcel in between two loose slats of wood before standing back to examine his handiwork.

Yes, it would do. True, someone might stumble across it, but then, quite soon, they would have other things on their mind.

Nobody will have time for a treasure hunt when they're already playing another of my little games.

Keitarou cast the bundle one last look, letting out a little sigh of resignation, then returning to his perch atop the building's slanted roof. It was the tallest structure in Inner Seireitei, and as a result, he could see a good number of the division barracks from this vantage point. Unencumbered by the wrapped bundle, he was capable of concealing himself completely from outside sight and senses — at least, from everyone except one soul.

His eyes darted in the direction of the Thirteenth Division, making out the very boundaries of its courtyard, and his brows knitted together thoughtfully.

Koku, I'm sure you must realise I'm here. Knowing you, you're waiting for me. Which means I'll doubtless have to pay a visit to an old acquaintance. But I must retrieve you, so there's no time for other considerations. Thirteenth will just have to take its place in the line of destruction. In the meantime...

His gaze shifted across a few divisions, and an amused smile

touched his lips as he made out two *haori*-clad figures, exchanging words near the gates of their respective divisions. Another was with them, and from the gleam of metal on his upper arm, Keitarou surmised that he was an officer of second rank. Examining the *reiatsumi* of these individuals, he congratulated himself on his good fortune.

Well, well. Ninth and... Tenth Division Captains, unless I misread my kanji. I suppose the other is a sidekick for one of them. Still, minnows I can use, and use well. It appears that the strongest forces went to the Real World... with a couple of obvious exceptions.

His eyes became slits.

Juushirou is still here, and that Kyouraku annoyance. Should I consider that coincidence, or a failsafe on the part of the Gotei?

He clicked his tongue against his teeth pensively.

My brother-in-law is here too, somewhere... but after his encounter with Katsura, he ought to be more wary of challenging me face to face. His Division have been torn to ribbons, and whilst I'm sure he'd like to finish what he began all those years ago, it's not an acquaintance I want to renew. Still, with his anger so fresh, it ought to be easy enough to keep out of his way. He can't possibly conceal his presence when the Wind Hawk is howling for revenge. No sign of the old man of the Academy or that cursed Kuchiki fossil Kinryu, either, which is reassuring. It leaves just those three Captains who could possibly cause me trouble... but if we did cross paths, I imagine Chudokuga and I could make use of Hirata somehow. No, the other two are more... immediate concerns. Most especially since I can't use my sword in the traditional way on either one of them.

Pulling Chudokuga from his *obi*, he glanced at the blade, tilting it slightly so that it caught the light.

I can't risk launching any kind of attack on Thirteenth, not until I've reclaimed what's mine from there. I can't risk Koku getting hurt in the crossfire, so that will have to wait. In the meantime, though, there's the Kyouraku in... Eighth Division, I'm quite sure that's correct. Well, that's convenient.

His gaze returned to the two Captains, who, their conversation finished, were now about to go their separate ways, and his smile became cold as he flicked Chudokuga's blade in their direction.

"Let's see if I can't keep the *bocchan* occupied, at least long enough for me to do what I need to do here," he murmured. "*Chudokuga Konshi: Zenrei!*"

Author's Note:

Hands up who cringed when Moe ate Ryuusei's arm? Just in case it wasn't already clear... the positions of the three Kamen no Gunzei in the "ten modes of death" are Insanity (Aki), Rage (Haruya), and, of course, Greed (Moe). Another random factoid since both appear in this chapter – Ryuusei's name 流星 means 'Shooting Star'. It uses a completely different character from Ryu's name 龍 — his of course means "Dragon". ;) Their names may appear similar, but really — not at all.

Chapter today (Wed 6th Feb, UK time) even though there's no Bleach this week.

60. Spider's Web

Chapter Fifty Nine: Spider's Web

"I wish they'd bothered to teach us impossible maths at the Academy,"

Sora ran weary fingers through her thick dark hair, casting her gaze over the remaining division members with a heavy sigh. It was early in the morning, and the Vice Captain had been up most of the night, trying to make final adjustments to the patrol detail, but it was proving more difficult than she had anticipated. Four patrols had already left Inner Seireitei for their routine inspections of the Eighth's District land, and late the previous night, four officers had joined up with members of Hakubei's Tenth in order to help cover the remains of Fifth Division's usual territory. With the two deaths in Tenth not so long ago, Hakubei had found himself stretched, and so had sent a begging letter to his sister which she had not been able to refuse. Consequently, eleven officers, plus herself, Kaoru and the Third seated officer, Shindou Tetsuya were now gathered in the courtyard, the lower ranked officers looking and feeling rather like spare parts or cattle being prepared for market whilst their upper seats debated the plan of action.

It was proving more difficult than Sora had anticipated, which had led to her unexpected declaration.

"With the best will in the world," she continued now, "I can't divide twelve officers into two patrols of five."

"With all respect, Sora-dono, that's two patrols with two officers over," Shindou shot her an amused smile from where he was perched on the division's fence, polishing the blade of his sword. "It's not impossible maths, it's simple division. If we only have to send out two more patrols, we ought to be fine."

"No... we won't," Sora shook her head impatiently, "and it would help if you'd put that thing away and pay attention, Tetsu. Shunsui wants you, me and Kaoru to remain here at the very least — he'd like, if possible, there to be one or two other high ranked officers about in case of problems — which is how he put it, so don't ask me what problems he means. He hasn't told me any particulars... just gave me the lists and told me to get on with it."

“Taichou said that?” Shindou looked surprised, obediently sheathing his sword and getting to his feet, coming to stand at his Vice Captain’s side. “I know it’s not unheard of for him to give impossible orders, but I would’ve thought he’d be able to count his own members.”

“Well, I guess he doesn’t know that I already sent four officers to join Tenth’s patrols into Fifth District,” Sora looked guilty. “I thought at that point we were over capacity — I didn’t realise that Shunsui had other plans. He disappeared yesterday, and when he came back, he shut himself in his room without saying a word to me. This is a change as of three o’clock this morning, when apparently he went to bed — by which point, of course, those officers were already happily skipping through District meadows in search of Hollows under Tenth Division’s banner.”

“Ouch,” Shindou winced, shaking his head in mock-disapproval. “Sending Kyouraku shinigami to fight for the Shiba? That won’t win you votes in District Eight, now will it?”

“Shut up,” Sora thwapped her companion lightly on the head, then sighed. “Though you’re right. I didn’t even think about it — and certainly not as a Clan thing. It was more a favour my brother asked, and I wanted to help. Tenth are stretched very thin covering their usual places and Fifth’s, so it didn’t seem a bit deal. Remember, they lost a couple of members, and I didn’t think it would hurt if they borrowed a few of ours. We’re all shinigami, and we’re supposed to help each other out until Okaasama and the others come back, but now it means I have to do this impossible equation... and I’m not sure how to settle it.”

“Well, you did do right in one respect, at least,” Shindou told her sympathetically. “Nakamura isn’t here, which means that she must’ve gone with your four to Tenth... correct?”

“She wanted to go, and so I let her,” Sora agreed. “Shunsui’s the only one who Hanako always listens to, so I figured I’d take advantage of her volunteering. She likes the Districts, and her navigation is first class. I thought Haku-nii’s men would be able to make good use of her.”

“And we’d get a break,” Shindou’s lips curled in humour. “All right. Then let’s see what we can do about the rest of the patrols before Taichou wakes up and finds out that the remains of his division are standing idle in the courtyard looking like spare parts and nobody’s left for morning duty yet. Night patrols have been told not to come back till tomorrow, to make sure they provide the Districts with

proper cover, so we can't double-shift anyone. We'll have to make do, and hope he's not too cross about the end result."

"Considering he's sleeping in, he has no right to complain about it," Sora muttered. "I don't know what's with him at the moment. Yesterday, especially. I swear he came home with a thundercloud attached to his head. I thought he'd only been to Thirteenth — but I can't imagine Juushirou making him look like that, so perhaps I was wrong."

She sighed again, turning her attention back to the remaining officers. "Well? Not counting him, but with you and I, we've fourteen officers here. I don't like sending out patrols of fewer than five, not in this situation, but..."

She paused, holding up her fingers. "Shunsui, you, me, Kaoru — that's four. I guess it will have to do... what the hell was that?" As a loud crash erupted from the direction of the division's front yard.

"Shall I go?" Shindou's hand was already on the hilt of his weapon once more, but before Sora could respond there was a second crash, followed by an explosion that was unmistakably a flare of powerful Kidou.

"Tetsu, wait," Quickly making up her mind, Sora turned back to the gathered officers who, till moments before had been silent and to attention, but who now were exchanging glances and whispers, some apprehensive, some apparently excited at this unexpected interruption to their tedium. "Kaoru!"

"Yes, Fukutaichou?" Kaoru stepped out from the back of the pack, her expression anxious.

"Take everyone inside. Go down into one of the main storage basements, and stay there until someone gives you orders to the contrary. I'm putting you in charge, so don't let anyone leave, no matter what happens," Sora's orders were clipped and harried, and Kaoru swallowed hard, but she made no demur, bowing her acquiescence before gesturing to the troops to follow her down the rear steps towards the underground basements which held, among other things, Shunsui's prized collection of expensive Kyouraku sake. The rooms were well below ground level, and firmly dug out of the earth, with strong, stone pillars supporting the ceiling and preventing it from tumbling in on the rows of ceramic vessels. Though she did not yet know what the threat was, Sora's instincts told her that of all the places in the division that could be considered secure, the cellar was the most substantial, and so it was with a little sigh of relief that she

turned her back on her fourth seated officer, knowing that Kaoru was a shinigami who would follow her orders to the letter.

“Sora-dono?” Shindou cast her an urgent glance, and Sora nodded.

“I’m coming with you. Let’s go,” she said briskly, her own fingers curling around the hilt of Hotarue. She could already feel the flutter of her sword’s exciteable spirit dancing against her wits, impatient for action, and this sense of urgency gave wings to her feet as she hurried towards the main building.

“So, it’s begun.”

As they reached the main doorway, Shunsui’s voice almost stopped the Vice Captain in her tracks, and she swung around, the scolding retort burning on her tongue dying the moment she saw the darkness in her Captain’s brown gaze. Shadows beneath his eyes told her that although he might have retired to bed at three, he had not slept, and the smudges across his fingers indicated that he had been writing something instead. He was robed in his shinigami uniform, but there was no sign of the pink over-garment his sister had embroidered for him as a graduation gift so many years earlier, and its absence made Shunsui’s Eighth Division *haori* appear all the more stark and cold in the bright light of day. Whilst Sora liked working with Shunsui, and enjoyed their easy, bantering friendship, in that moment she saw the gleam of a Captain in those eyes, and she bit back her smart remark, instead sending her companion a quizzical glance.

“What’s begun, sir?” It was Shindou who voiced the question, and Shunsui did not answer at first, his eyes narrowing as he ran his gaze over the two of them.

“The others?”

“On patrol, except for Kaoru and about ten or eleven other officers from morning patrol who hadn’t yet left,” Sora said quickly. “I sent them down into the basement when the explosions began. I don’t know what’s out there, but whatever it is seems bent on causing structural damage, and that was no mean kidou blast just now.”

“You don’t know?” Sora had never seen Shunsui’s eyes look so flinty, and he tut-tutted, striding across in front of her and reaching out to fling open the door of the barracks, revealing for the first time the outer courtyard between the wooden structure and the remains of the Eighth Division gate. Most of this had been blown to smithereens, a blast that had created shrapnel and a statement of intent, rather than a direct strike on the barracks proper.

“That’s some lousy aim, sir,” Shindou reflected, and Shunsui shook his head.

“It’s not the building they want. It’s us. You, me, Sora, and anyone else they can find,” he said blackly. “As I said, it’s begun. Sora, I trust you told Kaoru not to bring the others out, no matter what?”

“I did,” Sora agreed quickly, and Shunsui inclined his head slightly.

“Good. Then there’s no risk of anyone who shouldn’t be involved getting into trouble. In the meantime...”

He turned, casting Sora a glance.

“This is what I’ve been waiting for,” he said cryptically. “Yesterday, I received an unsubstantiated report that today, Seireitei were likely to face some kind of attack. I didn’t know precise details, else I would’ve given more useful orders — but I wanted the pair of you here, just in case it got troublesome. Well, it looks like it’s got troublesome.”

“With respect, sir, we’re none of us weak fighters,” Shindou objected, but Shunsui did not respond, stepping out into the sunny courtyard and resting his hands on his *daishou* swords, drawing them swiftly from their sheaths and crossing them in front of him just in time to deflect a dazzling flare of *Oukasen* kidou flame, slicing through it with a mixture of anger and clinical determination. As Shunsui’s slashes diminished the glare of the attack, Sora saw for the first time the individual who had fired it, and her jaw dropped, eyes almost bugging out of their sockets in disbelief.

Standing across the courtyard, surrounded by the charred rubble of the Eighth Division gate was a figure, tall and rangy, with dark hair knotted back from his face in a casual tail and green eyes that glittered with the same flecks of gold as Sora’s own. About his shoulders was draped the distinctive white cloth of the Tenth Division *haori*, and in his right hand was clutched the hilt of a *zanpakutou*, its blade glittering with light, though not yet in full release. The faint embers of light around the fingers of his right hand told Sora that her eyes were not deceiving her, and, as though identifying her presence for the first time, the man’s head turned in her direction. A lump rose in Sora’s throat, indignation and anger competing with horror and dismay for control of her heart. For the first time in her entire life, her older brother’s gaze did not contain even the remotest glint of affection.

“Haku... nii?”

The words slipped from her lips in an almost unconscious whisper,

and Shindou stepped out behind her, letting out an audible string of curses. On any other day, the Clan-born Shindou's surprising propensity for graphic and expressive expletives would bring forth Sora's fist and a teasing reminder that there was a lady present, but in that instant, all humour had deserted her. All she could do was stare in cold disbelief at Hakubei, registering dully that his posture was changing, his muscles tensing as though ready to lunge forth in attack, but though she saw it, she could not make her own body react.

"He's being controlled," Shunsui's words brought her back to herself, cold as though he had doused her with ice water. "That's not your brother, Sora. It's not Hakubei. It's Keitarou. Don't be swayed. He won't be."

"Keitarou?" Anger sparked for the first time through Sora's numb dismay, and her fingers tightened around Hotarue's hilt, indignation glittering in her own green eyes. "You mean that bastard outlaw's taken control of Haku-nii, and sent him here like this, to... to..."

"To fight and kill us. Me, definitely. You and Tetsuya as an added bonus," Shunsui's words were grim. "I expected an assault in some form or another, but I'm sorry, Sora. Even for Keitarou, this is stooping low. It means fighting your brother... and not just that. It seems he's brought a friend."

He raised his hand, gesturing to the top of the division wall that separated Eighth's land from Ninth, and Sora raised her gaze, letting out a faint gasp as she registered for the first time the shadowed, hunched figure of another, watching with hunter's precision as he prepared to swoop in for the kill.

"Kanshi too?"

"Tenth Division seem to be having an off day," Shindou seemed to have recovered from his initial shock, turning to glance at Shunsui. "Permission to knock brute sense into their Captain and Vice Captain, sir."

Shunsui jerked his head forward in a brisk nod.

"We have no choice," he said simply. "Fight to immobilise. Both of you. And be on your guard. They are primed to kill, and loyalties mean nothing. Keitarou's weapon is our affection for our opponents. In this fight, though, we're protecting each other and we're protecting Eighth. That means we fight. If we don't win, Kaoru and the others won't stand a chance, not against Hakubei, and probably not against Kanshi either, not in this state. You both understand, yes?"

“Yes, sir,” Shindou flipped a brief salute with his free left hand, for in that moment Kanshi dropped down from the wall, advancing towards them with definite intent, and without a moment of hesitation, Shindou shot forward, clashing his blade defiantly against that of the Tenth Division’s Vice Captain. Although ranked at Third Seat, Shindou’s high Clan birth within the Kyouraku Clan had given him substantial *reiryoku* and an inborn military confidence which made him a solid opponent. As a result, despite Kanshi’s superior rank and homicidal intent, Shindou was able to parry the other’s strike, slashing back at him with his own weapon and causing his opponent to take a hop and a step back to avoid losing the tip of his ear.

For Sora, the exchange seemed to go in slow motion, more like a surreal nightmare than reality. Hakubei’s second blast of *Oukasen* came careening across the courtyard at that moment, on a direct collision course with her position. Though she tried to force her brain to react, the signals would not go through fast enough. Just when she felt sure she was about to be incinerated to a crisp by her own beloved brother, Shunsui was in front of her, sweeping the spell aside once more with the sealed edge of Amaki’s blade. The next second she saw Katen Kyoukotsu glimmer with spiritual energy, and she knew her Captain was preparing to release his weapon — something he did but rarely, but which told her that this was not only real, but as serious a situation as it could get.

“Sora, you understand?” Shunsui asked softly. “Twenty five years ago, when you agreed to be my Vice Captain, I told you it might mean standing against your kin to protect Eighth. I don’t want you to have to do it this way, either, but it’s what we’re here to do. We’ll try not to kill them, but we *must* stop them, and that might mean drawing blood.”

He glanced at Hakubei, then,

“We both know you’re not weaker than him, even if he wears a *haori*, and I’m not, either,” he added. “Between the three of us, taking down two senior officers alive should be possible. I don’t want to hurt or kill either Hakubei or Kanshi. It doesn’t sit well with me, as they’re both people I consider friends. More than that, though, I’m Captain of Eighth Division, and most of all, I don’t want to lose my Vice Captain or my Third Seat to Keitarou. It’s up to you. If you can’t defend your division, I’ll send you to join Kaoru and the others right now, and Tetsuya and I will fight alone, but I would rather have you here.”

Sora swallowed hard, glancing at the blade of her sword, then up at the advancing figure of her brother. She drew a deep breath into her

lungs, then nodded.

“I understand,” she said softly. “I’m sorry, Taichou. For a moment I forgot who and where I was, but it’s all right. Hotarue and I are ready to fight to defend the Eighth.”

There was fighting at Eighth Division.

Takaoka Sakura rested her hands on the sill of the mess hall window, leaning her weight against the polished slat of wood and pushing back the shutters further in a vain attempt to see what was going on. The walls between Eighth and Ninth Division were high and constructed of carved marble, imported specially from the south of District Six by Anabomi when the barracks had first been built, in order to give the Ninth Division’s territory a sense of Kuchiki elegance. It was just one of the many tiny signs of grandeur dotted over Ninth’s assigned quarters, and on a normal day, Sakura was generally amused by the fancy carvings and elaborate wall hangings that decorated otherwise stark bamboo-and-paper panel walls. She had visited Eighth and Twelfth many times, so she knew that Ninth’s penchant for expensive decor was unique among the Gotei, but it was just another one of Anabomi’s quirks that made him both loved and respected by his subordinate officers.

For Sakura’s part, as a Yamamoto born outside of the Kuchiki terrain of District Six, the constant representations of the swan insignia or the delicately engraved floral designs seemed a little over the top, but she knew better than to say as much to her superior officers. Whilst Anabomi was finicky and concerned with appearances, he was also a man who cared deeply about his division members and it had been this, more than anything else, which had drawn Sakura to apply for the Ninth in the first place. It had been a strange whim, she reflected now, running her gaze over the long string of carved blooms that ran along the marble divide with a sigh, that a girl whose name meant cherry blossom had recruited with a Kuchiki division. In fact, she had originally intended to apply to Tenth, and indeed, her friends had teased her, expecting this outcome, for she had long since had an unrequited crush on the Tenth’s Vice Captain, Souryou Kanshi. Yet in the year her class had graduated, Anabomi had come to the Academy to talk to prospective squad members, and his diligence and obvious charisma had drawn her in. She had applied on impulse, half expecting her application to be rejected on account of her foreign background, but to her surprise, Anabomi had accepted, welcoming her cordially by name on her first day and making her feel part of the family from the very off.

Like most of Ninth, Sakura admired her Captain, and it had not escaped her attention that he had been preoccupied and troubled in recent days. He had spent more time than usual in his office, and when he had passed her in the hall the previous evening, he had failed to greet her in his usual genial way. Outside of Ninth, Sakura knew Anabomi had the image of a reserved, even aloof individual, but behind the closed doors of the division, he maintained diligently his individual bonds with every one of his subordinates, and so this oversight had troubled her more than she had liked to admit.

It wasn't like the way she felt about Kanshi, she reasoned to herself now, chewing absently on her lip, but she could not help her fondness for her Captain.

And now, sensing the raised spiritual energy flowing over the high wall from Eighth, she felt she understood the reasons for his recent preoccupation.

Something big is happening in Seireitei.

Giving up on her attempt to see over the wall, she returned to the mess hall proper, glancing reluctantly at the pile of dirty dishes and tea mugs which she had been assigned to clean. Another of Anabomi's quirks was his fastidious cleanliness, and as a result all of his officers, from newest recruit to Vice Captain were all rostered in on an exacting timetable of menial chores in between their usual patrols and other drill duties, in order to keep Ninth neat as a pin. Today it was her turn. Normally she would not be assigned on her own, but with the short staffing and extra patrols, she had drawn the short straw. With something exciting happening just over the other side of the wall divide, the last thing she could focus on was washing dishes.

For a start, Eighth Division was her close friend Kaoru's division. And for another thing, as she had first glanced out of the window, she had felt certain she had seen Kanshi's silhouette hunched there, for the briefest of instants, before it had disappeared.

Sakura knew that she sometimes saw Kanshi in places he wasn't, but this time she had been certain. Whatever was happening at Eighth, Tenth were involved too — and she wanted to know what it was.

First some of the Divisions get sent to the Real World, hunting something unknown, and everyone is all hush-hush about it. Then Ninth is stretched thin trying to cover extra patrol areas, and now there's something going on next door. And I'm stuck with a pile of dirty dishes.

She snorted in dissatisfaction, bending to examine the nearest pile tentatively.

I swear some of them lick these out when they think nobody's looking. Honestly, for Kuchiki, some of the men here eat like apes. No wonder Taichou rarely eats his meals in here with us. Given the way he is about things, he'd probably throw it all back up again just watching his division demolish their rations. Anyone would think they were starving — I'm amazed nobody's eaten their chopsticks yet.

“Takaoka?”

As she reached reluctantly for the top plate in the pile, the door of the chamber opened, revealing the Vice Captain, a harried expression on his features as he crossed the floor towards her.

“Good, I found someone not militarily engaged,” Hyakken seemed relieved to see her, and at his clear tension, Sakura set the plate aside, casting her superior officer a confused glance.

“Fukutaichou?”

“You've probably sensed it, but something's up at Eighth,” Hyakken's gaze flitted to the window, and Sakura's heart skipped a beat at the expression she saw in his eyes. She nodded her head eagerly.

“Yes, sir. I thought I saw Tenth there, too,” she said quickly. “It's hard to see from here, but... well, it wasn't that I was shirking my duty, but... with all the *reiryoku*...”

“Yes...” Sakura half expected a scolding for being distracted, for Hyakken was a strict disciplinarian, but he seemed to be only half listening to her words. “Well, leave the dishes for now. They can be done later. Eighth haven't sent an alert this way, but from the loud explosion over their courtyard a few moments ago, I think it's not impossible they're under attack. I'm going to go gather together some of the other officers who aren't out on patrol already, and ready them for deployment. Run to the Captain's office, will you, and notify him of my intentions? I don't want to waste any time, so gain his consent then come to join me. It strikes me that, if something has attacked the Eighth, it might not take long to move to the Ninth, and we ought to be ready for whatever happens.”

“Yes, sir,” Sakura almost tripped over her own feet in her eagerness to obey the instruction, regaining her balance with a rueful giggle and hurrying down the long, perfectly angled hallway that led to the Captain's suite of rooms. Anabomi lived at the back of the division, his office and his personal chamber adjacent to one another, and as she hastened to carry out Hyakken's orders, she found herself musing — not for the first time — whether the rumours about Anabomi's

bedchamber were true. Nobody in Ninth had ever seen inside it, for Anabomi kept it locked during the daytime, and even at night, he took emergency reports through the closed door. Naturally, the more mischievous members of the squad had begun to theorise about their leader's private quarters. Some joked that it contained a huge Kuchiki shrine, before which he genuflected night and day. Others had scandalously suggested that he used it to entertain a string of lovers, enticed by his handsome looks and rich heritage. Yet more people had theorised that it was probably a pigsty — an act of secret rebellion against the pristine perfection expected in every other part of the Ninth. Sakura had often tried to see inside, whenever she had happened to pass, for she was a curious soul by nature and a locked door was one of the most enticing temptations there was around — but as she reached the end of the corridor, she could see the bedchamber door was, as ever, firmly pulled shut, whilst the office divide was slightly ajar. This indicated that Anabomi was in residence, probably at his desk going over reports — or arranging them at ninety degree angles to the edge of the desk, Sakura thought in amusement, even as she rapped lightly against the wood.

“Taichou? It's Takaoka. Fukutaichou sent me — please may I enter?”

There was a pause, then, the soft tones of her Captain.

“Come in, Takaoka.”

“Yes, sir,” Sakura pushed back the divide, neatly stepping into the chamber and pulling the door across behind her. Performing her requisite bow, she stood before the desk, awaiting her Captain's instruction to raise her head and report.

But it did not come.

Sakura did not know what instinct of self-preservation made her glance up at the moment she did. Later, when recounting her story, she would simply say that a chill had rushed through her, a cold, empty sensation that told her all was not well within her Captain's office. For some reason which she could not explain, she had sidestepped to the right, only to stare in disbelief and horror as a snaking tongue of Byakurai energy zig-zagged its way across the office, singing the perfectly polished floor where she had originally stood.

“Taichou?”

Sakura's voice was uncertain, her eyes huge as she gazed from the large scorch mark in Anabomi's pristine floor to the Captain himself.

He was staring at her with a look of equal distress in his grey gaze. This expression did nothing to relieve Sakura's sense of unease, for it was all too clear that her Captain, far from testing her reactions with some new training game or other, had not expected the spell any more than she had. He glanced at his left hand, staring at his index finger as though it did not belong to him, and slowly, Sakura took a step back.

"Taichou, erm, if you're busy, I guess... I can just... Fukutaichou wanted your consent to prepare and dispatch forces to help with Eighth, but... erm... if you're..."

"Takaoka," Anabomi swallowed hard, forcing his hand down at his side, and moving to sit down behind his desk. His movements were slow and measured, as though he was making a physical effort to complete the action, and even though he managed, Sakura could see the tension still running through his lean frame, his fingers gripping hold of the wood so tightly that his knuckles had turned white.

There was a long silence, then Anabomi took a deep breath, closing his eyes briefly as he sought to compose himself.

"I'm sorry. I think you startled me... I was so lost in thought," he spoke evenly, and something in his words reassured Sakura that whatever had upset her Captain, it had passed. "What did Hyakken say? About Eighth? Has a messenger come?"

"No, sir, but Fukutaichou is worried," Sakura took cautious steps forward, coming to stand before the desk. "There was an explosion over Eighth's gate and it seems like they might be under attack, sir. Fukutaichou believes that they might come to attack here next, and he wanted to be ready to deploy in case a messenger came from Kyouraku-taichou."

"I see," Anabomi wetted his lips, and Sakura noticed the fingers of his right hand twitch slightly, almost involuntarily. "An attack... at Eighth. I confess I hadn't... but then I've been... working..."

He raised the twitching fingers to rub his brow, letting out another weary sigh, and despite herself, Sakura felt sorry for her suspicions, realising how tired her Captain truly was.

"Sir, it's all right. I'll go and tell Fukutaichou that it's all all right, and we'll deploy. You look like you haven't slept at all, sir, and..."

"A Captain doesn't sleep when there is danger abroad," Anabomi cut across her matter-of-factly, getting to his feet and moving to the far wall, reaching to take down his *zanpakutou* from the custom-carved shelf on which it lay, and sliding it through his *obi*. "I

appreciate your concern, Takaoka, but I am fine. More, if our neighbours are under attack then... then..."

He faltered, putting out a hand to steady himself against the wall, and instinctively Sakura hurried forward to help him, trying to prevent him from falling headlong.

"Sir, please!" she pleaded. "You've not slept since Guren-sama left, have you? You're worrying about us too much, but we can manage! What we can't manage is if something happens to you, so please..."

Anything else she had been going to say died on her lips as she caught sight of her Captain's gaze, registering the sudden flicker of something deep in the grey depths. There was something feral and stormy lurking there, something a million miles away from the normal, ordered, reasoned Anabomi that had so inspired her, and at the sight of it, her heart clenched momentarily in her chest.

"Taichou, I really don't think you're very well. I really think you should rest," she murmured, taking a step backwards. "Let me... let me go and prepare your quarters, or do something, please. Let me..."

She did not manage to finish this sentence either, for in that instant her companion's fingers had tightened around the hilt of his sword, drawing it without hesitation from its scabbard and swinging it with intent in her direction. Letting out a shriek, Sakura tumbled to the floor in her attempts to evade the sharp edge of the blade, scrambling back against the wall in fear. The man who moments earlier had seemed fragile and about to faint suddenly bore down on her, every inch of the hunter in his demeanour. He slashed his sword again, and again, drawing closer to her with every step. Too late, Sakura realised that she had backed herself up into a corner of the room, and she scrabbled around helplessly for anything she could use to defend herself. Anabomi's weapon came down again, slicing through the ends of her hair and narrowly missing her throat as she rolled out of his way, fumbling for her own sword, but she could not get a good enough grip on it, and Anabomi's ruthless, relentless swing knocked it from her hands, sending it careening across the office floor. She shuffled away once more, knowing that she had very little space in which she could now manoeuvre, and, as the Captain's sword sliced through her upper arm, she opened her lips and let out a blood-curdling scream.

Anabomi's advance halted momentarily, horror and confusion flooding his expression, and Sakura stared at him, breathing hard and pulse racing.

“Takaoka?” The Captain’s words were soft, then, “Scream again. Please, Takaoka, scream. *Scream*. I don’t know what’s happening... but I can’t... make... it... stop.”

The final words were forced through his vocal chords, pain glittering in the silver gaze, and with a lurching sensation in her stomach, Sakura understood. As the sword began to angle towards her throat once again, she opened her lips, screaming as loud and as long as she possibly could.

“Takaoka? *Taichou!*” The sound of answering footsteps thudding down the corridor, followed by the sweep of the door being flung back brought Sakura a moment of blessed relief, but Anabomi turned, eying these new interlopers with an expression of clinical appraisal.

“Taichou, what are you...”

The first officer, the division’s Fourth seat, took a step into the room, and Sakura opened her lips to yell, the warning fresh against her tongue.

It was too late. Before she had even managed to voice a single syllable, Anabomi’s sword moved, once, twice, three times. Blood spurted and sprayed up the wall, staining the beautiful tapestries that decorated the office, and soaking into the paper-and-bamboo walls, running down the doorframe and pooling across the base. The Fourth Seated Officer’s body crumpled to the floor, the head rolling across the smooth surface until it came to a stop, nose touching the wall. This was too much for Sakura, whose screams for help now bordered on hysteria. Terrified, she could not even move before Anabomi’s sword swung again, slicing first through the division’s Fifth Seat, then the Third, sending their corpses tumbling on top of the decapitated remains of the Fourth in a bloody heap.

“*Taichou?!* ”

The horror in Hyakken’s voice penetrated Sakura’s petrified haze just a tiny bit, the Vice Captain’s sword drawn from its sheath, and a look of utter dismay in his gaze as he surveyed the bloodbath in the normally neat office.

“Taichou, what have you *done*?” he murmured, revulsion clear in his expression, and Sakura struggled to pull herself upright, forcing herself to look at her Vice Captain and not at the bloody mess that lay between him and the door. Anabomi stood over his kills, breathing heavily, his sword dripping with blood, but the memory of his expression, and his words to her hardened her resolve.

“Fukutaichou, something’s possessed the Captain!” she exclaimed. “Something’s *making* him do this. He doesn’t want to. He told me to scream, to bring help, but when I did... and then... he can’t stop. Please, stop him. *Please...*”

Anabomi’s sword swung again, and Hyakken’s weapon came up to meet it, the Vice Captain fighting to push back the attack.

“Takaoka,” he spoke through gritted teeth, the strength of his effort clear in the lines that criss-crossed his brow. “My earlier instructions are void. New orders.”

“Sir?” Shakily, Sakura had begun to edge her way around the pile of corpses towards the door, instinctively moving towards her Vice Captain for protection. Hyakken nodded, not even turning to glance at her.

“Get out of here,” he said grimly. “Go get help. I don’t care who. Anyone who can. Bring them to Ninth. Tell them what you told me. Bring a Captain... any Captain... and quickly.”

“Yes sir,” Sakura swallowed hard, half-sure she was going to be sick, but knowing that it was no time for her to be able to do so. Somehow she got out of that room, managing to avert her gaze from the glassy stares of her dead superiors. Somehow she managed to inch past them, pushing out of her mind the happier memories spent with these individuals as she forced her dazed brain to focus only on the instruction at hand.

Get help.

Get help for Fukutaichou.

Get help quickly.

Repeating these to herself, over and over, Sakura hurried out of the doorway and down the corridor towards the main gates. Though the wound to her upper arm stung, she paid it no heed, grateful that she could at least run, for her composure was too shot for her to attempt shunpo. From the office behind her, she could sense the rising levels of Hyakken’s reiatsu, and she quickened her pace, darting out into the main street. An explosion from Eighth’s courtyard sent her already dizzy heart into a panic, but somehow she steeled herself, hurrying past the Eighth without even bothering to take a glance within.

Eighth are fighting. Eighth are attacked, too. Maybe like Taichou. Maybe it’s all like that. I can’t go to Eighth, and I’m sure Tenth are already at Eighth. So I... so I’ll go to Seventh, and hope... I’ll hope... I’m in time.

It was definitely Kanshi's reiatsu, and yet, at the same time, it was not.

Michihashi Aoi set aside his book of supply records, his brow creasing and his pale eyes clouding with consternation. He got to his feet, moving slowly to the window of his office as he tried to make sense of the fragmented reiatsu swirling in the atmosphere, but try as he might he could not pull the pieces together into one logical thread. Resting his hands on the sill, he closed his eyes, extending his senses as far as he was able, but it was to no avail. Whatever he thought he had picked up on, it had been quickly cloaked and overwritten by the unmistakable flare of reiatsu from the Eighth Division Captain and Vice Captain. Aoi had been in the same graduating class as Kanshi, Sora and Shunsui, and consequently was well versed both in their spiritual auras and their abilities, but there was something raw and wrong about the whole sensation and he opened his eyes, dropping back against the window frame as he tried to figure it out.

Though he had recruited to the Twelfth Division on leaving the Academy, Aoi had always been more of a fighter and a tactician than a scientist, known more for his battle strategy and his intelligent leadership and administration than for his competent involvement in his eccentric Captain's frequently explosive experiments. A less perceptive officer might have dismissed the reiatsu flares as the business of another division, and let it pass, but Aoi was not disposed to that way of thinking. There were many in the Gotei who privately believed Twelfth Division remained afloat and functional on account of Aoi's presence there and, though he had never been one to unnecessarily push his opinions forward, his judgement was respected and trusted by his own officers and peers from neighbouring divisions. Something unsettling going on in Seireitei was, so far as he was concerned, something best investigated and dealt with as soon as possible, and so, with a resigned glance at the unfinished division accounts, he crossed the floor to the office door, sliding it back and stepping out into the hallway beyond.

The halls were quiet, and Aoi frowned, unsettled further by the unusual silence of what were well known as the Gotei's most chaotic barracks. Since the first day he had arrived and been seated at Eighth Seat, Aoi could not remember a single day when Twelfth Division had not been filled with the sounds of voices and sword clashes, punctuated by explosions and exclamations from the Captain's makeshift laboratory. Aoi had seen many hair-raising things — some of them literally so — but he had never encountered such an eerie stillness, and a prickle ran down his spine as he realised how accurate his hunch was. Something was going on in Seireitei... and somehow, it

had reached even here.

He set his teeth grimly, making his way through the halls and corridors towards the Captain's office. This had once been a simple, short route, but Mareiko's frequent accidents and the resultant devastation to the barracks had meant that much of it had been rebuilt, and consequently the inside of Twelfth was a veritable rabbit warren of passages and dead ends which only the most experienced officers managed to navigate without taking a false turn. Aoi knew that, among Twelfth's lower seats there was a popular legend about a recruit who had got so lost he had spent a night and a day trapped in the same loop of hallways during one of Aoi's visits to his family in Third District. Tearful and frightened, the young shinigami had been rescued the following day by one of the upper seated officers. Aoi's thought processes were based too deeply in common sense and rationality to credit such an embellished tale, but nonetheless he knew that it was not uncommon for recruits to turn up breathless and late to training sessions on account of the misleading layout of the division.

Most of the time Aoi took such things into his stride, but today, with such a feeling of unease eating away at him, he found himself wishing fervently that his Captain had had a better sense of planning when she had ordered rebuilding to be done.

So deep in thought was he that, as he drew closer to his Captain's office, he did not notice the sprawled leg of one of his subordinates jutting out from a nearby doorway, and it was all he could do to prevent himself from falling headlong, gripping hold of the doorframe tightly as he turned in consternation to examine what he had just stumbled over. His sense of unease only grew as he recognised one of the squad's younger recruits — a girl who had graduated the Academy only the previous spring, and with whom Aoi had spent some time perfecting a rough sword technique and explosive Kidou tendencies. She was pale and grey, and at first Aoi feared she was dead, but as he crouched down at her side, he was sure he saw her *shihakushou* move slightly as she drew air into her lungs. A quick touch of her throat reassured him that his instinct was correct, but something had laid her out cold and whatever it was, it could easily be still around. He could see no sign of physical trauma on the young girl's body — her *shihakushou* was clean and crisp as though freshly laundered for that day's work, and though he could not raise her back to herself, there was no sign of bruising around her head.

It was then that Aoi first noticed the odd, slightly sweet scent that pervaded the hallway. He sniffed, his brows knitting together in confusion as he tried to place the perfume, but on his second

inhalation his eyes opened wide, and he clamped his hand over his mouth and nose, gazing at the unconscious girl anew. The scent was soporific powder, a substance kept under lock and key in the division's deep cellar storerooms, yet now he looked he could see the light dust against the young recruit's skin, and knew that he was right.

He stood, glancing around him warily. Though he could smell the powder's seductive fragrance, he now realised there was not enough of it remaining in the air to intoxicate him. The young girl's clean clothing suggested that whatever she had managed to ingest, it had not been a huge amount, and it was only her lower spirit power and shaky discipline that had made her so vulnerable. Either that or...

He bent again, touching his finger to the skin of her cheek, then pulling back to examine his findings. Cautiously he put his finger to his lips, and his eyes darkened.

This was no accident, was it?

He wiped his fingers clean of the remaining substance, carefully sliding his hands beneath the girl's body and carrying her into the room proper, laying her down on the floor out of the way so that she would not trip up any more unsuspecting division members. As gentle as he was with the officer's fragile form, all the time his clever mind was racing, trying to work out who could've accessed the powder stores and, even more critically, why they had seen the need to drug a dopey but fairly harmless member of the division in such a direct and deliberate way.

Aoi stepped back out of the small chamber, pulling the door shut behind him with a soft click.

Had it been an experiment gone wrong? Had the girl somehow got into the... but no, Aoi shook his head impatiently at himself, his fingers automatically brushing against the keys that hung at his belt. He had insisted himself that the doors of the storeroom be locked and, for further security, that the powder should be kept in a self-locking cabinet, to prevent such accidents from occurring. The only people who had possession of a key were himself and his Captain, but his own key was still where it ought to be, gleaming and bright alongside its fellows. Aoi's gaze flitted towards the Captain's chamber, and the unease began to swirl even more deeply within his body.

"Taichou?"

He did not know why he had spoken out loud, but suddenly he was afraid, genuinely terrified that something had befallen his crazy, ditzzy Captain. She was capable of making the most extreme explosions, and her forgetfulness had often led to a large pile of paperwork for the

Vice Captain as he tried to make sense of everything, but though such things were normal within the Twelfth, it was not the same sensation as Aoi felt now. A tight uneasiness that threatened to stifle the very life out of him made him quicken his steps towards Mareiko's sanctum. On his way, he glanced in at this room or that, looking for signs of life, but there were none. The recruit aside, Twelfth Division were nowhere to be seen, and it was only as he reached the door of Mareiko's chamber that a sight from the courtyard made him stop dead in his tracks, horror flooding his expression.

The missing Division members were all gathered in the courtyard, as though awaiting drill inspection — or, more likely, their morning deployment orders to guard the abandoned Third Division's science facilities, as per Nagesu's final instruction before leaving for the Real World.

The only trouble was, they were all unconscious. Every single one of them, just like the recruit had been, and the smell of soporific powder was already beginning to drift in through the open window. Aoi found himself reassessing the facts in light of this new evidence. Perhaps the recruit had managed to escape this mass slumber, only to succumb to the drug a short way down the hall.

In the midst of the chaos stood a familiar figure, wild blond hair whipping in the wind, the ends of the straw-fair tail batting gently against the snow white fabric of a distinctive *haori*. Mareiko stood motionless, gazing at her division as though the sight of them in such a situation had momentarily robbed her of her senses, and before he knew what he was doing, Aoi had mounted the windowsill, scrambling through the gap and out into the yard as he hurried to his Captain's side.

“Taichou? Taichou, what happened? What...”

The words died in his throat as, for the first time, Mareiko raised her gaze towards him. Her eyes, normally so pale and dreamy were devoid of any kind of emotion, resembling two cold, pale pebbles that glinted eerily in the morning light. She stared at him, unblinking for a moment, then, very slowly, she raised her hands, light glimmering at the edges of her fingers. Too late Aoi realised that something was wrong with his Captain, more wrong than any of her scientific endeavours had ever caused before, and that he was now in very real danger. For all her absentminded recklessness, Aoi knew that Mareiko was spiritually far stronger than he was, and that, where Kidou was concerned, there were few in Seireitei who could match her.

He took a step back, not taking his eyes off her for one moment as

he tried to fathom out what he was seeing. Her movements were stiff and measured, as though she were a mannequin beneath that white robe, and her *shihakushou*'s liberal coating of white dust told him that he need look no further for the source of the soporific powder. Mareiko, the other possessor of the key had opened the vault herself and had used the drug to sedate her entire Division... but as he gazed at her, Aoi understood that this was a Mareiko he did not know.

There was something wrong with her.

Something. Badly. Wrong.

"Tai... chou?" he murmured, his words half-freezing in his throat, and at his words, Mareiko paused, her eyes flickering ever so briefly with what Aoi thought looked like regret. The next moment, however, it was gone, and the energy engulfing her hands began to grow in strength.

"You should've come with the others," she murmured, her voice lacking in its usual bounce and sounding somehow alien to Aoi's ears. "I don't want to hurt you, Aoi. I don't want... to do this to you."

"Taichou, whatever's wrong, let me help. Tell me what happened... something in the lab? Did you put a spell on yourself again?" Aoi's words flowed thick and fast, desperation edging his every syllable. "I know this isn't what you want, so lets talk about it, all right? Something's happened to you, but I'm sure we can..."

His words trailed away, as he saw tears glittering faintly against Mareiko's lashes. She closed her eyes, and Aoi saw her mouth four syllables.

"*Hakufuku.*"

No sooner had she spoken, but the world around Aoi grew hazy and strange, the air thick with another, different scent and he crumpled to his knees, unable to think or speak as the ground came up to meet him at speed. He tried to reach out a hand to grab Mareiko's *haori*, knowing that something was wrong and he ought to stop her, but his fingers twitched helplessly against the empty air. As darkness swept in to dominate his vision, he was faintly aware of Mareiko stepping over his body, and then the sound of retreating footsteps in the direction of the Division gate. It was the last thing he knew, however, for Mareiko's *kidou* was just too strong, and with a sigh, Aoi relinquished his grip on his consciousness, plunging deep into the black.

Things are afoot! Or a hand. Or a leg. Or a... okay, bad jokes ending here. As Shunsui says, and so... it begins. Hang on tight, folks. It might be a bumpy ride...

61. True Intent

Chapter Sixty: True Intent

His office was eerily silent.

Anabomi drew a ragged breath into his lungs, his vision blurring and dancing as he struggled to regain the shreds of his sanity and his composure. All around the room, sunlight streamed in through the open shutters, illuminating the scene in graphic technicolour, but despite this, for the first few moments, Anabomi could see nothing but darkness all around his body. He was standing, he realised dully, the hilt of his sword clasped in his gloved fingers, and from the quickness of his breathing, he had been engaged in some kind of physical confrontation. He blinked, closing his eyes as he tried to make sense of it. Sakura had been there, he remembered hazily, and there had been a scream... then swiftly, the flashes of a silver sword blade, and suddenly, an oasis of blood.

He opened his eyes once more, the room's surroundings coming into clear focus for the first time, and as he took in the disarray before him, his stomach twisted with nausea and revulsion. In stricken silence he gazed down upon the corpses of his own men, bloody and motionless across the polished floor of his administrative chamber. What had happened here? What had killed them? He tried to turn back his memory, but he had no clear, coherent image of anything after he had told Sakura to scream. His whole body felt alien and disconnected, and though he knew the men who lay before him were members of the Ninth Division, he could not make out their features or identify them by name.

It was then that he caught sight of the blade of his sword, and registered the thick smear of blood that coated it.

With a yelp of dismay, he tossed the weapon away like a scalding potato, his gesture containing enough force for the *zanpakutou's* edge to scrape a furrow down the wall. It clattered to rest atop another sword, a clean one which, as his memory began to piece itself back together, Anabomi knew belonged to Sakura. He glanced hurriedly around him, frightened for the girl's safety, but there was no sign of her anywhere. Whatever had occurred, she was no longer there. She wasn't... but...

Steeling himself, Anabomi turned his attention back to the

unmistakeable group of corpses that lay sprawled and cooling across the centre of his chamber. With every passing moment, they were becoming more and more recognisable, and Anabomi's entire body trembled as he moved to kneel down beside them, reaching frightened, desperate fingers across bloody chests in search of a pulse.

The men were all dead.

Slowly Anabomi lowered his hand, tears glittering against his lashes as, for the first time, names and identities connected in his sluggish brain.

The two corpses slumped atop one another were his Fifth and Third Seated officers, he could tell now, the Third Seated officer's fingers still clutched resolutely around the hilt of his weapon. Both had suffered fatal slashes to the chest, and as he turned them over, one by one, Anabomi was revolted by the violence that had cleaved open their ribcages, severing through the vital structures beneath. Beneath them was a third body, lacking in a head, and with a fresh jolt of horror, Anabomi realised that he had been decapitated by a single sword swing — almost certainly the reason for the smear of blood that had coated his own weapon. The head lay facing the wall, but Anabomi felt as though its glassy eyes, accusing and frightened, were boring into the core of his soul. Hurriedly he moved to cover the gazes of the two men that lay within his reach, attempting to make a peaceful final repose out of the impossible carnage, but as he struggled to pull himself to his feet, he heard the sound of laughter.

He turned, swinging around desperately in an attempt to locate the source of the sound, but he could see nobody. Frightened and disorientated, his thoughts still flowing together in a disjointed, dazed kind of sequence, he reached to his waist for his sword, already having forgotten the events that had made him fling it across the room moments before. There was the sound of a tut-tut, then he felt his arm lower itself, the limb moving entirely of its own accord to hang loose at his side.

Now, now. Just because I've given you a moment to breathe, it doesn't mean that we're finished here.

The voice was cold and amused, searing through his senses like hot oil, and Anabomi froze, struggling to work out who the speaker was and where the sound was coming from.

No, you can't see me. I'm not out there. I'm in here. Inside.

Anabomi hesitated, then, very slowly, he felt his blood-soaked fingers moving up towards his head, tapping his skull lightly on the left hand side. He jerked his head away, unnerved by his limbs'

sudden fight for independence, but this only drew forth more laughter.

So, I found a houseproud Kuchiki who'll slice his way through his subordinates, but flinch away from landing bloody prints against his skin. How entertaining. It's a shame we never met twenty five years ago, Anabomi Seizuku. If we had, I'm sure we would have had great fun — your sword swing is far more accurate than even I anticipated it could be under my control. Your native skills must be honed to perfection. Dare I say it makes you my greatest weapon to date?

Anabomi drew shaky breath into his lungs, the words sinking and soaking into his thoughts one by one as understanding began to clear away the haze of confusion.

“Aizen... Keitarou.”

The words left his lips as a whisper forced through vocal chords which were not entirely his own, and there was a murmur of approval from the disembodied voice within his skull.

Impressive. You're intelligent as well as a competent fighter. Perhaps I made a mistake, last time, focusing on your betters. You are a far more useful weapon. I'd only anticipated using you as a distraction, but if you can be pushed to kill your own men with such ruthless accuracy, I'm sure I can find greater use for you.

“Get out of my head!” Anabomi's temper began to flare, desperation flooding his senses, and for a brief moment his fingers returned to his own control as he clawed at his brow, no longer caring that he was smearing his comrades' blood through his hair and over his skin. “Get out! I don't treat with exiles or outlaws, and I don't aid and abet criminals like you! I will not let you make a puppet of me, Aizen Keitarou — I will not!”

I think you'll find I already did.

Though Anabomi had not commanded it, his body suddenly swung around, his head forced to gaze once more upon the pile of corpses, and though he tried to shut his eyes, the lids would not respond to his instructions.

No, you can't pretend it didn't happen. Your sword killed them. Yes, you had my instructions, but you did it. You did it beautifully. Very beautifully.

“No...” Anabomi's voice filled with despair. “Not... my Ninth. I wouldn't... I couldn't... I... I...”

You saw the blood on your blade, didn't you?

The voice was mocking.

You know it. You just don't want to accept it. That's why I gave you

this moment of respite. To make you kill, I had to overload every one of your sensibilities. I wanted you to see what you had done, and understand it for yourself. It's a break, it isn't the end. There's nobody else here to kill right now, and I don't intend on wasting my energy controlling your body completely when there's no need. Still... your adjutant sent the girl for help, so more people will come. And when they do...

The voice broke off abruptly, and Anabomi found himself taking steps towards the desk, reaching down to pick up the bloody zanpakutou once more.

Then round two will begin. Who knows how many we can kill together before this day is out?

“Stop it!”

Anabomi struggled to relinquish his hold on the weapon, but it was to no avail. “Stop it! I don't want to kill anyone, and especially not for you! You murdered my best friend... do you think I'd ever forgive you for that?”

I'm sure I don't know who that might be.

Keitarou's voice was casual, his words dismissing the accusation.

I've killed enough people in my life, Kuchiki included. I can't be expected to remember each and every corpse in my tally.

Anger seared through Anabomi's body, but before he could yell back a riposte, something else occurred to him, and he took a deep breath, forcing his head to turn and glance around the office once more.

Hyakken. Where is Hyakken? Hyakken sent Takaoka for help. Where is he?

Ah. You're worried about your adjutant? How sweet.

Now Keitarou's voice was mocking, amusement clear in his tones, and Anabomi gritted his teeth.

“Tell me what you did with Hyakken!” he demanded. “Tell me, Aizen, or I slit my own throat and take you out of my body this instant!”

A nice try, but you can't kill yourself if you can't control your sword arm, now can you?

Keitarou seemed unconcerned.

Besides, I know that suicide is scandalous for Kuchiki. I am saving you from Clan shame and censure. You ought to be glad of my intervention. Well, I'm sure you will be... later. When all is done. I

might even keep you. You never know.

Anabomi had the sense that his invisible companion had smiled coldly, although he couldn't see Keitarou's expression, and then his body turned again, moving slowly and heavily towards the open door. ***Your adjutant. You asked, and I have no problem with answering, whether you make threats or not. Here, I'll let you walk by yourself, even. You'll find him at the end of this hallway. He's no doubt waiting for you.***

With a sudden jolt, Anabomi felt control of his legs return to him, and he hurried forward into the hallway, his eyes widening as he registered the long, slick trail of blood that wound its way along the floor. At the end of the trail of blood was a huddled shape, and, as he approached it, Anabomi found his worst fears were realised. As he drew closer to the hunched form, flashes of memory penetrated his senses, and the tears that had glittered against his lashes began to fall silently down his cheeks.

Hyakken, who had fought him back to let Sakura escape, who had raised his blade and swung it so bravely... Hyakken, who he had stabbed and slashed at as though carving a piece of meat, yet the Vice Captain had not given up. He had kept going, kept fighting, no matter how bloody he became. Anabomi screwed up his eyes, but he could not escape the image of his own sword swinging, nor his Vice Captain's desperate attempt to put space between them, diving out into the corridor. With the open hall behind them, Anabomi remembered his fingers spreading with light, the resultant spell cannoning into Hyakken's torso and sending him crashing against the far wall.

He had had ample opportunity, with the door open, to run away and flee for safety, but he had not. He had maintained the last defence against his Captain's rogue blade, and although there was no way of confirming its truth, Anabomi knew only one reason why his loyal, steadfast sidekick would act so recklessly in the face of obviously lethal danger. Hyakken must have known that he was no match for his Captain's blade, but he had also realised that there was only him who could attempt to buy Sakura time... time to go, time to fetch help. That meant that, contrary to Keitarou's belief, the division was not empty. Somewhere, maybe hiding, maybe not, there were other Division members lurking, people whose presence Hyakken had gambled his life to keep concealed and safe.

"Hyakken..."

Anabomi knelt down at his Vice Captain's side, cupping a shaking

hand beneath the other man's chin and lifting the bloody face to meet his own. There was no fear in these eyes, but nor had they become glassy and empty like the others, and his skin was still warm to the touch. He had fought, fearlessly and resolutely in defence of his division, in such a way that ought to have brought Anabomi pride in his choice of adjutant, but instead he felt only revulsion. He had mutilated this loyal officer, and the others. He had been weak, and Keitarou had capitalised, laying waste to the squad which he had spent so much time fighting to build.

He stumbled unsteadily upright, staggering back towards his office. He did not want to see the awful, bloody sight again, but nor did he intend to let Hyakken's sacrifice be in vain, and so he pulled his heavy body inside, forcing the door closed so that he was alone with the results of his gory handiwork. Now there was no preventing the impulse to be sick, and Anabomi dropped to his knees, his entire body heaving with the shock and distress of his reaction. Inside his head, he could hear Keitarou tut-tutting, but as his nausea subsided, his indignation and pride began to take hold. Rage replaced grief and dismay in his heart, and he dragged himself to his feet, forcing his body step by step down the hall towards the office once more. His sword was still clasped in his right hand, and as he raised it slightly, he felt it resist him, preventing him from turning the weapon on his own body.

No, you don't. I told you. Kuchiki don't commit suicide. I'm protecting your family pride and my interests — you're far too useful a weapon for me to discard just yet. Just be a little patient. I'm sure it won't be long before help arrives.

You let Takaoka escape for that reason, didn't you?

Realisation splashed like cold water against Anabomi's senses, and Keitarou chuckled.

Different situations call for different tactics.

His words held no apology.

You aren't my only weapon. I sent Tenth's hallowed leaders to rip holes in the Eighth, but you've proven so effective on your own territory that I thought I should bring the prey to you. It doesn't really matter to me how Seireitei's people die, so long as they do. I won't kill anyone else.

Raising his free left hand, Anabomi reached up to yank down the tapestry that hid the secret compartment from view, gazing at the small, carved panel with a new sense of resolve.

I don't intend to let you use me as you see fit. You talk about shame, but my shame is already complete. A Captain does not hurt those he is sworn to protect and lead. Whether you acted within me or not, those deeds are unforgivable and they can't be forgiven. I won't let them be. I will fight you at every single step. This body no longer deserves life, nor the respect of the Kuchiki Clan. Therefore, I will fight you until my last breath.
That suits me, but I anticipate our acquaintance being a little longer than you do.

Anabomi felt his right fist twitch slightly, as if reminding him who had control of the sword arm, and he frowned. It was control, but only partial control. Keitarou was focusing the bulk of his manipulation on whatever was occurring in other places, and his focus over Anabomi's own movements was basic at best. True, he would not allow the other man to turn his blade on himself, but...

His gaze strayed to the desk, and he took an experimental step towards it, followed by another, reaching his left hand down for the secret drawer in which lay the silver key to the compartment.

Now what are you about?

Keitarou's words were curious, but not fearful, and Anabomi did not respond, pulling back the drawer and rummaging inside for the key. Retrieving it, he held it up before his gaze, tilting it so that it caught the light.

A friend of mine left a present here for you. I'll retrieve it.

A present?

Keitarou's words were surprised.

A friend? For me?

Yes. A friend called Shougo, whose life you cut short in the Rukon twenty five years ago.

There was silence, then a soft chuckle.

I see.

Keitarou's tones were once more amused, and Anabomi felt the resistance in his left hand dissipate.

Very well. I'm curious to see what this 'present' is. Show me.

Anabomi gritted his teeth, sliding the key into the lock and opening the cabinet, gazing inside at the hidden contents. Slowly he reached for the carved box, resting it on the edge of the shelf as he fumbled with the fingers of his left hand to open it.

And this is the present that your friend left for me, Anabomi Seizuku?

Keitarou's words were dangerously quiet.

A small bottle in a carved box? Do you have any idea what's in that vial?

"A way of getting rid of you." Anabomi scooped up the vial, removing the stopper with his teeth and spitting it out onto the floor. "I'm not a scientist, I don't care about the details. If it gets you out of my head, all to the good. You can't stop me from drinking it, Keitarou."

It looks untested. The formula is flawed... I can tell you that just from glancing at the piece of paper through your eyes. What if it kills you? What then?

Then my suicide will be complete, and you won't be able to use me any more, now will you?

Anabomi's eyes hardened, and he forced his left hand to his lips, tipping the contents down his throat in one jerky movement.

There. It's done. It's done and you can't make me your slave any more. It's over, Keitarou. All of it is over.

There was no response, and Anabomi felt his right hand slowly return to his own control, the manipulative presence receding back, back, back against his senses until he was aware of his whole body under his sovereignty once more. The potion seared and burned through his body, making him cough, but every inch of him felt alive with a glow of warmth, and he twitched each finger individually, revelling in the return of control.

Your potion worked, Shougo. It worked. It pushed Keitarou out, and now... thanks to your potion, I can die here, with my men. Thanks to that...

You should be careful what you wish for.

Keitarou's words were faint, almost like a dream, cutting through Anabomi's thoughts, but before he could react to them, something surged through his body, hot and fierce and angry. The world outside, which moments earlier had appeared in such clear definition was now a swirl of lights and darks, all punctuated through a haze of red. Though he knew he was quite alone, shapes and figures seemed to rear up from this crimson fog, and he stumbled forward, slashing at the shapes but making contact only with air. His heart pounded in his chest, fit to burst, and he took a desperate breath of air, trying to compose himself.

Maybe... it needed more trials. Maybe... but it doesn't matter. I intended to die here. So long as I do that... it doesn't matter. I'll see you soon... Shougo.

That was the last coherent thought he had, as a swell of rage and

hot red energy flooded through him, engulfing his whole being.

Hirata had been in his office when he had sensed the first explosions from the Eighth Division, and had known that, once more, Seireitei was under some kind of attack. Mindful of the assault Katsura had made on Seventh so many days earlier, he had been quick to get to his feet, thrusting his weapon through his *obi* as he made his way towards the main door.

Seventh were under capacity, but that would not stop them from taking their part in a fight that involved Keitarou and his progeny.

Despite their best attempts, none of the Seventh Division patrols for Katsura's body had come up with anything, and Hirata felt certain that the young man had somehow escaped — spirited away into the night by the man who had used Ohara so shamelessly as a puppet. Ohara still lay deeply comatose, and each morning, Hirata himself had strengthened the barrier of Kidou that surrounded his body, not trusting the Geki that still encircled the man's heart to be enough to hold him indefinitely. Ohara was an arrogant poser at the best of times, but he was a shinigami of some potential, and so it would not do to have him roaming around with the rest of the division so depleted.

Especially if, as he suspected, Keitarou was finally making a move.

Hirata did not know what he expected to find when he stepped out into the front forecourt of his division, but though he could see the rising smoke from the gate of his neighbouring barracks, he could not sense the distinctive swirl of raw *reiryoku* that would signify a fresh assault from Keitarou's eldest son. Instead, he was vaguely aware of several spiritual presences, all of them familiar.

Am I overreacting?

He paused, his fingers drumming against Tsumi no Fuuhi's hilt as he considered this possibility.

Are Shunsui and the others just doing some kind of training session that's got a mite out of hand? I can't sense any hostile force... yet it's not like the Eighth to perform manoeuvres in their front forecourt like that.

He was still debating this possibility when there was the loud clatter of someone colliding with the gate, then a dazed, blood-spattered figure staggered into the Seventh Division's front yard, weaving unsteadily across the cobbles in his general direction.

"Help... help me... please... someone... help me..."

Her words were incoherent, and as it looked likely she was going to tumble forward onto the ground, Hirata let out an exclamation, hurrying forward to catch her. He raised his voice to yell for any of his subordinates who were in the near vicinity, tightening his grip as the girl struggled feebly against his hold. The girl was a stranger to him, but it was not her identity that concerned Hirata, for he had quickly picked up on the scuffling to her uniform, and the seeping wound to her upper arm, the trickle of crimson liquid tracing its way across her skin in stark contrast to her ashen pallor. Her eyes were awash with tears, and she was shaking, clearly fighting off full-blown hysteria. He gave her a little shake to bring her back to her senses, resisting the urge to slap her in case it made the situation worse.

“Calm down and report to me,” he instructed, giving her another little shake as she fought against his hold a second time. “You said you wanted help, but I can’t help you unless you talk to me. Calm down and tell me what’s happened. Where are you from? What’s going on?”

At the sharpness in his voice, the girl’s struggles ceased, and she blinked, apparently taking in her companion’s appearance for the first time.

“Endou... taichou?”

“That’s right,” Hirata nodded his head. “You came here asking for help, so report. Who are you and what are you doing staggering all over my courtyard? There’s been an attack, correct? Tell me where and tell me quickly.”

“Are you... going to attack me too?”

The girl’s voice was soft and blurry, but Hirata could see genuine fear in her eyes, and he shook his head.

“Don’t be foolish,” he snapped. “Why would I hurt you? You came for help, but I can’t give it unless you report. State your name and division, girl, and stop leaking all over me. If there’s a crisis, you can’t help it by sobbing and hysterics.”

The girl’s eyes widened at this, her body trembling even more with the force of her emotions, but she swallowed hard, relief glittering briefly in her gaze.

“Takaoka... Sakura,” she murmured, and Hirata realised the girl had calmed sufficiently to give her name. “I’m the... Sixth Seat... of the... Ninth Division. Please, come help. Fukutaichou ordered me... get help. Bring a Captain. Any Captain. Quickly.”

“To Ninth?” Hirata dumped Sakura unceremoniously down onto the

ground now she had returned somewhat to her senses, casting her a startled glance. "Something's happened at the Ninth?"

Sakura sniffed, nodding her head jerkily.

"Something's happened to Taichou," she whispered. "He said he couldn't... make it stop. He told me to scream, but when I did..."

She closed her eyes, fresh tears spilling down her cheeks, and Hirata bit back his impatience, his fear growing with every passing moment.

"When you did?" he prompted, more edge to his tones than necessary, but Sakura's eyes snapped open, and she swallowed hard. Slowly she raised her uninjured arm, making a slashing motion with her hand before burying her face in her palm.

Hirata frowned, realising that the girl had reached the end of her tether. Getting to his feet, he rested his hand lightly on her head, turning to glance around him.

"Kikyue! Hajime! Nakata! Joumei! Dammit, is nobody there when I yell?" he exclaimed impatiently. Almost before he had finished shouting, the door of the barracks opened, revealing his daughter and the silver haired Kitsune, both with swords in hand. A moment later, Nakata emerged, stifling a yawn behind his the back of his uninjured hand. Hajime was the final member to join the group, and by glancing at him, Hirata knew he had been organising the juniors. Without being asked, Hajime too had clearly registered the explosions and reiatsu flares from Eighth, and had taken it upon himself to ensure all of Seventh's lower officers were safely hidden away somewhere deep beneath Seventh's own barracks. It was instinct like this which had made Hirata give Hajime Fourth Seat over Ohara's preening in the first place, and as he sent his subordinate a questioning glance, Hajime offered him a little nod of confirmation.

"Who the hell..?" At the sight of the bloodsoaked girl, Nakata jerked wide awake, casting his Captain a startled glance. "What's happening, Taichou? Who's this?"

"Takaoka, with a message from Ninth. They're under attack and require urgent reinforcements," Hirata said briskly. "I don't know more than that. Takaoka's injured and in shock, so she's finding it hard to give a coherent description. Nonetheless, I think it's urgent. We should go investigate."

"Me too, sir?" Nakata glanced at his injured arm, then frowned. "I mean, I'll come, sir, but I don't want to be in the way."

“I’m taking all of you,” Hirata made up his mind. “Hajime, I trust from the time you took to respond to me, you’ve made sure the juniors are safe?”

“Locked in the cells, sir,” Hajime said matter-of-factly. “Some of them are crying like newborns, and I had to physically toss a couple of them into the prison, but it seemed the safest place. Our prisons are sealed with Sekkiseki on the outside. I figured, if something has attacked Eighth, it could come here, and we’re not fit to protect the young ones if we have to worry about fighting for our own lives. I acted before you gave the order, but I hoped you’d approve. Masaoka’s in charge. I’ve told him he’s not to let anyone out till he gets orders from me or someone above my rank... he’s to use force if need be to keep them where they are.”

“It saves time, and it won’t kill them, not for once,” Hirata said grimly. “Joumei, you have a sword... I didn’t think you could use one of those.”

“I can’t, really, but Kikyue-hime was trying to teach me,” Joumei responded honestly. “I’m probably more use with my Kidou, but I’ll come and I’ll fight. I promised I’d deploy as you instructed, so even if Nakata-san is unable to fight, I’ll do what I can.”

“Then we’re going to Ninth. Nakata, I’m putting you in charge of Takaoka,” Hirata hauled the distressed girl to her feet, giving her a little push in Nakata’s direction, and the older officer sent his Captain a non-plussed look. “Your duty is to ensure no harm befalls her. We may need her, and I can’t leave her here in this state.”

“Taking her while she’s bawling like that isn’t going to help our battle plan, Taichou,” Kikyue eyed Sakura disdainfully, and something in her scorn seemed to raise the other girl from her daze.

“How would you feel if your Captain tried to kill you, then cut down three of your superiors right in front of you!” she demanded, the venom in her words sending all deference or respect due Kikyue as her ranked superior flying out of the window as her emotions took over. “How would you feel if it was *your* Captain you just watched behead your Fourth Seat and slash open your Third and Fifth seats? How would *you* feel?”

“Anabomi did *what*?” Hajime’s eyes almost fell out of his head, and Hirata’s own shock was too great to scold his fellow officer for his lack of manners.

“Something is controlling him,” Sakura’s voice shook, and she gripped hold of Hirata’s arm desperately. “Something evil. I don’t

know what, but he said he couldn't stop it. He told me to scream, to bring help, and I screamed, but Taichou is strong. He wanted someone to stop him but they couldn't. He's stronger than anyone. Fukutaichou was holding him off so I could come get help... but Taichou is stronger than Fukutaichou. Much stronger. Taichou would never hurt anyone in Ninth, but something else wants to, and it's making him do it. He looked so upset, Endou-Taichou. Please, help us. I don't understand what's happening, but I want to make it stop."

"We're going to Ninth, and we're going now," Hirata did not wait for his companions to make any further comments, detaching Sakura's hold from his arm and nodding to her. "You, stay with Nakata and do as he tells you. We're going to do what we can in your division, you have my word."

With that he was gone into shunpo, speeding through the streams of light towards the other Division's compound. In his slipstream, he could sense the spiritual presences of his companions, all of them equally stunned by Sakura's revelation, but prepared to follow his instructions to the letter, and so as he touched down in Ninth's courtyard, he drew his sword from its sheath, gazing around him cautiously for any sign of life.

There was none. The division was eerily still, as though deserted.

"Doesn't seem like there's anyone here," Kikyue was the next to drop out of her flash-step, putting Hirata's own impressions into words. "Taichou, what do you think? Should we split up and case the joint? Or..."

"No," Hirata shook his head, as Hajime, Joumei, and finally Nakata, with Sakura in tow, materialised on the cobbles. 'Not yet. We need more information. Takaoka,' he turned to the still shaking Sixth Seat, who, despite her earlier hysteria, appeared to have returned somewhat to her senses now that help was at hand. "Where did all this happen? Anabomi was afflicted where? In his office? In the training rooms? The mess hall? Where?"

"His... office, sir," Sakura's voice caught, but she was able to answer rationally enough, and Hirata drew a sigh of relief into his lungs. "I went there to take a message from Fukutaichou. He fired Byakurai at me, but it wasn't like... he didn't seem to know why he'd done it. We were talking, he seemed normal again, then... suddenly he was coming after me with his sword. Everything else... happened there. In his office."

"Then that's where I'm heading to," Hirata said decidedly. "The rest

of you, keep a wide berth. I can sense Anabomi's reiatsu now — at least, something which I think is Anabomi — and so should you all be able to. He's not attempting to hide himself, so it ought to be easy enough to keep clear of him. Takaoka, that goes for you too. Tell me, how many of your squad were here at barracks this morning, do you know?"

"Not exactly, sir," Sakura shook her head despondently. "Some are out on patrol in the Districts. I know Fukutaichou was working with some other officers. I mean, other than... other than..."

She faltered, her voice breaking again, and Hirata nodded curtly, turning to Kikyue.

"You, Hajime and Joumei, search the division for any surviving officers who haven't been caught up in this so far," he said softly. "Evacuate them in whatever way you can. Take them back to Seventh if need be. I'll go relieve Mikihara and do something about Anabomi. I'm probably the only one who can, but I think I ought to be able..."

That was as far as he got, for with a tremendous crash, the front wall of the Ninth Division barracks exploded, dust and debris flying in all directions. Kikyue let out a yelp, as Hajime roughly pulled her to the ground to avoid bamboo shrapnel, and Nakata let out a curse, using the broad back of his body to shield Sakura from the force of the blast. The Ninth Division officer began to scream again, but Hirata had no time to focus on the girl's distress. As the smoke and dust cleared, a silhouetted outline became visible for the first time amid the rubble, and despite himself, Hirata drew breath sharply into his lungs, registering with horror who — no, the better word was *what* — stood before them.

A ragged, bloodsoaked *haori* and a torn, dusty *shihakushou* gave away the figure's identity as that of Anabomi Seizuku, the Captain whose pristine image and attention to neatness and public appearance had always been legend among the rest of the Gotei. His fingers were caked in blood, and an ugly red smear across the silver blade of his *zanpakutou* told Hirata that Sakura's tearful outburst had not been exaggerated. It was from the neck up, however, that caused Hirata the most consternation, for instead of the delicate Kuchiki complexion and soft grey eyes, this individual's gaze was as blood red as the stain on his sword, his skin swathed in a slick, chalky substance that could only be interpreted as a Hollow mask. The transformation was imperfect, the mask lumpy and uneven in its coverage of his features, yet from the raw, violent edge that now coated Anabomi's reiatsu, Hirata knew that there was no he watched, the body gave another

judder, the shoulder bones twisting and dislocating as the white substance spread across them, mutating them into the flat blades of lizard-like armour, and Hirata's heart clenched in his chest.

This is Keitarou's work. Keitarou's doing. Keitarou's trap. It's Reidoku. It must be.

He tightened his grip on his *zanpakutou*, readying himself for release.

Well, that settles what we do here then, Seizumi. There's nothing else for it, is there?

Out loud he said,

"All of you, get inside the Ninth building and search for survivors! Evacuate any you can, but don't come back here!"

"Taichou!" It was Kikyue who protested, but before she could do anything else, Joumei had grabbed her by the wrist. His lips moved, his words too soft for Hirata to make out as he drew together the air currents around his blade, preparing to unleash the Wind Hawk in its full glory. Whatever Joumei had said, however, it had been effective, for the next moment Hirata found himself alone with his colleague, his gaze running over Anabomi's demented form as he tried to make sense of what he was seeing.

Anabomi's tongue flicked in and out of his mouth like a snake, licking his lips, and a strange, high-pitched shriek emitted from his vocal chords. He lurched forward, *zanpakutou* raised, his movements jerky and heavy as though his body was not fully under his own control. Though he did not make an attempt to release his weapon, the toxic level of his *reiryoku* was enough to make anyone choke and falter, and Hirata narrowed his gaze behind his glasses, steadying himself against the spiritual onslaught.

Whatever was happening in Eighth, they would have to take care of themselves.

Right now, I can only deal with what's in front of me. I have to deal with this... in the only way an Endou can. I have to use the Wind Hawk and I have to kill Anabomi. Otherwise, who knows how many others will fall to that sword?

At the same time that events were unfolding across Seireitei, Juushirou was ensconced in Ugendou with his Vice Captain and Third Seated officer in full attendance, processing the plans for the day's amended patrols. Despite the Council's expectations that remaining

squads would take on the bulk of District protection, many regions remained short of adequate protection. As a District squad, Thirteenth were especially keenly aware of this fact, with many members of the squad anxious about friends and family in distant areas, and Juushirou was no exception. As a result, he had summoned his second and third officer to his office as soon as had been decently possible, determined to make the division's limited forces work double-time, if necessary, to ensure no losses of life or property that could otherwise be protected. Enishi and Naoko had just begun debating how best to deploy recruits when the first sense of rising reiatsu had tickled Juushirou's synapses, and he had turned his head towards the window, brows knitting together as he tried to work out what it was he had sensed. Eighth, Ninth and Tenth were far enough from Thirteenth for the sensations to be somewhat vague and indistinct, but Juushirou's senses were extremely perceptive, and try as he might to shake the thought, he could not avoid the genuine unease in what he was feeling.

At the heart of it was Shunsui's Eighth, of that he was certain, but it was the darker, more raw emissions coming from the direction of Ninth that made him the most unsettled.

"...And then there's the Kitsune kid," Enishi interjected now, drawing Juushirou's attention back to the matter at hand. "She's no good to send out anywhere, and we're meant to be protecting her. Kid can barely hold a sword and doesn't show a lot of inclination for the sport. I'd hate to see her up against a Hollow... she'd be eaten for lunch before she had time to breathe."

"Ichimaru-san is too smart to be eaten that easily," Naoko objected, then she sighed, shrugging her shoulders. "But I can't argue with you about her sword skills. She's hopelessly untrained for physical combat."

"Taichou, what do you think?" Enishi cast Juushirou a quizzical look, and Juushirou tore his thoughts from further away divisions, resting his chin in his hands as he considered the dilemma.

"Izumi isn't here to enter into combat against anyone," he said slowly. "Like Enishi said, we're meant to protect her. Her recruitment here is formalised and official, but essentially she's claiming sanctuary. She's also repaid her debts through her scientific research... and been threatened into the bargain. Though she doesn't seem to have taken harm from that, not now it's over and done with... I hardly think I could face Joumei if I sent her into active combat. The trouble is..."

He trailed off, his expression becoming troubled.

The trouble is, I can't guarantee her safety here, not when I'm convinced Keitarou is coming here, and soon.

"The trouble is?" Naoko echoed his words, a question in her tone, and Juushirou sighed heavily.

"I don't think it's a matter of inclination," he said finally. "I don't know if you've paid attention, either of you, but since the attack by Tenichi, Izumi's been spending a lot of time in the training gym with Ketsui, and they've done a lot of sword drill. She isn't a natural, and will never be. Joumei said to me that it was always believed, among the Kitsune, that Izumi's muteness and tiny stature was a result of her being born and raised in a Sekkiseki environment. He was lucky, and healthy, but she was born early and as a result was always small and silent as a baby... so I doubt her physical strength is particularly good, either. Holding a sword may just not be her talent... but she is trying to act more like a shinigami now she realises how easily her life can be put in danger."

"Maybe, but it isn't enough to send her out on patrol," Enishi said gruffly. "I'm sorry, Ukitake, even if you order it, I'll risk a disciplinary and defy the command. I don't intend to let the kid get hurt just because she's started waving a sword... it's just not in me to do."

She might be safer on patrol, if the reiatsu I can sense from across Seireitei means what I'm afraid it does.

Juushirou's gaze flitted back to the window, this time in the direction of the Twelfth Division, and he pursed his lips.

And something there isn't right, either. I've never known our neighbours to be so quiet... but they can't possibly all be out on patrol.

Out loud he said,

"It's all right, Enishi. I don't intend to give that order. Izumi will stay here, and I want her to be told unequivocally that she's to stay within the Division buildings and out of sight. I'll also keep Ketsui, since she's got the closest bond with him... I think that would be the most sensible decision. In terms of the rest..."

He frowned, debating with his instincts for a moment, then,

"I want everyone else prepared for immediate deployment, but I don't want anyone to physically leave Thirteenth until I give the order," he decided eventually. 'I know there are still a lot of areas to cover,' as Naoko's eyes widened in surprise, "but I'm sure you've noticed that some of our more distant neighbours are unusually active this morning. In the unlikely event of it being more than overvigorous training drills, I want us to be ready to act in support of whoever

needs it most. A lot of divisions have already sent large forces outside of Inner Seireitei... since Thirteenth haven't done that yet, we might prove to be needed."

"Reiatsu?" Enishi creased his brow, and Juushirou knew his big adjutant was attempting to pick up the signals. "I don't sense anything unusual, but I'm not as sharp as you are. Shikibu, what about you? Do you pick up what Ukitake's feeling?"

"I have," Naoko admitted. "In fits and starts, it feels like there's fighting going on. But I can't detect the presence of a hostile force... so I don't know whether it's something we should be worried about right now. Still, if that's the order, then it's what we'll do. I'm assuming you'll leave Mitsuki with the boy, Taichou, and let me take Kirio as part of the deployment?"

"Kirio is a military officer," Juushirou said simply, nodding his head. "We need her and her sword primed and ready to fight. But I've already sent Mitsuki to the Fourth Division. Unohana-taichou requested her, now that her spirit power is pretty much returned... she didn't say why, but I didn't feel in a position to refuse Mitsuki's actual superior officer in a summons like that."

And I imagine Unohana-taichou feels how I do — that there's a likelihood of attack and she wants to be ready to deal with any wounded that it creates. Otherwise there'd be no reason for her to cocoon Fourth in protective Kidou... or decide to suddenly want Mitsuki back without any advance warning.

"Then the kid?" Enishi was surprised. Juushirou shrugged.

"Like Izumi, he'll have to stay inside. Hopefully I'm overreacting, anyway," he said wearily. "For now, prepare the division as best you can. Recruits — minus Izumi — and seated officers — minus Ketsui — are all to be briefed for action. You can let them think that their patrolling will be against Hollows in the Districts, because right now that's as much information as I have. But make sure nobody leaves here until I'm ready."

He got to his feet, and Naoko cast him a suspicious look.

"We'll do so, but where are you going? You're not leaving Thirteenth?"

"No..." Juushirou offered her a rueful smile, shaking his head. "No, I'm just going to step outside and assess the local situation. Things in the atmosphere are bothering me, and I thought perhaps I'd get a better grip on what was what if I went there. I'll be safe enough,

Naoko — please, go with Enishi and do as I've asked."

"An order is an order," Enishi glanced at Naoko. "Let's go, Shikibu. They're reasonable instructions — and we'll have everyone ready quicker between the two of us."

"True," Naoko sighed reluctantly, but nodded. "I'm coming."

Juushirou watched them leave with an uneasy heart.

Kai left here early this morning. I only hope that his forays will be in time and we can prevent a worst case scenario. I don't know, though. Much as I want to believe everything is all right, every single sense of mine is telling me that it's not.

You need to trust those senses, Juushirou.

In's voice murmuring in his ear made him jump, then let out a soft groan.

In... you're not helping.

There was no reply, just the sensation of fish fins brushing against his thoughts, and he set his lips in a grim line, hardening his resolve and marching determinedly out into the front courtyard of the Thirteenth, unsure what exactly he was going to find.

"It's been a while, Juushirou."

No sooner had he stepped outside the door, when a voice sent chills down Juushirou's spine, and he swung around, his fingers more than halfway to Sougyo no Kotowari's hilt before he managed to lay eyes on the speaker. He was dressed all in black, except for the battered grey cloak he wore about his shoulders, and his sandy brown hair was pulled into a haphazard tie behind his head. It had been more than twenty years since the two men had last met, but despite the reports of Keitarou's serious injuries on that occasion, he now seemed in good health. He was thinner, perhaps, but not noticeably aged by the experience of living within the worst regions of Rukongai. He appeared relaxed, almost in good humour, his arms folded casually across his chest as though he had simply sauntered into the compound on a random whim, but Juushirou was not a child any more and he was not fooled by this pretence of nonchalance. His fingers closed around Sougyo no Kotowari's hilt, pulling the weapon free into the open air, his gaze searching Keitarou's waist for any sign of the man's own distinctive *tantou* knife.

At the gesture, Keitarou tut-tutted, shaking his head.

"You don't want to draw that on me here, like this," he said reproachfully. "It's not like you, especially not after all this time. You

surely don't bear a grudge for the past, do you? It was a long time ago — and I haven't come here intending to fight you."

"Last time we met, you tried to kill me," Juushirou spoke coldly. "The time before, you manipulated me against my close friend and caused us both serious harm. I believe my grandfather made it clear twenty-five years ago that your presence isn't welcome anywhere around me. If you didn't get that memo clearly the last time, I'll happily add a postscript. I have clearance from the Council to kill you on sight. Don't think for one moment I'll hesitate in completing that order."

"Ah, but I don't think you'll release that sword, not here," Juushirou did not see Keitarou move, but the next moment the exile was at his side, reaching out a black-gloved hand to push Sougyo no Kotowari's blade casually down against Juushirou's side. "There, that's better. Hear me out first. What I have to say might interest you."

"Nothing you have to say interests me," Juushirou bristled, yanking his weapon away from Keitarou's touch. "You're an enemy of Soul Society, and I'm sure I've told you many times, Seireitei's justice is the justice I believe in... justice you turned your back on a long time ago!"

"True," Keitarou held up his hands in mock surrender, an amused smile lighting up his clever features. "Still, I think you ought to listen. That is, if you don't want there to be more lives lost than absolutely necessary."

"Lives... lost?" Despite himself, Juushirou hesitated, his eyes narrowing to slits as he glared at his foe suspiciously. "You can't sway me from my purpose with clever word games, Keitarou. I'm not a child, I've grown up. I spent a long time living in Seventh District, and I learned what it was like to have someone with a metaphorical knife to your back every day I got up. I'm not a student, now. I'm a Captain. You won't hurt the people here, for I won't let you take another step inside my division."

"You have something that belongs to me," Keitarou's eyes suddenly became cold, his right hand sliding into the folds of his clothing and producing the small, distinctive *tantou* blade that Juushirou recognised only too well as the enigmatic scientist's *zanpakutou*, Chudokuga. He tensed, and Keitarou nodded.

"Yes, you were looking for this just a moment ago, and you were right to be wary," he said softly. "I wouldn't come here without it. Nor would I come here without using it to take specific, protective precautions."

He twisted the blade, allowing the light to glint off its surface, and Juushirou's brows knitted together, taking in the odd, slightly hazy sheen to the weapon's surface. A sudden sense of unease gripped his stomach.

"What did you do with that?" he demanded, and Keitarou pressed his lips together, tilting the weapon in Juushirou's direction.

"So you can see it. Impressive... but then I'm not surprised. I would've expected it from you, Juushirou — someone I picked out so young to be so strong and powerful... yes, it would be a shame if I'd been wrong at this late stage about your particular skills of perception."

He slid the weapon back into his *obi*, the hilt poking out tauntingly from beneath the folds of cloth.

"I can't use it on you again, though, sadly," he said with regret. "It's a great pity, because I would've liked to have seen how you'd evolved — but instead, I will have to use more base methods of manipulation to keep you from releasing that weapon, won't I?"

"I already told you..."

"What if *I* told *you* that the leaders of the Ninth and Tenth Divisions were currently acting under their own, unique kill-on-sight orders?" Keitarou's tones had taken on a dangerous edge, and there was a challenging expression in his mud-slurried eyes. "I know, you see, that the Gotei here is undermanned — all it takes are a few cleverly placed chess pieces and Seireitei's guarding forces will be check-mated without me even needing to lift a finger. Would you believe me, Juushirou, if I told you that as we speak, your friends are tearing each other to shreds, blade on blade? Would you think I was lying, if I told you that all those precious, honed shinigami skills of theirs were currently aimed at one another... and blood was already being spilled?"

Juushirou's eyes opened wide with dismay, remembering the flurries of reiatsu he had picked up from further across Seireitei, and Keitarou inclined his head.

"Yes. Your perception means you know I'm not lying to you," he said softly. "So now you realise exactly what cards I hold in my hands, I suggest you put that sword away and listen to my terms. The quicker you listen, the quicker I might be prevailed upon to release my hold. Of course, there's no guarantee I'll do anything so obliging — nor can I promise that all lives will be saved and all officers left in possession of all their limbs — but those things are by the by. We aren't allies, so

I'm under no obligation to respect your sensibilities about life and death. You do know well enough the power of my sword to tell that I'm not lying, though... don't you?"

Juushirou's eyes darkened with anger, but slowly he lowered Sougyo no Kotowari into its sheath, and Keitarou nodded slowly.

"Good," he remarked, pleased. "Your principles are still as they were all those years ago, even if I can tell your reiatsu is substantially stronger. As you are now, Juushirou, I believe you could kill me with that blade, especially knowing that Chudokuga is hampered in what it can now do to you. I understand the reasons why you won't, though — not whilst you know that my sword cannot be repealed by anyone but me... and if you did anything reckless against me now, those friends of yours would keep fighting and dying until they had no more life left. I have evolved too, in the time we've been apart. The wounds your grandfather gave me were troublesome, but healing from them provided unexpected dividends. One of those is the reason I'm here now. As I said before, you have something that is mine, and I want it back."

Juushirou's eyes narrowed at this.

"If you mean Koku, then he's not a thing, he's your son!" he snapped. "He's a living, thinking, breathing being with a mind and a will of his own! He doesn't just exist for you to use him and his power as you see fit!"

Keitarou arched an eyebrow, then he burst out laughing, shaking his head in clear amusement.

"Can you hear yourself?" he demanded, a mocking note in his tones. "You've outdone yourself this time, Juushirou — does your faith in other people have no limits or boundaries of sense or self-preservation?"

"Does your sense of fatherhood have no element of love or understanding?" Juushirou shot back. "Did you ever think how much your doing this might *hurt* him? Damage him? Did that ever occur to you, or did it not matter, in light of your greater plans for world devastation?"

"Did *you* ever consider that, as my son, he might be as adept at deception as I am?" Keitarou was unmoved. "Once I understood he was in the custody of the Thirteenth, I knew that no harm would befall him. Even if you learned his real name — which clearly you have done — I *knew*. People get stronger and wiser, but their fundamental nature very rarely changes from how it is when they are

young. I trusted that you would use that idealism of yours and protect him, the poor, pathetic stray from Rukongai, whose past was a long, sad story of abuse and neglect. That's what he told you, I trust? I'm sure my son would do nothing less, making use of the obvious foolishness of those around him to ensure he was kept safe. I knew you wouldn't even think to question his intentions — just like with Shikiki, you reach out to adopt those you believe are in some way disadvantaged and unwanted. It's the arrogance you have, both as a shinigami and as an individual, to assume that every miserable specimen is waiting for you to extend an arm in their defence. Did you not stop to think that you might've been shielding an assassin? I'm sure it never dawned on you that my son might have been sent here, on purpose, to win you over and then kill you while you slept?"

Juushirou gazed at Keitarou for a moment, then he shook his head.

"You can say what you like," he replied coldly. "I know that boy wasn't sent here to hurt anyone, Keitarou. I know that he came here by accident, when your stupid, blood-thirsty daughter killed a man who did nothing to deserve the injuries inflicted upon him. He came here because, like me and like so many others, he dislikes seeing people die unnecessarily. Maybe *you're* the one who doesn't know your son. Maybe you've used him as your pawn for so long that you don't understand the sensitive heart that lurks beneath."

"The sensitive heart?" Keitarou echoed the words derisively. "You really are a fool. You ought to have had children of your own to foist these paternal impulses on, Juushirou. As for Koku... *Kohaku*, he's *my* son, he's not *yours*. He has my spiritual heritage, not yours. I have known him his whole life. Contrary to your belief in my parenting skills, I protected him, raised him, trained him and taught him everything he knows about the world. He survived because of me and the efforts I made to ensure it. He is dependant on me, because I am the only one who understands even a little bit of the power that lurks within him and how best to govern it safely. You, by contrast, are a stranger. An uncommonly soppy stranger, but a stranger nonetheless. As angry as you can be on his behalf, Koku has no reason to take your part. So, I'll say it again. Return to me what's mine — or I won't be held responsible for the carnage that follows. There's already been blood spilled at the Ninth Division... who knows, perhaps the Eighth will be next?"

"Shunsui..." Juushirou hesitated for the briefest of instants, then he hardened his resolve, shaking his head.

"Shunsui can take care of himself," he said frankly. "We don't run

to protect each other, because it's not needed. Koku is not your property, and I have no intention of letting you set foot within my Division. We have an impasse... because Thirteenth and its people — among whom I currently include your son — are my immediate responsibility, and I won't allow you to put them in danger."

"Taichou!" Naoko's voice came from across the courtyard, the Third Seated officer stopping dead at the sight of the interloper, and Juushirou glanced at her, seeing the mixture of emotions that ranged across her clever features. Dokusou Houshi was already out of its scabbard and glittering with green light, but Keitarou merely shot her a playful glance, inclining his head towards her in acknowledgement.

"Shikibu Naoko, I believe. Well, well. I didn't realise you still lived. My compliments for managing it — it's quite a feat, considering."

"Naoko, stand down. That's an order," Juushirou held up his hand, casting his subordinate a warning look. "Keitarou is not for you to fight. I know your feelings, but I'm overruling them in this case. Is everyone prepped and ready for dispatch?"

"Yes, sir, but..."

"Then return to them and complete the orders you were given," Juushirou kept his voice calm. "Keitarou will be leaving here, shortly. If he doesn't go by choice, I will be using Sougyo no Kotowari persuasively. In the meantime, Enishi needs your help far more than I do."

"You should do what your Captain tells you, Naoko-san," An infuriating smile played at the corners of Keitarou's lips. "Much as your sword interested me once, I think it unlikely I'd find you of any use to me now, and it would be a shame when you'd lived this long if I were to do something with Chudokuga that resulted in your death."

Juushirou saw Naoko's entire body tense, her face twisting into a mask of anger and hatred so intense that even he felt a chill at the sight of it, but before he could shout out another caution to his officer to keep a hold of her temper, someone else stepped out into the courtyard, padding barefoot between the militant Third Seat and the defiant Captain to stand in the middle of the cobbles.

At the sight of him, Juushirou's heart skipped a beat.

"Koku?"

Kohaku did not meet Juushirou's gaze at first, standing before his father and meeting Keitarou's mud-slurried eyes with his own sombre brown ones.

“I knew you would come here,” he said quietly. “I was waiting. There’s no need to goad Shikibu-san or Ukitake-dono into violence... you shouldn’t be wasting your time and energy on such things.”

“Koku, you shouldn’t be here,” Juushirou hurried forwards, grasping the boy’s thin bony arm through the sleeve of the thin robe he had pulled around his body, but Kohaku gently detached the man’s hold, turning a melancholy gaze on his would-be protector.

“I have to go with him,” he said matter-of-factly. “Right now, it’s the only thing that I can do. I don’t expect you to understand, and probably you’re angry with me. It’s all right, if you are. Like I told you, I can’t take advantage of your kindness. He’s come for me... and now he has, I have to go.”

“Even though you know he will hurt you again?” Juushirou demanded, and Kohaku smiled sadly, a bittersweet expression entering his dark eyes.

“Nothing can begin if I stay here,” he said simply. “I’m sorry. There’s no reason for you or Shikibu-san to draw swords to defend me. I intend to go with him — I always did. It’s the only thing I know how to do.”

“And so you see, blood really is thicker than water, sometimes,” Keitarou shot Juushirou a smug look, holding out a hand to his son and beckoning his fingers towards him. Slowly, Juushirou’s hand slipped to his side, as Kohaku took one step, then another towards where the outlaw stood. As soon as he was within reaching distance, Keitarou’s hands closed around his son’s arms, and with a whoosh of spirit power, the two of them were gone.

“*Taichou!*” Naoko’s frustration was clear on her face, but Juushirou rubbed his brows, suddenly exhausted.

“Keitarou told me that he has significant officers — possibly Captains — under Chudokuga’s control, and from the reiatsu storm we sensed earlier, I believe him,” he said quietly. “I also can’t track his movements — he’s gained the ability to conceal himself completely from our senses, and he’s obviously able to cloak Koku as well. Right now, we can’t do anything about that except hope for the best. I want to believe in that boy, regardless — but even if he can’t be trusted, there’s a more pressing danger we have to be ready to confront. Thirteenth’s Captain can’t be put under Keitarou’s spell, and I am fairly sure you’re also immune, from the way he spoke — but that makes the two of us important, possibly indispensable if an attack comes our way. Right now, Naoko, I want you to go back and

complete the final arrangements for Thirteenth's deployment. I want everyone ready to act in a split-second. If Keitarou had managed to get within the confines of this Division, then it's very possible all of those we consider friends would've turned on us and slaughtered us where we stood. I couldn't let that happen — and it mustn't happen. This is a war, a real war, and it's begun in the worst way possible. Seireitei is currently missing Divisions One through Six, with the exception of Fourth which has cocooned itself in thick layers of protective Kidou and from which we can expect no kind of physical offensive. There remain to us seven divisions, but Seventh is already greatly weakened following recent events. If Keitarou is telling the truth, Eighth and Ninth are apparently already under attack and Tenth are additionally under his control. Maybe other places are too... I sensed something odd from the direction of our neighbours, and I can't get a proper lock on Sekime's reiatsu at the moment, which unsettles me."

"So we're deploying to help? In which direction?" Naoko was anxious, and Juushirou grimaced.

"I can already sense Hirata's reiatsu moving towards Ninth, and I have faith in Shunsui's strength at Eighth, so I don't intend to deploy in those directions," he said frankly. "I don't sense people fighting at Twelfth, but there are other things in the air that I don't like the feel of and I want to be on our guard here in case we come under particular attack. Since Keitarou knows he can't use Chudokuga on me, I have no doubt that he has an attack in mind, especially now. If Twelfth have been attacked in some way, we can't call on them for support, and who knows what's going on at Eleventh in the midst of all of this? Minaichi is an unknown quantity. It might be down to us to act in ultimate defence of all we can, until the missing divisions return."

"We could send them a message?"

"No good," Juushirou shook his head. "They're scattered in the field. More, though, they didn't take spirit pagers, nor leave a frequency by which they could be reached. Even if we want to bring them back, we can't."

"Brilliant," Naoko groaned, hitting her forehead with her palm, and Juushirou nodded.

"Which leaves a lot of the decisions to us," he agreed grimly. "We have to use the knowledge we have to act sensibly, not simply react to our emotions. Whilst he has people primed to kill, killing Keitarou will only work to his advantage... its not a spell that can be broken by his

death. Right now we are not under attack, nor have we taken any injuries. I intend to preserve that state of affairs as long as possible, in case it becomes the turning-point of the battle.”

“And you’re all right with the fact that bastard Keitarou is flying around doing as he pleases, with your waif and stray at his complete mercy?”

“Koku is Keitarou’s son, Naoko.”

“*What?*”

Naoko was beside herself now, and Juushirou came to rest his hands on her shoulders.

“Shunsui and I have taken some gambles. That is one of them,” he said quietly. “I don’t know, yet, how costly those gambles will be... but I do believe that Koku’s life is not currently in danger. More, I believe he chose to leave here so that Keitarou took his interest away from the Thirteenth Division. He already asked me not to fight his father — I don’t think he means us harm, whatever other confusion he might have about right or wrong. In the current circumstances, I could only let him go. I’m tied too, you see.”

“So we just wait here? While other people are being attacked, and maybe being killed? We wait and see whether we can trust in Keitarou’s son by sitting twiddling our thumbs and hoping he doesn’t decide to kill us after all?”

“I hope not, at least, not for long,” Juushirou bit his lip, his thoughts on Kai and the Onmitsukidou’s secret mission to the Spiritless Zone. Kai had taken his most trusted, discreet agents with him, and he knew that, for now, the balance was in his old friend’s hands. If Kai could only find Eiraki, or the other son, Katsura... if he and his men could do that...

He frowned.

“We need leverage of our own,” he said at length. “At the moment, we don’t have it. Hopefully it won’t be long before we do. If Koku betrays my trust in him, then he is subject to Seireitei’s justice and I won’t try and do anything to prevent it being carried out. But I didn’t choose to live in a Seireitei where we kill people first and ask questions later. If we’re fighting a war, then we’ll do it as bloodlessly as we can. Kai and the Onmitsukidou are currently following a good lead in the hunt for Keitarou’s base camp — and hopefully, his wife and other surviving son. While Keitarou is here, they’re unprotected, but if we had them in our power, we have a chance to force a

surrender — or at the very least, negotiate for the release of those individuals Chudokuga is currently manipulating. Until we have that, though... we have nothing at all. More, we believe there's a spy here in Seireitei, and again, we have good evidence they exist, but no indication of who they are. For that reason, we have had to be doubly careful — even if that means putting lives at risk. I'm sorry you're angry with me for keeping it all from you, Naoko — and I'm sure you'll have plenty more to be angry about, later, but for now I need my Third Seat with all her rational, clinical charm. Thirteenth might yet have to defend itself, so all we can do is be ready for whatever comes our way."

Author's Note

Gotta love Hirata's 'bedside manner'...

62. Betrayal

Chapter Sixty One: Betrayal

“I have to hand it to you, Nagesu-sama,”

Midori ducked her head to avoid a low hanging slab of stone, stepping carefully around the uneven lumps and dips in the passageway. “You might’ve done a number on this mountain from the outside, but inside it seems fairly stable and intact. I don’t pretend I know anything about Real World geology, but it doesn’t feel unsteady beneath my feet.”

“Sekizanha’s already made sure that it’s safe to walk through,” Nagesu patted the hilt of his weapon, turning his head to glance back in the direction they’d come. Midori had quickly returned to the mountain base, her cluster of Second Division officers in tow, some of them turning a sickly shade of green as they had laid eyes on her sword’s neat handiwork. Nagesu had quickly realised that these were officers adjudged not fit for the Onmitsukidou for a reason, and that Midori had brought them with her as much to blood their sensibilities as to hunt for Keitarou. She had paid their flinching very little mind, instead turning her attention to the best way to navigate the mountain, and, as Nagesu had painstakingly broken a chink through the area of rock Yunosuke had earlier pointed out. After half an hour’s work, his diligence had paid off, for the stone had crumbled and fallen away in patches, revealing a gaping hole beneath. Sekizanha had quickly confirmed that this was a passage, rather than an air pocket, the original entrance of which had been closed up by the eruption. Shiketsu had been doubtful about attempting to negotiate it, but with his weapon released, Nagesu had felt the faintest flicker of Keitarou’s reiatsu, and it had made up his mind. He had overruled his son, ordering the young man to take charge of the remainder of Third in preparing Aki’s body for safe transit back to Seireitei, and then to continue to patrol the mountain whilst he investigated whatever lay within. There was no room for more than a couple of officers to enter at any one time, and Shiketsu, realising that greatness of numbers might actually work against them in a confined space, had reluctantly acquiesced, calling to Yunosuke to help organise the rest of the men into a proper investigative operation.

After assessing the narrowness of the tunnel, Midori had also assigned her edgy division members to Shiketsu’s care, announcing

that she intended on accompanying Nagesu into the depths of the volcano, and one glance at his companion had told the Urahara leader it would be futile to argue, even if he had been so inclined. As it was, despite the two families' slightly chequered past, it was with a measure of comfort that Nagesu knew he could count the assassin-trained, matter of fact Shadow Cat as his ally, rather than as his enemy. Despite the past, Midori had proven herself a trustworthy Shihouin at every level of government and military leadership, and besides, Nagesu felt privately certain that, where he might hesitate to kill his cousin in a sweeping blow, his companion would have little compunctions about making such a choice.

Consequently, the two Clan Leaders had begun to explore the path, taking occasional wrong turnings and discovering dead ends as they tried to fathom out the logic that had constructed it — logic that, as Nagesu admitted ruefully to himself, had been exacerbated by his own exertions on his previous visit, for in places the evidence of lava flow was only too visible.

"I think that this pathway might've been wider at one point, because it almost looks as though there are wagon grooves of some kind on the floor," he observed now. "I suppose I did it some kind of permanent damage — there's barely room for us to pass through single file in its current condition."

"Mm. It's not ideal from a combat perspective," Midori acknowledged, eying the tunnel ahead with a critical eye. "Still, I think we can make it through all right. Neither of us are portly types, fortunately — though I can imagine you've smashed your head into some of the ceiling stalactites en route. You're taller than I am, and I'm having to hunch to avoid them, so it must be worse for you."

"I'm sure my wife would say that my skull is thick enough to take a few bruises without suffering permanent harm for it," Nagesu rubbed his chin ruefully, and despite herself, Midori grinned.

"Then I shall take her word for it and save my concern," she returned lightly. "In the meantime, it's darker up ahead. I'm debating whether it would be too risky to light a spell so we can see our way?"

"I don't think it will help or hinder anything lurking in the shadows if we were to avoid using spirit power to navigate," Nagesu spoke darkly. "Keitarou proved on our last encounter that he'd mastered reiatsu suppression to an infinitesimal degree. This is also the Real World. If he's here, he probably already knows we are, but we won't see him till he launches an attack. You might as well light the spell, Midori-dono. Maybe it will bring him out — and if we're fortunate,

we'll get a split-second in which to react before his spirit threads run us through."

"Running through is Akekage's speciality, so she'll be ready for it, if he tries," Midori dismissed this with a careless flick of her fingers, a soft reddish glow emitting from the tips of each digit as she did so. "It would be nice to see where we were going, though."

"There's a lot of grime on the walls of this tunnel, and not all of it relates to the eruption," Nagesu peered at the cracks and crevasses as they passed, squinting through his glasses at the bumps and nodules that littered the wall. "Some kind of real world organism — a lichen or a spore of some kind, perhaps. It appears to have dried out completely, so perhaps we're in luck. It looks like it might've been considerably damp in here before the volcano erupted."

"As it is, it's rather nice and toasty," Midori agreed. "Do you think the spores are important at all, Nagesu-sama? Can they cause us harm in this state?"

"There isn't a lot of formal study on the effect of Real World spores on Seireitei's residents, and they're long since dead, so I don't suppose we need to bother about them. They're naturally occurring, not a trap Keitarou's laid for us to fall into," Nagesu scraped his finger against the wall, peering at it then rubbing it clean against his already dusty *shihakushou*. "It suggests that, before that encounter, this wasn't being regularly used. Keitarou has been here, but whether he's here now... I have my doubts."

"Something is, or was, though," Midori remarked. "Otherwise, why all the passages? Who was using this and why? Real World people?"

"No..." Nagesu's eyes narrowed. "I can't explain it, but there's something about the atmosphere down here that doesn't feel right. It's as though someone released a good amount of spiritual energy down here, not too long ago. The eruption sealed it within the tunnels, so it's still lurking here — but it's old, and disintegrating, and so I can't get any tangible hold on what might have caused it. It's not Keitarou's aura, it's something else... but I don't think it's just a normal Hollow. I'm sure you can sense it too."

"I can, but I'm not a scientist," Midori admitted. "There are a lot of us here in this part of the Real World, and our being here could've caused a build up of spirit pressure too... as far as I'm concerned, I can't tell one from the other. But," she raised her free hand, gesturing ahead, "I can recognise an open doorway when I see one. That's not a passageway, Nagesu-sama. It's an opening into the rock. There's no

door there now, true, but there was one, once. You can make out the frame around the edge, just about, and what looks like the remains of a hinge.”

“You’re right,” Nagesu came to stand behind her, his gaze running over the melted and charred remains. “And Keitarou’s presence is all over it. Even without Sekizanha released, I can sense his aura here. He destroyed this, not the eruption.”

“Well, where he goes, we do,” Midori shrugged, stepping over the ash and debris and into the chamber beyond. She let out a low whistle, the red light against her fingers flickering as she examined her surroundings.

“I think we can safely say that we’ve found what we were looking for, if we were looking for something in particular,” she murmured, and Nagesu bent, hunching his shoulders and following her into the room, stopping dead at the sight that greeted him. Although it was still fairly dusty and looked to have been largely unused for some time, it was unmistakably some kind of laboratory. The eruption had not penetrated the thick walls of this chamber, though the trembles of the earth had shaken enough to crack through the carved shelves, sending ancient volumes tumbling all over the desk and floor. A few had lost pages, others lay folornly open on the ground like a turtle stuck on its back, unable to regain its dignity without help. Automatically, Nagesu bent to pick up the nearest, dusting it off and snapping it shut, glancing at the cover, and his brows knitted together.

“But this is...”

“Nagesu-sama?” Midori finished lighting the Kidou lamps dotted around the chamber, turning to survey her companion with a questioning look. “Something you know about, or something you don’t?”

“I’ve seen this book before,” Nagesu set the volume down on the desk, moving to examine some of the others that still clung to the shelves. “We own it, in fact, in the archive at home. It’s part of the family’s collection.”

“That hardly seems to merit the face you just pulled at it,” Midori objected, folding her arms across her chest and leaning up against the wall. “Surely books like that aren’t so rare to come by? We’re assuming this is Keitarou’s place, right? If so, well, he comes from the same family tree you do... albeit a rather more broken branch. It makes sense he’d have access to similar literature.”

“No...” Nagesu shook his head. “It’s not that. These volumes...”

they're all part of the archive that my uncle used to use regularly, before he was arraigned for the *reidoku* incident. Keitarou left the Urahara estate when he was four, and I don't know how he came by his scientific knowledge — but this particular volume... I have seen before."

"So..?" Midori frowned. "One of your exiled kin half-inched it and gave it to him as a coming of age present, maybe?"

"I should think not," Nagesu pulled another couple of books from the shelf, setting them down on the desk and opening the front covers, gesturing to the inside leaf. "It's not the books themselves, it's what's been written inside of them. These books... all belong to someone that wasn't condemned by my father. On the contrary, he was a man in whom Father put a lot of faith... after Uncle was executed."

"Ooh," Midori's eyes took on a look of grave comprehension. "I see what you mean. This man wasn't part of your uncle's coterie?"

"He was..." Nagesu pressed his lips together, considering. "I believe he studied under my uncle for a time, but he wasn't involved in the *reidoku* incident... nor did he get involved in the finger-pointing that followed. He kept well out of it, in fact. Not long before things went sour, Father presented him with several of these volumes on Uncle's request, which is why I recognise them as his — but..."

"And he gave them to Keitarou?" Midori arched an eyebrow, but Nagesu shook his head.

"He died a long time ago," he replied with a grimace, shutting the books one by one with a brisk sweep of his hand. "He died very suddenly, in fact. It was a big shock to everyone — he had seemed in such good health. They found no suspicious signs of foul play, though, so it was ruled a natural death and life moved on. But..."

"Maybe it wasn't so natural," Midori plucked a couple of other books from the floor, setting them on the desk. "Suspiciously innocent means of death are Keitarou's trademarks. Shouichi-dono was a perfect example... but there might have been others. If this man had something that Keitarou wanted... something in these books, maybe... hey, wait a minute. I know that crest. I'm sure I do."

"You do," Nagesu offered her a bitter smile. "It's the Kusakawa family crest."

"Kusakawa," Midori's expression took on a look of recognition. "I thought so. I knew I'd seen it before, but... I don't believe I ever knew a Kusakawa Daigo."

“You wouldn’t have met him, probably,” Nagesu looked pensive. “Like I said, he died a very long time ago.”

“Mm,” Midori pushed the books aside, uncovering a pile of folders which had been carelessly left lying about on the surface of the unit. “And these? I can’t make out a single word — either someone had a spasm while holding their brush, or this is some kind of shorthand I’m not trained in reading.”

“Let me see,” Nagesu moved to join her, and as his gaze rested on the upper sheet, his eyes widened, his complexion paling.

“Nagesu-sama?”

Midori cast him a concerned glance, but the Urahara was oblivious to her words, scooping up the sheets and fingering through them, a feverish desperation to his actions and a look of stricken disbelief in his eyes.

“It can’t be... it’s not...” his words came out in half-sentences as he struggled to absorb what he was seeing, and Midori’s brows knitted together in consternation. She strode across the chamber, grabbing the other man by the arm and giving him a little shake.

“Nagesu-sama? What is it? What does it say?”

This time Nagesu registered that he had company, and he dropped the sheets of paper back down onto the unit, shaking his head.

“We’re wrong,” he murmured, half to himself and half to his confused companion. “Everything... we’ve got it wrong. This may be Keitarou’s, now, but it wasn’t... it wasn’t originally. It was... it was something else. Something... and I never... Father never...”

“What in hell did that paper say, to make you look and act like that?” Midori had thrown her usual manners to the wind, genuine concern crossing her features. “Nagesu-sama, if something’s amiss, we’ll settle it — by blades if need be, but I can’t do anything while you’re gibbering to yourself, and I didn’t see anything but scribbles on that sheet, so you’re going to have to translate.”

“They came from here,” Nagesu swallowed hard. “Aki. That girl. Others, too. Three of them, kept here... kept here for a long, long time. Daigo-dono brought them here. All of them. From Seireitei.”

“Daigo-dono did?” Midori was still lost. “Brought who here? But you said he died a long time ago. That girl I killed was young... surely...”

“She wasn’t young. She was probably older than me, certainly older

than you — but she was frozen,” Nagesu looked grim, his eyes suddenly becoming flinty as he turned to scan the laboratory for any sign of a confinement chamber. “Her and two others, indefinitely, with an intricate mix of chemicals and customised Kidou, so that their cells didn’t age, deteriorate and die. She hated me, Midori-dono. That girl, she looked at me and she saw an Urahara, so she wanted me dead. But she told me... I wasn’t *him*. I wasn’t the one she wanted. The one she wanted was *Kusakawa Daigo*... the one who brought her here a prisoner, experimented on her and her companions, and turned them into monsters. It wasn’t Keitarou. He didn’t do this to them. It was... an older sin. An older deceit. One that began... when my Father was still alive.”

“Those papers say all that?” Midori’s eyes became huge, and Nagesu sighed, removing his glasses and pressing the bridge of his nose, trying to relieve the tension that now coursed through his body.

“Those papers, as you put it, are a work diary,” he murmured. “They detail years of experiments on three living subjects two male, one female. The female is named in this text simply as Aki, written phonetically, and that’s the name Keitarou called her by the first time I encountered them. They were apparently prisoners, taken from the Urahara jails. Prisoners who were sentenced to death by Urahara courts... for what crimes, I don’t know. My father could be very demanding and paranoid... well, you’re a Shihouin, so I’m sure you understand what I mean.”

“My family’s current structure is largely thanks to Rikaya-sama’s demanding paranoia, so yes,” Midori agreed wryly, “though I grant you that’s a largely Shihouin point of view, my Uncle never had much love for your father, following the scraps over territory that cost his older children their lives.”

“Indeed,” Nagesu looked grave. “His perspective could be just as harsh on people inside District Three, if he felt they were somehow up to mischief. I changed a lot of regulations when I became Clan Leader, to remove capital charges on all crimes except the most offensive. In Father’s day, though, if you stole something, or committed fraud of some kind... even if you tried begging or poaching on certain areas of land, you could be sentenced to death for it.”

He patted the papers lightly.

“Almost certainly I could find out what these three allegedly did in the family records, and probably the entries there will also say each of them was executed in accordance with that strict zero-tolerance policy on crime. The man in charge of that duty was Kusakawa Daigo, and

nobody would care to check what happened to prisoners. Why he chose these three out of all of them is another question and that one I can't answer so easily. Maybe that information is written here somewhere, or perhaps that will have to wait till I get home, too. But these notes... weren't written by Keitarou. They're written and marked by Daigo-dono. And more... they continue. After his death."

"After his... death?"

"Keitarou might have found this place, and he might have used it to his advantage once he did," Nagesu looked troubled. "But he didn't begin it, Midori-dono. It wasn't his work. Remember, Daigo-dono might have died unexpectedly... but he also had a son. One, very bright, very brilliant son... who apparently attempted to continue the work his father began. Maybe even... to the point of experimenting in the wilds of Rukongai."

Midori's eyes widened, and she let out a muttered curse.

"You mean... all this time..."

Nagesu nodded his head grimly.

"Keitarou isn't here, but I'm sure he brought us here to find this, and mock our ignorance," he said flatly. "Somewhere in this chamber are confinement cells, and among these papers there is probably more data about what went on here and why. We need to take as much as we can back to Seireitei with us. As painful as it is, I have a feeling that it's only when we have every single scrap of truth that any of this will be properly laid to rest. If Keitarou found this place, he almost certainly used his skills to stabilise Aki and any others, rather than create them. That means they'd fight for him, with absolute loyalty, most likely. He doesn't look like an Urahara, so they wouldn't hate or fear him. He's taken advantage of an ancient treason... but it bothers me how he knew it was here, and more, whether his letting us find it has another, darker motive."

"Like puppets without the proverbial strings tugging us along?" Midori asked astutely, and Nagesu nodded.

"Something like that," he agreed, "so we should get to work, before they tug again."

"This seems as good a place as any to talk, though we don't have a lot of time in which to do it."

Keitarou pulled them both out of the smooth flashstep, setting them down on the grass behind the archive building, and Kohaku turned to

glance around him, shivering slightly as a chill wind whipped around his thin frame. He had not been here before, and something about the imposing structure of this great, foreign building made him remember Kyouka's dream castle, creating a sense of unease in the pit of his stomach. At his expression, Keitarou cast him a critical glance, resting his hands on his son's shoulders and eying him from top to bottom. For a moment he didn't speak, then his eyes softened, and he tut-tutted under his breath.

"I left you too long, didn't I?" he murmured, more than half to himself. "Eiraki had good reason to worry about you — you're skin and bone. I would've thought that food would be plentiful here, but looking at you..."

He trailed off, and Kohaku bit his lip, slowly shaking his head.

"I haven't been able to eat, much," he admitted. "Everything here is alien to me... it's been hard."

"I suppose so," Keitarou acknowledged. "I'm sorry. I should know better than anyone how mercurial your senses are. I've spent my life coming in and out of Seireitei, so I'm used to the change in spirit flow between here and the Rukon, but it's a fresh experience for you. With your perception and abilities, it must've been difficult to keep things under control."

He gestured for his companion to settle himself on the grass, and after a moment, Kohaku did so, brushing his fingers absently against the green blades as he watched his father begin digging around the side of the building, clearly trying to locate something specific.

"Everything here is alive," he murmured. "I didn't realise how blue the sky could be, or how green the grass was. Katsu-nii always said it, how it would be so much nicer to live in Seireitei, but I never believed him. I never imagined it was a place like this. The sun hurt my eyes to begin with, and there was so much here that I didn't know even existed."

"Which is why we'll reclaim it and make it our own," Keitarou cast him a grin. "That's always been the plan, and it's what we've worked towards for so long. Perhaps it wasn't the perfect introduction, but I'm glad you've been able to see and feel this world for yourself, rather than just through Katsura's memories. I want you to want it too — to live in this place, and not have to struggle to survive any longer."

"I won't go back to Rukongai," Kohaku's voice was edged with regret. "I knew if I came here, I wouldn't go back. I'm supposed to die here, Father. I know that now, more than I ever did before."

“People like you and I aren’t supposed to leave here,” Keitarou’s eyes twinkled, but there was a seriousness in their expression, and Kohaku was not sure whether his companion was truly as light-hearted as he seemed. His heart clenched in his chest as he considered this — for he knew that, of everyone he had met in his short life, Keitarou was the most adept at concealing his real feelings. “You were born in the wrong place — but this is where you belong, and where I want you to be. To which end, I brought something else with me... something which you were careless enough to leave behind when you first decided to break curfew and skip existential planes.”

He stood, a raggedy bundle clutched in his arms, and at the sight of it, Kohaku’s expression clouded. He nodded.

“I knew you’d come, sooner or later,” he reflected, holding his hands out reluctantly to take the lumpy, misshapen parcel and setting it down in his lap, resting his hands on the top of it. “I knew, and I knew you’d bring this, too.”

“Well, I knew you’d be waiting for me when I did,” Keitarou grinned, dropping down at his companion’s side and patting the young man’s thin shoulder approvingly. “It was probably better, leaving the weapon with me, anyway. Your sister created a problem, and you did the best you could to rectify it to our benefit — I realised that more and more as time went on.”

“Sakaki is dead,” Kohaku raised pensive eyes to his father’s, seeing the flicker of genuine grief that lurked there. Slowly the scientist nodded.

“She is,” he agreed sadly. “I’m sorry, Koku. It was my oversight — my mistake. I didn’t mean for it... but ultimately, she died fighting for our cause.”

He sighed, patting the grass lightly.

“Maybe it’s better for her, this way,” he reflected. “Horrible as it sounds... and as much as I would never have said it before your mother, Sakaki couldn’t come here with us like this. The spiritual pressure would be too great for her to tolerate for any length of time, and it would have caused her to suffer. She was happy in Rukongai. She had freedom to act and do as she pleased, and she lived her life to the fullest. If that life ended in battle, well, in some ways it was a fitting end. She... never was like you or your brother, and our coming here would’ve made her see that in the cruellest light possible. I would not have left her behind — but whilst we belong here, she... never would have done.”

“Mm. Maybe that’s true,” Kohaku slipped his fingers beneath the folds of the wrapped bundle, his expression sad. “Sakaki was never really my sister, anyway. She never looked at me and called me Oniichan. She never had a place for me in her family, and I never really looked on her that way, either. Her death made me sad, Tousama, but not angry. You don’t have to explain it to me... I already know. All of it... I know.”

“Yes, of course you do,” Keitarou pressed his lips together in acknowledgement. “Being here, you must’ve seen things in so much more clarity, even without the proximity of that wretched sword.”

“I suppose that’s true,” Kohaku was surprised, “but it’s like picking up a messy signal. There are a lot of people here, and a lot of other things that give off spiritual auras. Sometimes it makes it harder to see anything that makes sense.”

“Well, then you know how I felt all those years, picking up bits and pieces from you without any coherent thread running through to pull them all together,” Keitarou sat back on his heels, looking resigned. “I always tried to know what you were thinking, but you never were good at explaining things you saw, even if you wrote them down, and you’d constantly tell me I was wrong, never correct my assumptions to what was right.”

“I never knew myself what was right until it was,” Kohaku owned. “It’s not like that. It never has been like that, Father.”

“Well, I tried to understand, but it pains me that only Katsura was able to really do that with any effectiveness,” Keitarou sighed. “When you vanished, Koku, I was honestly worried about what it meant. When Katsura said you were unwell, I shouted at him, but only because I was afraid he was right. That’s why it comforted me so much that you came to me today of your own free will.”

“What else was I going to do?” Kohaku asked simply. “Like I said to Ukitake-dono, I didn’t have the right to take advantage of his kindness, because I knew you would come and that I would go with you. Maybe, at one point, I thought I’d hide, or run away... but I suppose, deep down inside, I knew that I wouldn’t. I understood what I had to do and it’s what I’ve known in some way or another ever since I was small. I saw things much more clearly then... its only now that they’ve begun to come back into focus.”

“Maybe allowing you freedom to mix and mingle in the Rukon was a mistake, then,” Keitarou looked pensive. “Well, no parents are perfect, Koku, so if I was wrong in letting you bond so closely with

your brother, and allowing you to see so much of his world, I'll hold up my hands. Perhaps I should never have encouraged you to step out of the hut for the first time, or built a sword for you to confine that power in when you clearly were far from ready to make anything meaningful of doing so."

He offered his companion a philosophical smile, and Kohaku felt his heart ache at the sight of it.

"As a scientist, all those judgements were probably awry," he admitted. "Chudokuga criticises me for it constantly, my fondness towards my kin. You know, though, that even if Katsura claimed a soft spot with your mother, you were always my favourite. If I tried to make you see the world before you were ready to understand it, I'm sorry. It was never my intention to make things harder."

Kohaku shook his head slowly, drawing into the forefront of his mind with sudden clarity the day when, for the first time, Keitarou had unfastened the bolts of the cage, taking him by the hand and leading him carefully out into the weak light of the Rukongai sun. He shivered, remembering the fear that had rippled through him, the uncertainty of his surroundings, and the alien environment of colours and textures he had never before known. They had been figments of Katsura's dream-messages before that day, yet one by one they had come to life before his eyes, and the sensation had proved overwhelming. He had screamed, cried, even tried to return to the hut at first, but Keitarou had persisted, coaxing him gently with unending patience until he had been certain his younger son would not bolt and get himself hurt.

It had been not long after that day that Katsura had discovered his brother trying to harm himself, frightened by the voice in his head and its threatening demands, and Kohaku frowned, forcing the thoughts away and opening his eyes.

I was scared to let Father see me fail, then, so we kept it from him, and he never knew. Now the way he smiles, the way he talks... is as though he doesn't want me to see his uncertainties, or understand his failures. Sakaki's death, Katsu-nii's behaviour... were outside of his calculations, yet he tries to act as though all is well. I've never felt that from him before.

"It was the right thing," he murmured out loud, suddenly wanting to reassure the man who had guided and led him since he had been born. "You can't change the world if you don't know anything about it. I had to know about it. All of it. I had to know, even if it made me afraid."

"Very true," Keitarou's shoulders sagged in obvious relief at this

response, and he nodded.

“I should have known you’d understand — you always have and you always do,” he added. “Perhaps that’s why I felt so strongly that, whatever else happened, you’d know that I wouldn’t just abandon you. You’re far too important to me — to everything — to just discard. I hoped your coming here had a purpose, and now, having seen Juushirou’s reaction, I know I was right. Your brother thought you’d chosen to come here with the shinigami in a fit of madness or panic... but it wasn’t that at all, was it? You weren’t relapsing at all. You came here because you knew Juushirou was a problem for me. You came with the bloody corpse of a shinigami, to make them see you as their ally, and to win Juushirou over. You knew you could... and so you did.”

Kohaku didn’t respond for a moment, his delicate fingers carefully unwrapping the bundle until he could see the glitter of silver, and the hard, carved surface of the Sekkiseki coated hilt. His index finger brushed against the stone, feeling the prickle of rejection that rippled through it, and he let out a heavy sigh.

“I knew you’d come,” he repeated. “I also knew I’d be helpless to do anything without the sword, so all I could do was try to heal. I’ve been injured... I had to heal. The shinigami healed me... and so I let them.”

“So I can see,” Keitarou grimaced. “Well, and I can’t pretend everything has gone smoothly on my path to this point, or that I wouldn’t have liked to have moved to retrieve you more quickly, but you did decide to take things into your own hands without a word to anyone, and then things fell a little out of my control after Sakaki died. Your brother’s impulsiveness... I know you helped him escape Seireitei. I sensed your reiatsu in the swirl that followed his little debacle. I did what I could to ensure he escaped with his life, but I don’t know his current location, and at present, there’s nothing more I can do to help him. Katsura brought us all into danger, you included, and right now, if I were to try and bring him into things, it could destroy everything we’ve spent so long working towards. His future... any possibility of him being able to rejoin us again depends on what we do now. His safety, his life, everything relies on it.”

He paused, tilting his head on one side, and Kohaku could see the regret in his father’s face as the older man regarded him.

“Your mother wants me to make your power safe, even seal it away, when this is over,” he admitted. “In a moment of weakness, I promised her I would. She wants you to stop having nightmares, and

for me to stop putting you through the pain. She doesn't understand about spirit power, not really, but I decided, when I came here... that if it was what you wanted, then I would do it. Even though I consider it a waste, if it's what you choose, I'll help seal Kyouka away forever. You'll have a life of your own, free and safe, where everything is open for you. That's the reason we're at this point now. I know how you feel about killing, but sometimes it's the only way to cleanse a world, ready for a new start. A lot of bad things exist in this place — bad things spreading back to the time of your Grandfather, and countless injustices against innocent people ever since. With your help, I want to expunge all of those things... so we can begin anew."

Kohaku pushed back the last of the clothes that had swathed the ugly, disfigured sword during its journey through the *Senkaimon*, wrapping his right hand around the hilt and tilting it upwards so that he could see his face, thin and pale, reflected in the smoky blade. Suddenly he was reminded of the dream-castle, and the flower-edged mirror reflecting his own self bound by chains and covered with blood. He frowned, lowering the weapon back into his lap.

"I know," he said at length, his words little more than a whisper. "I've already seen it, Father. I know how to create that world. And, I guess... I know that I will."

"In which case, I have another errand I need to run," Keitarou sounded pleased, clapping his son warmly on the back. "Even if this is the last time you ever use your power, I still have things I must do with mine. Right now, the shinigami are thrown into chaos, not knowing whether they can trust in their neighbours thanks to Chudokuga's power, but the fight is far from over. Sooner or later, the others will return, and I have to be ready for when they do. I'm relying on you, my boy. For the sake of your family, don't let me down."

He got to his feet, holding out his hand to haul his companion to his, and Kohaku allowed himself to be pulled upright, sliding the ungainly sword roughly through the tie of his loose white robe.

"You're going to leave me here, on my own?" he asked apprehensively, and Keitarou laughed, looking amused.

"I doubt there's a single soul here in Seireitei who could lay a finger on you now you have that, so don't look so frightened," he scolded lightly, gesturing towards the sword. "You're not a child now, Koku, you're a man with a man's weapon and you don't need me to lead you forth into the light any more, not when you've survived so successfully here alone and undercover for as long as you have."

“Alone...” Kohaku murmured the word, and Keitarou nodded.

“You’ve stood up to it well, and I’m proud of you,” he added. “Now, though, you have a very important task to carry out. We’ll meet again, when everything is done, but it might not be till after the sun sets. Killing the people here is only part of the agenda. There are still those in the Real World, and I doubt very much that my diversions there will pose Council Gotei members a problem for too long. Perhaps they’ll spill some blood and gut some soldiers... but I still expect the other shinigami to return. When they do, bloody, tired and off their guard, I’ll finish what I’ve already begun.”

He patted Kohaku lightly on the head, ruffling his hair affectionately.

“But you don’t need to worry about that — it’s for me to do, not you,” he added. “You have your weapon, and you know exactly what you need to do now. We sealed all that spirit power in that blade for a reason, and this is it. You need not hold back this time, Koku.”

He paused, eying his companion quizzically.

“You do understand, don’t you?” he pressed softly. “Nobody ever brought the dawn of a new world without cutting away the deadwood of the old one? It can’t be done without bloodshed — you understand that, don’t you?”

Kohaku sent his father a melancholy glance, then, very slowly, he nodded his head. Without a word, he darted forward, flinging his arms around the other man and hugging him tightly.

“Koku?” Keitarou was taken off guard, but Kohaku buried his head in the other man’s shoulders, not wanting him to see the tears that glistened on his lashes. The worn fabric of the grey coat pressed against his skin, the familiar scent of Rukongai dust and Keitarou’s own scientific forays so deeply embedded in the cloth that they too brought forth a plethora of memories, some good, some bad. For a moment, fear of the path ahead consumed him, and he clung on tightly, afraid to let go of the person who, for so much of his life, had been his guide and teacher.

“Koku, what’s this about?” Keitarou’s words were unmistakeably anxious, and Kohaku swallowed hard, fighting against the swirl of emotions and regaining control of his composure. Yet still he did not raise his eyes, not wanting his father to see his face. A collage of images broke through the darkness of his vision, images he had seen before, images of things that had yet to come to be. He had always had control over them, he knew with regret. Which ones came to be

and which did not depend on him and only him... on making the life and death choices he'd always been afraid to make.

I might die here, Otousama. What I've decided to do, and how it must be done... it may well be the last time I use my power, and because of it, we might not be able to meet again. But I promised Kyouka not to be afraid... not to run away. I won't let him take control of me, and so that means... I have to take control of my own destiny and accept it for what it is, bloodstains and all. I understand things you haven't seen about the world you want to create, Otousama, but deep down I know that it's not you who can choose, but me. It's my knowledge, my decisions that everything depends on. I've made up my mind... so now I have to stick with it, and not turn back just because it's a step into the unknown.

"I understand," At last he spoke aloud, his words muffled by the rough fabric of Keitarou's cloak. "I understand, Father, and I've made up my mind. I have resolve... and I know... what it is I must do. Even if it means people die... I know, and I... will... fight."

Well, that was the last of the stock reports for the month, at the very least.

Atsushi tossed the booklet onto the pile with the others with a very bad grace, glaring at it as though it had personally offended him. In the past, he mused bitterly, getting to his feet and pacing across the room towards the window, he had been able to leave such things entirely to his Vice Captain's discretion, but, along with his other failings, Ikata had proven to have a poor head for figures and an even worse one for ordering quantities of necessary supplies. After a couple of months where the Division had been forced to beg, borrow or steal rice from neighbouring divisions just to feed themselves, Atsushi had taken the decision to double-check his second in command's work before anything was submitted to the central supply office for authorisation. It had meant taking more work onto an already busy workload, and it had done nothing to improve his relationship with his Vice Captain, though Ikata had shrugged it off with his usual swaggering insouciance. On one occasion, the man had even suggested Atsushi do it all from scratch himself, if he was so keen to check it over, and even the memory of this conversation sent fresh bristles of annoyance through Atsushi's lean, stocky body.

He sighed, resting his hands on the window-sill and drawing deep breaths of air into his lungs to settle his composure. He was more on edge lately, he reasoned, and had been since the subject of Rukongai had come back into general parlance. He had not been able to attend the Captains' meeting, in which the final discussions about Real World

dispatch had been made, but even if he had gone, it would've made little difference to the ultimate outcome. Whether Keitarou was in the Real World, Rukongai or Seireitei, it didn't matter to him in the least. It was not Keitarou's face he saw in his nightmares, nor Keitarou's name which was sometimes on his lips when he awoke. The longer things had gone on, the more he had been forced to reflect on an incident which he had struggled with for the best part of twenty-five years — but though the old cliché had said time healed all wounds, his was still as raw as it had been then.

It was a failing and a defeat for a man of his military discipline, to be caught up in the emotions of another officer's death for this long, but it was a battle he knew he would probably never win. Things were as they were, and there was nothing to do but get on with the duties assigned to him. And, at least when he was being angry towards Ikata's incompetence, he could push aside the other feelings that competed for dominance within his heart.

Contrary to his colleagues at other divisions, he had not noticed the rapidly changing spiritual conditions that surrounded Seireitei that morning. Of the fighting at Eighth and the tragedy at Ninth, he had remained completely oblivious, and it was not until he had set his brush aside, allowing his thoughts to move away from the mundane that he realised how quiet his surroundings were. With a frown, he hurried to the window, pushing the shutters back and examining the training ground for any sign of the usual drill practice. The yard was deserted, however, and Atsushi muttered a sequence of expletives under his breath, cursing Ikata's inefficiency for the thousandth time that day. When it came to physical practice, the man was usually to be relied upon, but it appeared that this time he had let even that slip.

“Ikata!”

He bellowed the Vice Captain's name, loud enough that it could be heard across the whole of the Divisions. “Ikata, where the hell are you, you useless lump of flesh! Get yourself into my office, this instant, or else!”

There was a moment of silence, then Atsushi was aware of the sound of soft footfalls, approaching his office with unhurried, measured steps. Half tempted to fling the door open and yell more abuse at his adjutant's face, something in the sound of the tread made Atsushi pause, his brows furrowing as he realised how unlike his Vice Captain's usual thudding steps it sounded. More, in the usual bustle of the Eleventh Division, such quiet steps ought not be audible, and with a jolt he realised that it wasn't just the lack of drill that was unusual,

but the complete, dead quiet that had fallen over the entire premises.

He frowned, moving back towards his desk as the footsteps stopped. Nothing else happened immediately, and Atsushi was half-wondering if he had imagined them, when the door slid back with a disconcerting hiss.

“Ikata isn’t available to answer your yell right now, Atsushi-kun.”

The voice was soft and even, and at the sound of it, Atsushi swung around, his eyes widening in surprise as he registered the figure who now stood in the entrance to his office.

“Mareiko?”

The Twelfth Division Captain’s *shihakushou* was peppered with some kind of dust and her haphazard hair and crumpled *haori* made him think at first that she had stumbled out of one of her own explosions again. About to ask which part of Twelfth Division needed shoring up or digging out this time, he caught a glimpse of her expression, and the words faded in his throat, a look of consternation crossing his thin features as he assessed her appearance anew and realised what it was that had seemed so wrong and out of place.

It had been more than twenty years since Mareiko had last drawn her *zanpakutou*, for the ligaments in her right shoulder had been too badly damaged in the Rukongai incident for her to ever utilise the weapon in combat again. Instead, she had focused on Kidou research, employing her sword as a medium or prism through which she could expand her understanding of spiritual magic. The sword had hung at her side, more in a ceremonial affectation of her military position than proof of her fighting prowess, but it had become almost an unspoken understanding that she would probably never use the blade in a physical capacity again.

Today, however, the sword was not at her side, but in her hand, and as he absorbed this tidbit of information, Atsushi noticed with a jolt that it was her *left* hand which held the weapon, not her damaged right. His gaze flitted back to his neighbour’s face, looking for some clue or explanation for her sudden interruption, and what he saw there made his blood run momentarily cold.

His colleague’s pale eyes were normally dreamy, sometimes melancholy, but he had never seen them as cold and empty as they were at that moment.

Taken off guard, Atsushi simply stared.

“Nothing to say?” Mareiko’s words continued in the same calm

vein, but there was a hardness to it that Atsushi had never heard there before, as, step by step, she drew closer to where he stood. For a moment she regarded him, and the undisguised hatred in her expression pierced the startled Captain right through to his very core.

“Mareiko, what are you...” he began, but the words trailed off again as, with a sweep of her left arm, Mareiko raised her sword, pushing the tip towards his jugular until it scraped lightly against the surface of his skin. He cursed, stepping back, but Mareiko did not halt her advance, her steps unhurried and even, but determined. Thrown completely by this unexpected and uncharacteristic hostility, Atsushi could do nothing but back away, but the hard surface of his office wall soon told him there was nowhere else to run. Mareiko’s eyes became slits, and for a moment, Atsushi thought he saw a flicker of fire lurking in their depths.

Then, in tones laced with suppressed anger and hate, she spoke once more.

“It’s been twenty-five years, hasn’t it?” she whispered, and Atsushi felt the prick of the blade press more resolutely against his skin. “Twenty-five years ago, you killed my Captain in the Rukon. You probably thought you got away with it, but now, at long last, I’m here to avenge his death.”

63. Rage, Greed, Insanity

Chapter Sixty Two: Rage, Greed, Insanity

The campsite was in ruins.

Kyouki drew a deep breath into her lungs, brushing back the loose strands of wavy dark hair from her face with her free left hand and scanning the surroundings for any sign of her target. Scorch-marks peppered the entire environment, the combination of her maternal anger and the white hot flares of heat from Gekkoushin's Day Moon blade rendering most of the area into charcoal rubble, yet somehow the lumbering beast had managed to avoid her attacks. He had been remarkably agile for one Kyouki considered without rationality, and she had quickly realised that, repulsive as his actions may have been, it did not mean that she was dealing with a normal Hollowed spirit. On the contrary, there had been glimmers of light and understanding in the creature's feral eyes, and though he had not attempted to speak to her, Kyouki felt sure that it was not necessarily because he had no way to communicate.

She took a cautious step or two forwards, glancing around the heaps of rocks and tree debris for any sign of where her foe had gone. The dark, thickly packed forestland lay before her, and she gazed at it, knowing that it was the perfect hiding place for an ambush. She could still sense him, his presence all around her, but though her military training told her that he was most likely somewhere within the woods, she was reluctant to follow him in. It was a battleground he had chosen, she reflected, not one that suited her and her sword all that well, and, whilst putting an end to the danger was her first priority, she knew from long experience that vandalising large swathes of real world woodland with an unexpected forest fire was something to be avoided if at all possible.

Her gaze flitted to the left, the spatters of blood that lined the area a visual clue to the direction in which her division had retreated. Arai had held his nerve on receiving Kyouki's instructions, and had managed to organise the shell-shocked members of the Fifth Division with remarkable speed, getting all those who were physically able to help those who were not. Nobody had been left behind, though Kyouki felt certain that some of her men would not have survived the monster's original attack, and the dented, bloodsoaked crest that had once adorned her eldest son's arm was a constant reminder of the fact

that Ryuusei may be among those beyond saving. She could not give up on tracking the creature, not even to attend to her son, for her foe had proven already that he was capable of ripping lesser division members to shreds. What her opponent's true spiritual level was, she was not yet sure, for he had made no attempt to attack her directly, merely leaping and dodging her blasts with uncanny accuracy and mocking, inarticulate screeches.

He was playing with her.

The knowledge made her even more angry, but there was little she could do about it except find her target and make him regret ever crossing her path.

A rustle of tree branches alerted her to the fact that he had tired of waiting, and she swung around, Gekkoushin raised and glittering with energy as a blast of eerie green light came surging out from the darkness of the woodland, followed by the ungainly form of her enemy, leaping down from the trees and landing with an ugly kind of deftness on all fours. Kyouki swung her sword, casting another scorching flare of Day Moon fire across the battered campsite to meet the Cero head on, and, as the two blasts of spirit power collided, they exploded into a dazzling ball of light, illuminating the copse so brightly that for a moment neither Kyouki nor her opponent could see a thing. Blinded, Kyouki allowed her instincts to take over, tilting her weapon so that the smooth, golden surface of Gekkoushin's blade reflected the intensity of the glare.

"Hitsuki no Kagayaki," she murmured, and with a neat sweep of her weapon, she brought the dazzling glow under her own control, driving the sword down so that the haze cloaked her from view. Little by little she began to make out shapes and colours, faint and indistinct yet enough for her to use as landmarks and, as her opponent hesitated, still confused by the force of the glare, Kyouki slipped into shunpo, re-materialising directly behind the creature's body. Without a moment of hesitation, she drew Gekkoushin's gleaming blade in a smooth, arced stroke. From the scalding hot surface of the blade burst a fresh flame of energy, searing through the thin Real World atmosphere towards her target. Too late, the Hollow man registered that he was in danger, and with a shriek he attempted to dodge out of the way, but it was in vain. The speed of Kyouki's Day Moon attack was faster than he could clear its trajectory, and the flame engulfed his left side, causing an ungodly shriek of pain to fill the entire surrounding area.

Kyouki carved through the dazzling light of Gekkoushin's shield, dispersing the haze to see how much damage had been done. The

creature was on the ground, his left arm little more than a charred mess from shoulder to finger-tip. The heat had reduced flesh and bone to cinders, but his attempts to evade it had, at least, prevented the blast from causing fatal damage and, though the edge of his mask was singed and cracked away, the majority of it remained intact. Kyouki lifted her weapon again, preparing to put an end to the matter once and for all, but, as she prepared to cast Gekkoushin down one final time, the creature raised his gaze, his feral gaze boring into hers. His lips parted, and Kyouki was aware of a thick tongue lolling around inside of his mouth. He did not speak, and the next moment he was gone, with a flash of *reiryoku* so like *shunpo* it took the other woman off guard. She cursed, swinging around for any sign of him, but she could not see him.

Even with an injury that bad, he manages to move so swiftly? That was shunpo... or something very close to it. I don't remember ever hearing that Hollows could do shunpo — not enough rational thought or control to learn any kind of meaningful technique other than Cero. This one has both Cero and the ability to move, though. I'm not sure how... but if he's still able to do that, then the injury I gave him can't be as bad as I thought.

A commotion from the woodland drew her attention, as a flock of birds erupted suddenly from the upper branches of the trees, squawking and screeching as though running for their lives. No sooner had they made their evacuation when Kyouki heard animals squealing, and her blood ran cold. Remembering the rabbit in the snare, she suddenly understood the reason behind the animals' fear, and more, what and who it was who had been hunting them.

Not Real World people at all. The one who set the snare was this one. This creature who I assumed was out of his wits is really the hunter that's terrorised the forestland. He ate Ryuusei's arm, I saw him. The rabbit was also his handiwork. And now... what is he doing? Why is he attacking forest critters instead of attacking me?

Her eyes became near slits as she contemplated.

I can't assume that he's lacking in understanding or rationality, even if his actions are abhorrent and seem inexplicable to me. On his own level, he is thinking, reacting, strategising, and for that reason, Gekkoushin has not yet been able to take him down. That leaves one horrendous possibility I haven't yet explored.

She took a tentative step towards the forest, knowing now that, disadvantage or not, she could not avoid going in to locate her prey.

Shinigami eat to replenish reiatsu reserves when they are injured. They use food as a medium through which power can be regenerated. Hollows

eat souls to keep themselves satiated. This creature is a hybrid of both elements — a soul, but not a Pure Soul, and a Hollow, but not a full Hollow. He ate Ryuusei's arm, and he was very swift at avoiding my attacks. Now he's hurt, and retreated to the forest... but what if it isn't a retreat? What if the birds fled because they know that if they don't, he will kill them? Real World animals are much smarter than Real World people when it comes to sensing danger. They can see him, as sure as they can see me... and more, the rabbit proves he's able to touch and consume them. We eat food, and this creature hunts animals. His savagery has a purpose. He's using them to heal. The question is, if I go in there after him, can I track him down and put an end to this without putting myself in serious danger? This is his territory and he probably knows it like the back of his hand. I'm a stranger here... and that might prove crucial.

She sighed, glancing at her weapon.

I also can't set fire to the forest, which will probably mean a change of tactics at some point in this encounter.

Not without misgivings, she allowed the golden gleam of Gekkoushin's blade to dim to a dull amber, drawing in her *reiryoku* as far as she dared so as not to accidentally cause an inferno the moment she stepped into the wood. She ducked beneath the branches of the outermost trees, pushing back the stray leaves and foliage as she tried once more to get her spiritual bearings in the dim, gloomy woodland. There was silence now, no birds, no animals, not even the buzz of insects, as though everything that lived in the forest had gone to ground, attempting to make themselves as inconspicuous as possible. The creature's reiatsu was heavy all around her, but he made no attempt to attack, and Kyouki continued deeper into the woodland, certain that she was being led into a hunter's trap but knowing that she had no choice but to spring it if she was going to have a chance of killing her opponent. Time was ticking by, with who knew how many members of her division wounded or killed, and every moment she wasted was a moment longer that they were not receiving help. This thought spurred her on, but though an occasional gentle breeze rustled through the branches, there was no sign of her foe.

If I was in any doubt before that this was something to do with Keitarou, this kind of cat and mouse game would confirm it for me.

Kyouki gritted her teeth, stepping over the tree roots and past the remains of the dead rabbit without giving it a single glance. As she stepped into a small clearing, she had the impression that someone — or something — was watching her, and she raised her gaze to the tree canopy, squinting as she tried to make out anything that ought not be there.

At first she could see nothing, but then something soft and bloody dropped to the ground in front of her, and she sprang back, sword poised in case it was some kind of an attack. As she brought it into clearer focus, however, she could see that it was the tail of something small and furry, probably a squirrel, and that, from the blood, it had only recently been parted from its owner. Kyouki prodded it cautiously with the tip of Gekkoushin's blade, before glancing up in the direction from which it had come. At first she could not see him, but then, as the branches above her rustled, she made out the beady gaze through the leaves, staring down at her like a hunter preparing to pounce on his prey. The intensity of the stare sent chills through Kyouki's body as she added another realisation to her understanding of her foe.

He hadn't just brought her here to fight her. He had brought her here in anticipation of the kill. This was not a fight for anyone or any cause in particular, but simply a lust to hunt and destroy, and probably, Kyouki reflected grimly, in order for him to feed on her next. The squirrel tail had not been dropped by accident, but as a deliberate hint to his presence. He had decided it was time to re-begin the contest, and Kyouki understood that from the very start they had been fighting on his terms, not her own.

She did not have time to process her companion's motives any further, for at that moment, the Hollow man let out a tremendous yell which could only be interpreted as a war cry, launching himself without a hint of fear towards his companion. Kyouki cursed, bringing Gekkoushin up to stop him, but he seemed to sense that she was somehow limited in using the powerful attacks that she had flung around with reckless abandon beyond the forest limits, and the Fifth Division Captain wondered whether this had been another reason for his luring her into the wood. As he plunged towards her, he extended his left hand as though to grab her throat and Kyouki was horrified to see that, though his clothing remained charred and wrecked from Gekkoushin's blast, the limb she had turned almost to charcoal was now once more healed and alive, its fingers twitching in anticipation of the kill. She slipped into shunpo, re-materialising a small distance across the clearing, but her companion did not crash into the ground, using the momentum of his leap instead to swing his body around and land with perfect accuracy on all fours at the foot of the tree. He turned his head, glaring at her through the tiny sockets in the chalky mask as though chastising her for ruining his fun, and Kyouki tightened her grip on Gekkoushin's blade, trying to work out what he intended to do next.

For a moment there was deadlock, as the two eyed each other. The

Hollow-man had not tried to get to his feet, instead padding around the edge of the copse towards her in a slow, methodical fashion rather like that of a tiger, stalking its prey. The hunch Kyouki had noticed in the man's spine now no longer seemed like a hunch, but a biological adaptation of his body which allowed him to move more easily on all fours, instead of upright on two legs, and long, straggly fair hair flowed like a mane over his shoulders, only adding to the impression that she was faced with a wild hunting cat and not a humanoid at all. She backed away from him cautiously, loath to re-enter the woodland but knowing that she was essentially trapped here with him, and she needed a good strategy with which to fight.

Whatever it was, it would have to be quick, as she now knew that a maiming injury was all but ineffective against him. Yet getting close to a creature willing to consume live animals and body parts in order to rebuild his body was a risky endeavour, and the speed of his movement made it unlikely that she could kill him with a single, potent blast of Gekkoushin's fire.

She gazed at her blade, debating. In this confined environment, using her Bankai was less than ideal, but there was still one potential line of attack that she had not yet tried.

She raised the weapon, turning her attention back to her opponent, but he was nowhere to be seen. Her heart stopped in her chest as she realised that, in the split second her attention had been drawn away from him, he had once more used the strange, shunpo-like power and given himself back the element of surprise. He had not gone far, for his intoxicating reiatsu was still all around her, and Kyouki swung around, moving into the centre of the copse and gazing around her in genuine alarm. Though a powerful fighter, she had never been good against opponents whose key skills lay in stealth techniques, and she began to wish that she had brought Midori with her, feeling certain that the young Shihouin would have been able to anticipate the creature's movements with far more ease.

There was no time to think or regret any more, however, for something came barrelling out of the dark woodland at that moment, claw-like fingers outstretched. This time his hands made contact with Kyouki's body, grabbing hold of her *haori* and yanking at it as he tried to reach the warm flesh that lay beneath. Now genuinely frightened, Kyouki struggled to pull away, but the monster's face was almost level with hers, his fetid breath choking her and making her gag and his gleaming eyes boring into hers. He was preparing for the kill, she knew, for even without language, she could pick up the shifts in his aura and sense the excitement and anticipation that lay there. He had

no understanding of her as a shinigami, a Captain, an enemy. He did not know her as Shiba Kyouki, Head of the Shiba Clan and a formidable warrior heroine among her Clan and across her District. None of those things mattered or even registered to this individual. He saw her simply as another living thing that he could consume to feed his insatiable appetite, and for a moment Kyouki froze, uncertain of what she could do.

Kyouki!

Gekkoushin's strident tones penetrated the haze of fear, and with a jolt, Kyouki realised where she was and what was happening. A split-second of time had passed, but, as the enemy's blood-stained fingers reached out to grab her throat, she swung against him, using her sword's sheer blade to cut through the fabric of her *haori* and cast it away. The Hollow-man fell back with a yowl and a thud as the scorched white cloth fell into two, and Kyouki gathered her composure, passing Gekkoushin between her right and left hands as she tried to calm her nerves.

We're not done here yet. Doubtless I'll get another scolding for sacrificing a haori on the battlefield, but at least cloth can be replaced more easily than my life. Thank you, Gekkoushin. For a moment there, I wasn't sure what to do.

Don't even think about giving up again, not when I'm clasped in your hand. You know we can do better than that.

Gekkoushin's voice was unmoved.

Now stop dithering and get on with it. Or don't you care that your son may be bleeding to death because of this creature?

Kyouki's eyes narrowed, and she nodded, feeling her resolve harden once more as the Hollow-man scrambled to his hands and feet, discarding the piece of fabric and using his back legs to launch another attack on the Gotei Captain.

This time Kyouki was not to be thrown, however, and she summoned her *reiryoku*, watching as the amber colour of Gekkoushin's blade shifted to a cold, arctic blue.

"We can't use fire, so it's time for the opposite," she murmured. "*Hi ga shizundemo, sora ni hikatte. Yozuki.*"

The gloomy stretch of marshland exploded into another blast of crimson light, sending clumps of muck and slime flying in all directions. Muttering curses under his breath, Ryuu ducked and rolled out of the way of the blast, and a barrage of silver petals shot across the air from the other side of the swamp, on a collision course with Haruya's thick white mask. The Hollow-man had anticipated

Shirogane's attack, however, raising a thick fist to bat back the bulk of the petals, and Ryuu saw the glitter of argent light that surrounded them intensify, pulling the fragments back together before any could become lost in the mud a second time.

He gazed down at the weapon in his hands, noting with a critical gaze that his own plunge to the ground had splattered the dark muck across Shizurugi's own fine, floral hilt. His sword would likely scold him for it later, he reflected, but in the midst of battle, there was no time for such frivolities, and so he pulled himself to his feet, ignoring the slurping, squelching sound of his uniform pulling through the slick ground.

Since his arrival on the scene, the pace of the encounter had changed, but it had quickly become clear to Ryuu's analytical brain that his Vice Captain was hugely disadvantaged. Whilst Ginkyoujiki was able to damage Haruya's mask, their broad-set opponent was both agile and intelligent to the danger, protecting his face from every one of Shirogane's speculative attacks. Ryuu's own sword had made contact with Haruya's skin on a couple of occasions, but, whilst it had seared through the flesh, leaving a long, dark scar, it had not done anything to slow down the enemy's attack. Indeed, after the initial shock of Shizurugi's purified spirit power against his own tainted reiatsu, Haruya had shown not a single pain reaction, his eyes derisive and daring them to do better.

"What's this? I thought that Kuchiki were supposed to be finely groomed and proud people," he mocked now. "Are you sure your Captain will recognise your corpses, if you continue to roll in the mud? Or are you thinking that I might lose sight of you if you camouflage yourself with the local surrounds?"

His eyes darted in Shirogane's direction, as though sensing the surge of energy surrounding the other man's sword.

"I wouldn't bother, unless you want that pretty little toy of yours buried beneath the grime a second time," he said disparagingly. "Your sword can't hurt me, Kuchiki Shirogane, so you might as well surrender and die."

"Mine can, though," Ryuu answered before Shirogane could retort, bringing Shizurugi's blade down in a sweeping arc towards Haruya's hands, where a glimmer of a Cero had begun to take shape. Shizurugi's pure aura sliced through the heart of the blast, fragmenting it into its component atoms, and Haruya pulled his hands back, casting Ryuu a look of dislike.

“You can tattoo me. I wouldn’t call it hurting,” he said dismissively. “It took me off guard, before, but for all your fine words, so far all you’ve managed to do is brand a few scars into my body. Well, I had plenty of those before, inside and out. I’m not a vain man, so I don’t mind taking a few more. Fire away, Kuchiki Ryuu. Your sword doesn’t scare me, either.”

He folded his arms across his chest, glancing from one shinigami to the other.

“Well?” he challenged. “Are you already out of ideas? I’m not even out of breath. I put my mask on, but perhaps that was premature. I don’t seem to need the level of power that Keitarou thought I would... and against Kuchiki, too. Pitiful.”

“Keitarou!” Shirogane’s eyes flashed with fire, his grip on his sword tightening, and Haruya laughed, nodding his head.

“I thought that might rile you,” he said lightly. “You seem fixated with him. What he’s done to you, I neither know nor care, but if it inspires you to fight me, all to the good. I told you, didn’t I? I’ve a lot of anger to expend and you’re not helping me expend it. It’s the first time in a long time I’ve been able to move so freely and I feel as though I’ve barely begun... but if this is all Sixth District can send me, I’m going to go home disappointed.”

“What is Keitarou to you?” Shirogane demanded, and Ryuu frowned, slipping into shunpo and re-materialising at his Vice Captain’s side.

“Don’t let him lead you, Fukutaichou,” he murmured. “He’s trying to taunt us into anger and therefore error. He is within his wits... he is not a mindless monster and we cannot think to tackle him with the usual level of spiritual force.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Shirogane shook his head impatiently. “Monster or not, he’s injured our men and he’s connected to Keitarou. We won’t find what we’re looking for without dealing with what’s right in front of us. If you’re suggesting we retreat, Ryuu, put the thought out of your head. We don’t have that option.”

“I wasn’t thinking anything of the kind,” Ryuu was mildly affronted by the suggestion. “We must defeat him, but I think... we need to re-strategise. This way...” he tapped the blade of his sword against Ginkyoujiki’s guard, “is getting us nowhere at all, and there are young ones with injuries that ought to be properly treated. I know you are thinking of Ribari-sama... but we are not fighting here for vengeance. We are fighting because it is our duty, and that is all.”

Shirogane shot Ryuu a startled look, and the Third Seat offered him a rueful smile.

"I am not normally impulsive," he said pragmatically. "There are times when that is a disadvantage, but I believe in a fight such as this, it is well to remain level-headed. Haruya, or whatever you called yourself," he turned to the Hollow-man, raising his voice. "You are mistaken if you think that Kuchiki officers can be goaded into playing by your rules. We are here to fight and kill you if that is what it takes to pass you and locate our target. We are not interested in conversation with you unless you seek to tell us the whereabouts of that target."

Haruya snorted, opening his lips to retort, but before he could speak, his entire body froze, tension rippling suddenly through his broad frame. Ryuu stared at him, confused by the flicker of fear that darted through the reptilian gaze, followed by a sudden fluctuation in the man's whole aura. For an instant, Haruya's eyes were no longer those of the Hollow, but of a man, stricken with grief and dismay, but before either Ryuu or Shirogane had time to process this unexpected shift, Haruya's entire body became bathed in an angry reddish light, his fists punching up towards the sky. He opened his mouth, letting out a loud, blood-curdling roar which seemed to shake through the whole surroundings. The chips and cracks which Shirogane's sword had managed to carve through the edge of his mask began to glitter and, bit by bit, draw together, sealing and mending until the smooth white surface was once more intact. No, it was more than that, Ryuu realised with a jolt of dismay, for the chalky substance no longer stopped at his chin but appeared to be encircling his entire head, slipping over and around his ears and sliding down over the thick red-gold waves of hair like a helmet. Two sharp, horns protruded from the crown of this helmet, and Haruya let out a second, then a third roar of rage. He opened his fists, sparks of red energy bursting forth from them like restless fireworks, and as fragments of energy caught the edge of the rotting buildings, the damp wood began to smoulder, producing clouds of acrid dark smoke.

"What the hell..." Shirogane murmured, more than half to himself, and Ryuu bit his lip, as confused by the sudden transformation as his companion. Before he could respond, however, the world seemed to become a grainy mix of black and white, images jerking and jumping as though his consciousness was having trouble keeping up with whatever was going on around him, and he stumbled, his grip on Shizurugi's hilt loosening. Desperately he grabbed for his blade, only just managing to prevent it falling into the mud. At his side, Shirogane's hand had also gone to his head, and Ryuu suddenly

realised what was happening. Without warning, he grasped Shirogane by the arm, pulling them both into a desperate shunpo into the abandoned village.

“What are you doing!” As they dropped out of the flashstep, Shirogane pulled his hand free, glaring at his companion angrily, but Ryuu paid him no attention, ducking behind the uneven frame of an old market stall to where the members of Sixth Division were still huddled, frightened and confused.

“Go to the river!” he instructed, his words uncharacteristically urgent and direct. He thrust Shizurugi’s point out in the right direction. “Go, go now! Go and don’t look back -that’s an order!”

“Ryuu!” Shirogane pushed through behind him, but Ryuu took no notice.

“*Go to the river!*” He bellowed, and the shock of being yelled at in such a way by such a reasoned, methodical officer seemed to galvanise the lesser ranks into action. Gathering up the wounded bodies of the two young men, they hurried to obey the command. Sakurai, after meeting Ryuu’s gaze, took immediate control of the situation, hurrying and chivvying individuals to their feet, and before long, the entire space had been vacated.

“What the hell are you doing?” Shirogane grabbed his cousin by the fabric of his *hakamashita*. “Why are you giving orders over my head, to my men? Have you forgotten what your rank is, and who your Vice Captain happens to be? This is my command, not yours — why are you overreaching my position and acting on your own impulses? More, why are we here, not out there? The enemy is there, and we’re not retreating, remember? Why are we half-way inside of the village, instead of doing our job?”

“I’ve felt it before,” Ryuu inclined his head apologetically towards his companion in acknowledgement of his superior’s indignation. “My apologies, senpai. I’ll accept your discipline later — but I wanted to ensure that as many people as possible lived till later, and...”

“And?” Shirogane’s eyes narrowed. “What do you mean, you’ve felt it before?”

Ryuu’s lips pressed together, and he sighed, beckoning for his companion to follow him, cautiously, around the old and dilapidated buildings, towards the epicentre of *reiryoku* that was still erupting in the marshland beyond.

“When Father was ill, I felt it,” he said softly. “When Father was

angry, this is how it felt. This penetrating, poisoning sensation.”

“Seiren-dono?” Shirogane was taken aback, and Ryuu nodded, drawing forth an image of his father’s Hollowfication in his mind’s eye.

“When Father was angry, it was truly terrifying,” he murmured. “I remember most of the encounter, and I know that he acted to protect me, not to hurt me. But there are a few moments that, try as I might, I cannot bring to mind. Moments in which Father laid hands on me and pulled me forcibly from Keitarou’s grasp. I know he saved me, but my memories were jumbled by his *reiryoku* and even now, I cannot put them back together. Father was not my enemy, but in that instant, he could’ve killed me.”

He raised Shizurugi, pointing in Haruya’s direction.

“That is not Father. That is an enemy, and he is there to kill us,” he said grimly. “More, he is stronger than we are, and this reaction concerns me. I do not know what sparked it, but I realise that things have changed. He was rational and clear, mocking us... he said he was full of rage, but there was no real anger in what he did. This, however... is anger. Anger strong enough to put us out cold. Maybe even strong enough to...”

“To kill the juniors outright,” now Shirogane understood. “Fine. You could’ve done it a bit more clearly, but I get it now. I rescind the threat of discipline in light of your greater experience — though I have to tell you, Ryuu, if Seiren-dono ever looked or acted even a bit like that thing out there, I am quite glad I never happened to see it.”

“It is a terrible affliction,” Ryuu agreed soberly. “It has impacted on Father’s health and his life in many ways... he is not the man he once was, but his spirit power was within him from birth. This creature we are fighting has knowledge of Keitarou, therefore I can only assume that he has become mutated by Keitarou’s science in some way. What his limits are, or how much control he has, I do not know. All I know is that he intends to kill us. More, his sudden explosion of anger and energy just now indicates that, perhaps, his sanity is not what it appeared to be. Rationality in Hollows is something I find hard to credit... and if he is losing control of his, we have a far worse fight on our hands than we did before.”

“Agreed,” Shirogane muttered grimly, glancing at Ginkyoujiki, then giving it a little shake to seal it, returning it to its place at his side. “I can’t use my sword, either — he’s right about that. I’ll have to rely on my speed and my kidou, rather than my blade, and trust you to back

me up with Shizurugi as you can.”

“Do you think we can fight and defeat him that way, when we failed to damage him when he was rational?” Ryuu peered out from behind the slat of mouldy wood, eying the hunched figure of their foe with a critical eye. The explosive flares of red reiatsu had abated, and the air was no longer so filled with toxic spirit power, but there was a glint of something darker and more predatorial in the man’s gleaming gaze, and every muscle of his body seemed to be rippling in anticipation of the kill.

“He looks as though he’d like to tear us limb from limb, and is probably capable,” Ryuu said at length. “Father is far more slightly built than this one, yet I believed him capable of tearing Keitarou’s head from his body if he had so wished.”

“Would that he had, and then we’d all have been back home, where it was dry,” Shirogane muttered. “Do you think this one can sense us?”

“Probably,” Ryuu agreed. “Father was calmer when nobody was attacking him, but when someone did...” he shook his head. “Just because he seems to have settled, I imagine that, as soon as he sets eyes on us, he will react once more.”

“Well, charming,” Shirogane grimaced. “It’s bad enough we have to fight in this place, and that we have to fight a half Hollow, half man experiment of that damned scientist, without having to fight against one who’s lost all vestiges of sanity he ever had. I swear, Ryuu, I will treat Seiren-dono with a new level of respect after this encounter — for him to have gone to such extremes of madness and yet recover his wits well enough to support Guren-sama at court is quite a feat of recovery, and I ought to credit it more.”

“Indeed,” Ryuu agreed grimly. “Still, we cannot stay here the whole day. The men are gone. It’s only us, and between us, we stand as good a chance as any other Vice Captain and Third Seat — perhaps better, if I may say so, than most. We are a good team, Fukutaichou. Even if the odds are against us, we must use what we have and try.”

“If I had to chose anyone to wade through swamp mud with, in order to take down a raving, lunatic Hollow-man, you’d be top of my list,” Shirogane smiled ironically.

“Come out of hiding, you cowards!” Before Ryuu could respond to this back-handed bit of praise, Haruya let out a yell, every note trembling with ill-suppressed fury. “Where are you, you no-good shinigami? I’ll make you pay! I’ll rip every single one of your limbs

from your body and make you suffer for this!”

“What is the mad loon talking about now?” Shirogane arched an eyebrow, and Ryuu shrugged, mystified.

“If you don’t come out, I’ll come in after you!” A flare of red energy barrelled into the village, blowing apart a nearby storehouse, and Haruya took a lurching step or two forward, his aura prickling ominously and his gaze roving the surrounding area for any sign of life. “I know you’re there, you pathetic soul-slayers! I’ll dig you out and pull you to pieces, bit by bit! I’ll show you, every one of you! You won’t get away with hurting Aki... do you hear me? You won’t leave here alive, any of you, so don’t think you can hide from me!”

“What’s an ‘Aki’?” Ryuu blinked, and Shirogane snorted.

“Better not to ask. Better just to kill him,” he said matter-of-factly, resting his hands on the remains of the building wall and leaping nimbly over it, slipping into shunpo and re-materialising some feet from Haruya’s line of fire. The Hollow-man lumbered around to face him, but Shirogane’s fingers were already pulling together in one, two, three flares of *Shakkahou*, firing before disappearing and re-appearing in a different position in an attempt to confuse the enemy’s judgement. Haruya let out a roar, fresh Cero glittering from his fingers, and Ryuu could tell even from this distance that it was more potent and intense a flare than any of those the man had fired before. Those had been teasing, taunting jibes, but this one held a genuine intent to kill, and he thrust Shizurugi forth, releasing the bolt of pure purple energy. It sliced through the heart of the Cero, splitting it in two and causing it to disintegrate, but just as quickly, Haruya had produced another one, firing it towards Ryuu and causing him to shunpo out of its trajectory.

Whatever an ‘Aki’ was, and whatever Haruya’s demeanour had changed, the real battle was going to begin from this point on. And, no matter how much bravado either he or Shirogane used, Ryuu’s clinical common sense told him that their chances of emerging triumphant were severely limited.

Guren-sama could not fight Father. He struggled to match him, and almost lost his life.

He chewed hard on his lip, even as he flicked his sword once more in Haruya’s direction, attempting to penetrate the man’s defences and pierce through the masked skull.

This one is not as strong as Father was. Maybe because it is not a natural mutation, or the original spirit power was lacking. However I try to define it, though... one thing is crystal clear. It might not be as powerful as

Father was when he was ill... but it is more powerful than we are. Even if we work together... even if we're good at that... Ginkyoujiki is useless against it and that is a problem. We came here to find Keitarou, but it seems Keitarou was anticipating us, and has countered accordingly.

Haruya's rationality might have become questionable, but his speed and his reflexes had increased since the sudden flare of power. As Shirogane increased his barrage of kidou, the monster suddenly disappeared, reappearing a split-second before the Vice Captain dropped out of his final flashstep. With a roar, he grabbed the startled Shirogane by the fabric of his *shihakushou*, tossing him bodily in the direction of the nearest standing wooden wall. Before Ryuu could react, Shirogane had gathered his wits, righting himself and disappearing back into shunpo before re-materialising some distance away, but he had clearly had his senses shaken by the encounter, and Ryuu knew that he felt the same way.

That isn't shunpo, but it's just as fast. Father did it too, and anticipating it was impossible. Haruya anticipated Senpai's steps, though, which suggests, angry as he is now, he is still operating with some rationality and is able to judge our movements as he did before. He's become more dangerous... but it hasn't created a weakness in his attack. On the contrary, we are in considerably more danger now than we were a few moments ago.

A fresh Cero came blasting out of nowhere in his direction, and Ryuu cursed, swinging Shizurugi up to cut physically through the blast. It disintegrated, but a judder of pain rippled through the sword's aura, telling Ryuu that his *zanpakutou* was being pushed to its limits, and that further direct contact with Haruya's compressed *reiryoku* might do it serious damage.

The handicaps are building up, and we don't have a battle plan.

Despite himself, Ryuu felt a curl of fear snaking up inside of his gut. *Please, Shizurugi, don't let me down. If we lose you as well, then we're finished here.*

The sword did not respond verbally, though Ryuu saw a glitter of purple light run from hilt to tip, and he felt reassured. Dangerous as it was, Shizurugi was as invested in the fight as he was, and would not give up, no matter what the cost.

What happened next was difficult for Ryuu's stressed brain to properly fathom at first. Shirogane had fired a blast of *Oukasen*, on a direct collision course with Haruya's mask, only to see it punched into oblivion by the man's broad fists, prickles of noxious *reiryoku* disintegrating Shirogane's attack like acid through wood. A Cero had followed, and Shirogane had neatly ducked and dodged it, the ground

exploding into another flare of red light.

Yet as the Cero touched the earth, the whole world went deathly silent. Instead of the sound of exploding energy against mud and slime, there was nothing. Haruya's grunts, his heavy steps, Shirogane's explosions of spirit power... all were suddenly silent, as though Ryuu was watching them through a screen of soundproof glass. The world around him was still moving, still breathing... but he could no longer match sounds with actions. He glanced at his Vice Captain, seeing the man's lips move, but hearing no words come out. Haruya too had hesitated, apparently confused by the sudden mute on their surroundings, and Ryuu knew that it was not something the Hollow-man had done, but instead, something from outside.

And then, from nowhere, the final remaining house on the near edge of the abandoned village exploded into a silent fountain of splinters and shrapnel, sending Shirogane diving to the ground, hands clapped over his ears as though trying to protect his hearing from the silence that was all around them. This seemed nonsensical, yet Ryuu followed suit, acting more because Shirogane had than because the action made sense. The next instant he was glad he had, for even through the skin and bone of his fingers, he was aware of the most tremendous rumble of energy, a sudden mingling and merging of all the missing sounds crashing and exploding against one another in the atmosphere. The splinters of wood dropped like tiny blades into the soft soil, and Haruya let out a scream, clapping his own hands to his head and staggering back. Ryuu was not sure if it was the sudden volume of mingled noises or the rain of wooden shards that had shaken him, but as he looked, he could see that, where the mask had previously been a perfect white shell, now it showed chips and cracks across the edges. One of the horns had broken, but Ryuu could see nothing physical that could have caused such damage, and he frowned, his eyes flitting once more in Shirogane's direction. His Vice Captain's attention was fixed on something else, however, and Ryuu followed the line of his cousin's gaze, his eyes widening in disbelief as he made out the fact they were no longer alone.

Standing on the edge of the abandoned village, his *haori* still pristine despite the mud and muck that surrounded them was the Captain of the Sixth Division, and he did not look at all amused. In his hand he grasped the hilt of a long, curved sword, though Ryuu found it hard to make out the sharp edge of the blade. It appeared to be breathing, humming and vibrating with life and energy, and as he stepped forward into the midst of the battle scene, he cast his gaze from Ryuu to Shirogane, before resting it on the dazed figure of Haruya himself.

“Ryuu, Shirogane, you are done here.”

Guren did not raise his voice, yet the words carried through the thin atmosphere, and Ryuu scrambled hurriedly to his feet, bowing his head in deference to his Captain. Shirogane had acted likewise, and from the expression on the Vice Captain's face, Ryuu knew that this was not one of the times when Guren's authority could be swayed by his fondness for his oldest nephew.

“Go to the river, take charge of the others, and make yourselves presentable. I will talk to you properly later, but I am tired of waiting, and so will clean up the mess you seem incapable of mopping up for yourself,” Guren's words were soft and even, yet ringing with intent, and Ryuu shivered, reminding himself that, as close as their working relationship had become in the past quarter of a century, back in District Six, his uncle still had a fearsome reputation. He raised his hand in a salute, glancing at Shirogane, then disappearing into shunpo, heading in the direction of the river without a thought of turning or even glancing back. He could tell that Shirogane was hot on his tail, eager to obey the instruction as quickly as possible.

As he dropped out of his flash-step at the edge of the riverside meeting place, he felt a hand on his arm, and he glanced up, seeing the serious look on Shirogane's face.

“I might not be disciplining you, but we might both face trouble, later,” he said quietly. “Guren-sama is cross, Ryuu. Maybe because you abandoned your men, maybe because I abandoned mine... maybe because two young ones took injury, or because we failed to clean up a Hollow problem when there were two of us and only one of him. Whichever it is, I hope you're resolved.”

“It strikes me that Taichou's anger is a good match for the Hollow's rage,” Ryuu turned his gaze back in the direction they had come. “I am resigned, Fukutaichou. We failed in our brief, yet I am relieved, rather than shamed that Guren-sama came to our aid. I was not confident we could win... I think the enemy we faced was stronger than we were able to manage, even working as a team.”

“I think so too,” Shirogane's admission was reluctant, but honest, and he cast Ryuu a sheepish grin. “I wasn't sure if you heard my warning clearly or not — I'm glad you followed my lead and covered your ears. I didn't think you'd seen Tenkyourei in its released state before, and it can be a nasty jolt if you're not expecting it — as I think that Haruya found out.”

“Tenkyourei...” Ryuu remembered the shimmering, vibrating blade,

and shook his head. ‘I didn’t know what was going on, but I thought that you wouldn’t drop into mud again unless there was a good reason, so I copied you,’ he admitted. “I have never seen Guren-sama release his *zanpakutou*, though I know it has a legendary reputation. He never uses it in training sessions, and I am not sure whether he has used it on a deployment mission since I joined Sixth Squad.”

“I’ve trained against it, some, in shikai, but the last time he released it was probably before Seiren-dono’s illness,” Shirogane reflected thoughtfully. “I don’t know what, but I think Kinnya-sama said something to him — something about the dangers of being willing and able to release a sword of that much power in a battle and that, perhaps, it was better to deploy lesser officers and build their training than always rushing into battle himself. Guren-sama thinks highly of Kinnya-sama, and I think, once he felt he had you and I to back him up, he followed that advice... but today, we have failed him.”

“We have,” “Ryuu acknowledged,” but I have never been so relieved to see him — nor so frightened of him. I imagine the Hollow will not be so cocky with Guren-sama looking like that.”

“He might not have time to be anything, not if Guren-sama is really intending to kill him quickly,” Shirogane mused. “Tenkyourai controls soundwaves, and uses them to create sonic explosions, like the one we just saw. That’s not the limit of the weapon’s power, though... and I suspect that Guren-sama sent us away because of that fact. We should go join the others, and make sure those two injured juniors are doing all right. This far away, we should be safe from any fallout — but just in case, I think that, while we should be on our guard for Keitarou, we must make especially sure that not a single man tries to leave the riverbank, not until the Captain returns.”

“Senpai?” Ryuu cast his companion a confused look, and Shirogane offered him a grim smile.

“Trust me,” he said simply. “Guren-sama’s Bankai is not something you want to see. In fact, there’s a reason why the only people who have ever seen it are Grandfather, when training him, and Genryuusai-sensei, when ratifying its existence for the Council of Elders. It is not the kind of Bankai you show someone... and there are not many people with spirit power that equal or surpass our Uncle’s level well enough to withstand it. Grandfather, Kinnya-sama, Genryuusai-sensei — maybe Unohana-taichou, from the things I’ve heard... but you or I? In our current state...”

He shook his head.

“We stay here. Those are my orders, and the Captain’s,” he said decidedly. “Let’s do as Guren-sama told us, Ryu. Clean up and take command here... and be glad that, whatever punishment we might later face, it won’t be the kind of discipline handed out by Tenkyourei’s blade.”

“Well, I guess we can say with some certainty that there’s no Keitarou in these parts right at the moment,”

Midori let out a gusty sigh, setting aside the pile of papers she had been flicking through. “If he wanted us to come here, and so put that girl outside, he’s letting us take our time looking through everything. Of course, maybe he didn’t expect us to find the place so quickly — but it seems more likely to me that, if he was on the prowl nearby, he’d have come out to defend his puppet when he sensed her in peril.”

“Your attack was quick enough, and he’d realise there was nothing to be done,” Nagesu’s response was distracted, his gaze fixed on the volume in front of him, pale eyes darting from line to line as he absorbed the contents of what he was reading. To Midori, the tightly packed characters were little more than shorthand squiggles without logic or coherence, but from the increasing gravity on her companion’s features, she surmised that, to Nagesu, they were more confirmation of their earlier suspicions. “I’m concerned, Midori-dono. Concerned about what this all means, but more, by why we’re really here.”

“I thought we were here looking for Keitarou, as per the Council’s order,” Midori folded her arms, eying her neighbour expectantly. “Isn’t that what was decided? You’re presiding Council Head, so with all respect, I’m surprised if you don’t remember. You were the one who made the final decision to bring us here, and so...”

“And so...” Nagesu echoed, shutting the volume with a snap and reaching up to remove his spectacles. He set them down on the dusty unit, running his fingers through his unruly fair hair with a groan. “I’m sorry. What we’ve found here is beyond my expectations and far, far worse than I feared when we first entered the mountain. I had anticipated finding evidence of Keitarou’s work, perhaps Keitarou himself — but instead, to be greeted with...”

“Treason of the highest order,” Midori’s own expression became sober. “And treason you cannot act upon.”

“No... not me,” Nagesu shook his head. “That door is shut, locked and bolted, but it doesn’t make the truth any easier to swallow.”

He rested his hand atop the thick volume with a grimace.

“Everything here must, somehow, be returned to Seireitei and examined in full view of the Council, of course. There’s no alternative,” he added. “In the meantime, my cousin is still on the loose somewhere — probably congratulating himself on leaving such a paper trail here that would distract anyone’s attention.”

“You really believe Keitarou is here?” Midori arched an eyebrow. “We’ve searched this place, and it’s very convenient, if you ask me. All these papers laid out, just waiting for you to find them. The secret chamber in which these creatures were apparently kept, open and accessible enough that it took me only a matter of moments to locate its opening mechanism. True, I’m trained in secret arts and stealth tricks, but even so, it wasn’t much of a challenge. Don’t you think this entire scene has been laid out as a form of smokescreen — telling you things you don’t want to read, in order to distract you from the reality?”

“Which is?” Nagesu scooped up his glasses, rubbing the lenses absently on his dusty sleeves before returning them to his nose.

“Well, Keitarou isn’t a Shihouin, and I’m not a mad genius,” Midori said categorically, crossing the room towards the far wall and absently flicking up the switch that activated the hidden door separating the laboratory from the confinement chamber beyond. “For that reason, I might be reading him wrong. But to go to all of this trouble to suggest that he’s recently been here, and is still here, I begin to wonder whether or not he ever really was. As a Shihouin, I’d have very little respect for an enemy who left such a blatant trail to his true base’s location.”

“You don’t think he’s in the Real World at all, do you?” Nagesu demanded sharply, and Midori shrugged her shoulders, allowing the door to slide back and click shut.

“I wasn’t sure either way,” she acknowledged. “I wouldn’t say I thought he wasn’t here, only that there were things we needed to face up to and answer before it was conclusive that he was. That’s why I volunteered my services here, but left Kai and the Onmitsukidou behind. I split my forces, just in case... I wanted some insurance, because it didn’t seem wise to me that four full, Clan, Council divisions vacate Seireitei to hunt for a character known to be slipperier than most kinds of snake. Especially considering that Yuuichi-dono was heading to the Academy... it seemed high-risk that the only Council shinigami remaining in Inner Seireitei were Retsu-sama and Hirata... both of whom lead divisions who have suffered significant

losses as a result of events so far. Kai might not be Council, but he is sensible, and I felt he could be of use.”

“And now, your conclusion is..?”

“I think probably, Keitarou is not camping in the Real World, but at some point, he was here. Quite recently, perhaps, in order to lay this out so perfectly for you,” Midori mused. “It must have been for you, which is almost certainly why that girl attacked you the first time, and again today. You’re the only one who could possibly read those documents and realise their true significance. To me they’re just dusty pieces of paper and old scientific texts, nothing more important than that. It takes an Urahara to read shorthand written by an Urahara.”

“Mm,” Nagesu looked pained. “The one who taught me most of my notation skills was my uncle, Keitsune. Keitarou’s father... this is his cipher, although imperfect in places, it’s enough to be legible. The only people who ever learned it were those who worked with him directly. That includes Daigo-dono... and Father had me trained in it, too. Daigo-dono completed my education in it, in fact — and I fixed the imperfections in that training with the surviving notes Uncle left behind. There weren’t many — some were destroyed, others spirited away — and I imagine that’s how Keitarou learned to read it. He is a genius, and most likely, those who helped raise him were able to give him guidance where Keitsune-jisama could not.”

He rubbed his brow.

“My uncle would’ve been horrified to know how much his work had been mutated, manipulated and used, even by his own son,” he murmured. “He loved Keitarou more than anything, and I was always so very jealous that my cousin had a father who was so kind, attentive and warm, when I had... to live up to my father’s strict expectations. My uncle made mistakes, but they were not malicious ones and nothing that happened as a result of his experiments was with evil intent. By contrast... this... all of this...”

“If you ask me, Keitsune-dono sounds ill-suited for a back-stabbing Clan world, and paid the price,” Midori said pragmatically. “I’m too young to have met him, but it strikes me that, if he had made wiser decisions, he might still be alive now and we might not be trying to prevent a wholesale rebellion from his far too clever only son.”

“As you say,” Nagesu agreed wearily. “Sometimes I wonder if I have that same characteristic. I’ve tried so hard to bring my family back together, but regardless...”

He shook his head, as though trying to clear the negative thoughts

from it, and Midori pursed her lips.

“Do you regret sanctioning our coming here?” she asked softly, and Nagesu glanced at her sharply, before shrugging.

“Ukitake tried to convince me we should not,” he admitted. “He came to speak to me, and I confess, I didn’t fully understand the reasons why he was so against a Real World deployment. He was fixated with Rukongai, and the events of twenty five years ago... and asking about souls in the Rukon Valley, in areas we know to be deserted. Now I come here and I find this, and I can’t help thinking... that maybe he knew something. Something he couldn’t tell me, but something of great importance.”

“Juushirou isn’t usually the kind to hold back if he has those kinds of feelings,” Midori said thoughtfully. “I’m sure if he had suspected something of *this* nature, or had evidence of it, he’d have brought it to you directly. The Rukongai angle is interesting, however...”

“Oh?” Nagesu glanced at his companion, and Midori nodded.

“My brother,” she said simply. “According to my aide, Saku — who is also Kai’s second in command — Kai had a visit from Juushirou and Shunsui-dono not more than a few days ago. They chose to appear when I was away from my barracks, which I thought was interesting. True, it could have just been a friendly housecall — both of them have close bonds with my brother, even now — but though he didn’t discuss it with me, I had the impression Kai was preoccupied that night. Then, the day we left, I heard him speaking to a couple of the Onmitsukidou officers. I didn’t overhear the whole conversation, but I am sure I heard him mention the Spiritless Zone.”

“The..Spiritless Zone?” Nagesu blinked.

“Yes,” Midori confirmed. “Does that sound at all like whatever Juushirou asked you?”

“Ukitake wanted to know about the incident in the Rukon twenty five years ago, and also, about the transfer of souls with spirit power following the inauguration of the Spiritless Zone,” Nagesu’s expression became thoughtful. “He wanted to know specifically about them... but I told them that we’d swept Rukongai dry and there were no souls with spirit power remaining after the violent incidents we now know more about. Everyone else was moved to the Spiritless Zone, and that was that. I gave him the official report and he left... that was the last time we discussed it. He seemed surprised, though, that there were no souls with spirit power living in Rukongai.”

“Maybe that’s what he couldn’t tell you,” Midori moved to the desk, carefully beginning to gather together papers. “He knew something that official report did not. The big questions are what, and perhaps, how.”

“Midori-dono?”

“We’ve spent enough time here,” Midori’s hands did not pause, and she turned to offer her companion a brief grin. “There are enough idle officers outside to come down here and pack and prepare the evidence for transference, and since you and perhaps Shiketsu-dono are the only ones likely to be able to read the contents, it won’t create an uproar if we send lesser ranks to take care of that. We’re Captains, Nagesu-sama, and we came here with a job to do. True, it’s turned out to be a different one than the one we anticipated, but it’s still important.”

“Meaning what, exactly?”

“Keitarou laid a trap for us, and we need to make sure we spring it fully,” Midori dropped her pile on the side of the desk with a thump, beginning to pull together a second. “It’s pretty clear to me right now that your cousin isn’t here, which means we need to begin looking for him someplace else. But, we’re shinigami, and protecting lives is what we need to do, not just protecting ourselves and the community in which we live. We came looking for Keitarou, but we found Hollow-monsters and it’s our duty to deal with them. One is dead, and there are two more of considerable spiritual power roaming free around the landscape. Leaving them here alive to devour or mutilate members of the living population is against every shinigami value there has ever been, and so we can’t waste any time in ensuring they are dispatched. Only, I think it’s a good idea we make sure this place is made safe as quickly as we can. If Juushirou was talking about the Spiritless Zone, and Kai also mentioned it, it suggests to me that there’s something else going on that nobody has bothered to tell us about. And the sooner we go back and discover what that is, the better.”

64. Urami

Chapter Sixty Three: Urami

The wind rattled and howled around the perimeters of the Ninth Division, fragments of broken tiling and splintered wood creaking loose from the damaged fronting. It had been a bright, tranquil start to the day, weather-wise, but within the Ninth, the breeze had picked up.

The Wind Hawk was about to fly free.

Hirata's grip on his sword's hilt tightened, the vibrating currents of air circulating the blade's gleaming surface making it difficult for him to see anything reflected in the metal. The moment his daughter and the other members of Seventh Division had disappeared into the Ninth's building, he had released Tsumi no Fuuhi, and little by little the curl of killer instinct that he kept sealed and locked up inside of him had begun to unfurl its wings, extending its talons in expectation of the battle to come. The sensation made him both giddy and sick to his stomach, for he had spent so much of his life fighting the predatorial instinct that, on occasion, consumed him. He knew from past experience that he could kill, and kill without remorse. But this would be killing a comrade and a fellow Captain, and for that, he knew he needed his head clear.

Otherwise there would be nothing left of Anabomi for further Council investigations.

The other Captain's sword was gripped so tightly in his hand that Hirata quickly realised the blood that covered his fist was not from his victims but from his own nails sharpening to claws and cutting through the skin of his palm. In contrast to the warping of his face and upper body, Anabomi's fingers had retained their slender elegance, and the soft fabric fingerless glove that extended over them was intact, though spotted with more of the seeping red liquid. The transformation was incomplete, the man was neither fully Hollow nor still a Shinigami, and Hirata racked his brains, trying to remember a time when he had encountered such a thing before.

His mind was blank.

Still Anabomi did not attack.

The man appeared wary of the rising and dipping thrusts of air running around the inside of his Division compound, for Hirata could

see the reptilian red eyes darting here and there, following every creak and every falling splinter of wood. He opened his mouth, letting out a war cry of defiance, but he did not advance, and this hesitation put Hirata on edge. Every inch of Anabomi's body seemed to emit killer intent, but his actions belied it. Had his companion truly become a monster? Or was it something else?

Hirata gritted his teeth, pushing the thoughts aside. This was no longer Anabomi, and it was no time to be squeamish. Officers of the Ninth lay dead inside, and more would be killed if he did not put things straight here and now. It was down to him to do what he knew he could do — unleash Seizumi and allow the wind to do its work.

Yet still there was a standoff, neither side wanting to make the first move and risk falling into a strategic trap. Hirata had never known a Hollow to understand strategy before, and it, too, unnerved him, for he knew that Anabomi had always had a good reputation in battle skills.

Well, so did he, and more. Hirata gazed at Tsumi no Fuuhi's blade, imagining for a moment that as much blood stained its surface as currently adorned his opposite number. There had been times, in Seventh District, where it had not been his imagination, but the reality. There had been times when, as Third Seat of the Thirteenth Division he had rooted out assassins aiming for his Captain's life and had dealt with them mercilessly, vaporising them with a blast of air so intense and potent that all that had remained of the corpse was a spray of blood across his blade. Once, Juushirou had caught him in the act, and Hirata had never forgotten the conversation that had followed.

"If my life is in danger," the man had said, "I will fight to protect it. A Captain doesn't ask his subordinates to shed blood for him, Hirata. I won't ever ask you to use Tsumi no Fuuhi in such a way again, not so long as you're a part of Thirteenth — and then, after that, as your friend. I'm glad my life is important to you, but that doesn't mean other lives should be shed in its place. There are other forms of justice than simply death."

It had been like a splash of cold water on his sanity, quieting the hunter in a way nobody and nothing else had ever managed to do, and for the rest of his time in Thirteenth's colours, Hirata had not unleashed his Wind Hawk on any other individuals, no matter how deserving he had felt them to be. He had saved his ire and his power for dispatching Hollows, and, when he had inherited the *haori* of Seventh Division at long last, had asked both Shunsui and Juushirou

to ensure that he never crossed that line and used his abilities to kill in such a ruthless way again.

Now, he was contemplating using the sword he had strictly reserved for Hollows, to kill a man he had worked with for several years, and more, one whose ability to process rational thought was still under question. Releasing the Wind Hawk was easy, it was instinct and to do so would bring a sense of relief, allowing to flow free on the breeze all the pent up emotions that had lurked within him since Souja's tragic death. Still, Hirata did not want to give in to it. He remembered Juushirou's face, his expression and his disappointment, and he knew that he did not want to see that face again.

And then, just when he thought the stalemate would go on forever, Anabomi moved.

It was a flash-step of sorts, almost shunpo, but not quite, and it took the distracted Hirata momentarily off guard. At the last minute he saw the bared blade swinging down towards him, sending blood spatter across the white fabric of his *haori*, and he cursed, flinging Tsumi no Fuuhi up to meet the attack. Momentarily the gusts of wind around his *zanpakutou* warped and scattered, leaving his sword blade bare, but the Seventh Captain quickly gathered his composure, drawing his weapon through the atmosphere and turning Anabomi's lunge into an opportunity to counter. For a moment he unleashed his hold on his spirit power, allowing his survival instincts to kick in. With a ruthless, unrelenting series of strikes and parries, he pushed Anabomi onto the back foot, and his opponent let out a shriek, disappearing and re-appearing a few metres away.

Hirata was already breathing hard, the disruption of air-current around his sword having temporarily lowered the oxygen entering his body, and he reached his free hand up to push his hair out of his face. Anabomi had got close enough to him to cut through the tie that had held it back, and he knew that, a moment later, he would have had his head removed from his shoulders.

He grimaced, sizing up the situation afresh.

Hirata had always been weak with a sword, and even now, he could only fight a proper battle, weapon to weapon, if he allowed his sword's spirit to take control of the fight. Anabomi, by contrast, was a Kuchiki who had probably trained from infancy to hold his weapon well, and, from the dexterity of his companion's movement, Hollowfication did not seem to be impairing his abilities. There would be no opportunity for distance in this encounter, no recourse to offensive Kidou, nor would a game of cat and mouse suffice. This was

a sword fight, pure and simple, and even with his *zanpakutou* released, Hirata felt suddenly that he was at a disadvantage.

Anabomi's next attack came from behind him, a surge and shift in the atmosphere telling Hirata the second before his opponent dropped out of his strange, shunpo step that something was afoot. He swung around, smashing his blade into Anabomi's speculative swing, but the Hollow Captain had him in his sights now, and the gleaming red eyes bore down on him, as his opponent launched a fierce assault. A frantic exchange of blows followed, with Hirata finding himself pushed further and further back against the marble wall which separated Eighth from Ninth. The structure was already cracked, Hirata suspected from the fighting going on on its other side, but it was not cracked enough for him to use his Wind Hawk to loosen stones or create an avalanche. Drawing on the skills his father had taught him as a child, he drew a shield of *Kyokkou* down over his body, knowing that it would probably not last long but taking advantage of his momentary cloaking to slip and duck out of Anabomi's immediate line of sight. The other Captain paused, apparently confused by his sudden disappearance, and in that moment of hesitation, Hirata spied his opening.

"*Bakudou no Ichi, Sai!*" he exclaimed, thrusting his left hand out towards Anabomi's sword arm. As the jolt of Kidou leapt through the atmosphere between him, Anabomi's right arm stiffened and dropped against his body, clearly fighting for free movement but in vain. His opponent thus neutered, Hirata allowed his sword to sweep away the *Kyokkou* cloak, darting forward and taking his foe completely off guard. Buoyed by momentum, Hirata was able to break into Anabomi's personal space, thrusting the tip of his weapon up towards his companion's throat. The vibrating swirls of air current that surrounded the blade began to tease and pull at the edges of Anabomi's misshapen mask, creating thin, hairline cracks across the edge of the white surface.

Hirata opened his lips, about to give his sword the command to end his opponent's life, when suddenly, something made him pause.

"Kill me,"

Fragments of the mask began to crumble away from the edges of Anabomi's face, and Hirata heard his companion speak, the words rough and raw-edged, but unmistakably the voice of his fellow Captain. The reddish eyes had dulled, and, as a fragment of chalk broke away from Anabomi's cheekbone, Hirata could now see that there were tears glittering against his lashes. Tsumi no Fuuhi's blade

was still poised inches away from his companion's throat, but with those two words, Hirata knew that his companion still had rationality beneath his mask. He was not yet Hollow. He was still Anabomi, and as Anabomi, he had reached out to speak.

"Anabomi?" Tentatively, he voiced the man's name.

"Don't talk to me. Kill me," Anabomi's words were desperate and urgent, and Hirata could see the pain now glittering in his companion's gaze. "I killed my men. I would've killed you. Please, Hirata-dono. Kill me."

Hirata's blade twitched closer to Anabomi's skin, then he paused, shaking his head.

"I want to know what happened," he said quietly. "Keitarou was controlling you, I know that — Takaoka reported that you were under someone else's manipulation. The deaths of your men are on his hands, not yours. But this... this appearance... I don't understand."

"I wanted to stop myself," Anabomi's words were little more than a whisper now, as though something was swelling and closing around his windpipe, making it hard for him to expel the words through raw vocal chords. "Keitarou will make me kill... again... and again. I thought I had rid myself of him, but he's still there. It didn't work, and now... now I will kill everyone... if you... don't kill me."

His eyes closed, a ripple of pain crossing his brow, and Hirata hesitated, knowing that it was not just physical but emotional pain that was traumatising his companion.

"Anabomi..."

"I will not shame the Ninth," Anabomi's eyes snapped open, and for a moment, they were grey, as the Captain's resolve rallied inside of him. "I will not shame them like this, Hirata-dono. Please, understand that. Whether Keitarou killed my men or not, this is... my Ninth. I won't... be the cause... of more pain among my men."

Another ripple of pain crossed the man's brow, and then Hirata felt the noxious *reiryoku* begin to bubble and prick against his skin once more, as the violent, Hollow impulses Anabomi had been fighting tooth and nail to suppress in order to get his message across began to regain the upper hand.

"Keitarou... won't let me... kill myself," the words were stretched thin and hoarse, the desperate attempt of a man to hold on to the last vestiges of his sanity. "And a Kuchiki who kills himself... brings... more shame. If you kill me... then I... and Ninth... it will all... be

well. Please, Hirata-dono. I have never asked for anything from... my comrades before, but this one time... I... will... I will ask. Please. For Ninth. Kill me.”

With that the tears that had glittered against Anabomi's dark lashes began to solidify and turn white, a thick, oozing layer of Hollow mask that trickled forth to repair the cracks. Anabomi's *reiryoku* erupted in a violent pulse of dark energy, his eyes gleaming once more in predatorial, reptilian red as he let out an incoherent, earsplitting screech. Light glittered around the hilt of the sword still held in the man's hand, and just in time Hirata realised that it was Cero, aimed at point-blank range towards his own midsection. Cursing his moment of hesitation, he slipped into shunpo, withdrawing across the courtyard as the Cero took full form, a luminescent flare of azure energy that exploded against the remains of the Division's barrier fence and left it, not in pieces, but in fragments of black ash. Anabomi's desperate fight to prevent the Hollow impulses penetrating his native, Kuchiki *reiryoku* was clearly fading, and Hirata's *Sai* was torn to shreds by the force of the blast. As he watched, the other man's left arm swelled and and twisted out of its normal sockets, the flesh splitting to reveal bone that mutated from the inside out, extending long skeletal protrusions to encase the damaged limb in an external shell. Anabomi let out another terrifying shriek, but now Hirata understood that it was not Hollow defiance, but true despair and agony that rent through the man's vocal chords, and his earlier doubts began to slip away.

Even after hearing Sakura's report, he had come to Ninth resolved to restrain and immobilise his fellow Captain, but the moment he had seen the mask, he had known that option was gone. Briefly he had faltered, reminded of Ryu's father Seiren and the miracle cure that had been effected on his Hollow state so many years before. For that moment he had considered whether Anabomi's moment of sanity would, somehow, allow him to regain control of his body and his mind. But, as he surveyed his companion with a heavy heart, Hirata knew that Seiren's situation had been different. In that case, native spirit power had mutated out of all control, and had subsequently been removed. Here, Anabomi's carefully controlled, potent *reiryoku* had been poisoned with an unknown toxin, a symptom for which there was no cure. Whether it was *reidoku* or not, the end result was the same. Those questions could be asked later, but if he did not act now, there would be no later. Anabomi had understood far more quickly what the true cost of this encounter was. In this instance, even Juushirou would understand the use of the Wind Hawk. Even Juushirou would forgive it, if this time the only justice left was to kill. *Anabomi made Takaoka cry for help, because he wanted to be stopped.*

That's what she said, and now I understand that order, only too well. Anabomi came out to fight me. Maybe Keitarou sent him to kill me, but he came for another reason. He came because he believed I could stop him. He didn't mean he wanted to be stopped and restrained, but stopped so he could not move again. Guilty or not, Anabomi's heart is with the Ninth and the people he was made to kill. I was naive to think that simply restraining a possessed Captain would ever have been enough... or that, in trying to save him, I might actually make his pain worse.

Hirata gritted his teeth, as the whirls of wind that surrounded Tsumi no Fuuhi's blade began to pick up, sending nearby fragments of broken wood scattering across the cobbles, and pieces of black charcoal dust swirled in ominous clouds around the courtyard. *Whatever drove him to turn Hollow, whether it was his own desperation or something else, the road ends here. A Captain in his right mind has asked a favour of me, and its a favour that I can grant. In the circumstances, these are the costs of war. Sometimes you kill, sometimes you are killed, and sometimes you do what's best, whether you wish to do it or not.*

He lowered his weapon, angling the blade so that it was on a direct collision course for the vicinity of Anabomi's heart. It was not yet covered by the slick substance that, bit by bit, was taking apart his comrade's body, but there was no guarantee that, if he waited any longer, this would not occur. He knew from his studies at the Academy that a Hollow's heart was manifested in its mask, and so he could only hope and pray that he had not left it too long. There was no sign of a hole in Anabomi's chest, not yet, but Hirata knew that did not mean his colleague had not made a full transition beneath the surface. He was changing quickly now, the blood that had poured from his split arm congealing and drying up as though the heart was beginning to evolve into something else, and if Hirata waited any longer, it would be too late.

Muttering a curse under his breath, Hirata wrapped his left hand over the top of his right, and in the recesses of his mind, he could see the image of the hawk, hovering and ready, in anticipation of the kill. Silently, he gave Seizumi the consent it had waited impatiently to hear, and the air around Tsumi no Fuuhi's blade suddenly grew more intense, till Hirata could barely see his target on the other side. Another, whispered word passed his lips, drowned out by the whirling of the wind, and the blast of air seared from the silver weapon across the open space that separated the two men.

Anabomi was preparing a second Cero blast, but, once unleashed, Tsumi no Fuuhi's wind tornado was unforgiving and relentless, and it split apart the attack into its component spiritual atoms, causing the

fragments of damaged *reiryoku* to scatter like dying embers onto the stone below. Hirata had half expected Anabomi to try to evade, for it was clear that his rationality was gradually being swallowed up by aggressive Hollow instincts, but to his surprise, the man turned to meet the attack. The slender fingers of his undamaged right hand parted slightly, allowing the *zanpakutou* he held to fall harmlessly to the ground in a symbolic gesture of surrender. Time appeared to move in slow motion as Tsumi no Fuuhi's whirlwind met its mark, burrowing through the Ninth Captain's left chest with unyielding precision. It was a controlled attack, so much as Hirata ever had control — enough to kill, but not enough to destroy. A spray of blood told Hirata that he had probably been in time, and that he had killed his opponent before the transformation to Hollow had been able to complete. With a jolt time returned to itself, and Anabomi's body was sent flying across the ground, landing with a thud on the cold stone.

The wind hushed, silence pervading the entire arena, and Hirata gave his sword a little shake, sealing the hunter away before stepping carefully over the debris towards where his opposite number now lay.

Despite the ferocity of the mutation, the fragments of chalk and mutated bone were beginning to crumble and break away, surrounding the corpse in an odd white dust. Hirata knelt down at the man's side, reaching up a hand to brush away the worst of it from the man's face. Though the left arm was mangled, the shoulders dislocated and broken out of their normal alignment, Anabomi's face was unscarred by the episode, and as Hirata put his fingers to the other's throat in automatic search for a pulse, the man's eyes twitched, then flickered open. Startled, Hirata drew back as though stung by a wasp, his gaze darting to the oozing, bloody chest wound and then back to Anabomi's face in disbelief. Anabomi's heart had been torn to shreds by Tsumi no Fuuhi's blast, yet his companion was not yet dead. Had he been too late after all? Had the Hollow taken enough of Anabomi's power and sanity to make him able to survive a normally fatal wound? Inwardly he cursed himself — he had intended a quick, painless blow, not a lingering death for his companion, yet it appeared that his moment of doubt had caused him to fail.

The fingers of Anabomi's right hand brushed feebly against Hirata's, their movement so slight that, had it not been for the movement of the eyes, Hirata would have dismissed it as a final muscular death spasm. He returned his gaze to the other shinigami's face, realising that Anabomi's expression was peaceful, and there was relief, not pain in his eyes. As the two gazes met, Anabomi's lips parted.

“Thank you.”

The word was not voiced, merely a hiss of air passing between lips as the last breath left Anabomi's lungs, but Hirata understood it. As the light began to fade from Anabomi's grey eyes, he let out a heavy sigh, setting Tsumi no Fuuhi aside and lifting his sword arm to gently close the lids. His blow had indeed been fatal, but Anabomi had held on just those few moments more in order to convey that final message. *He understands the guilt of killing a comrade, so sought to relieve me of the same burden.*

Hirata got slowly to his feet, retrieving his sword and gazing down at the corpse with some regret as he slid Tsumi no Fuuhi into its scabbard.

But I am an Endou, Anabomi. Unlike you, I can kill and not feel emotion for it. I regret that I had no other choice, but I will recover from it sooner than you think. For you, Keitarou's actions ended your whole world, and even if you had lived, you would never have been able to forgive yourself for what occurred here today. Those emotions are ones I wish I could feel, but I don't. I can't feel like that about killing... I can only regulate myself according to the values of those around me, in order not to become a monster. I suppose that's how the Endou and the Kuchiki truly differ. Still, I do realise that this was the easiest way out for you — and with the Hollowfication, the only path. There is no cure for what afflicted you... and all Hollows must be destroyed, regardless of who they once were. But I will remember your words about Ninth, and make sure they are reported in full to the Council. Your Division will not be allowed to suffer more than it already has — for that, Anabomi, you have my word. That, and one other thing. The man behind this will not escape us this time. We will make a corpse of him. He will pay — for my son's life, and now, for yours, too.

“Taichou,”

Hajime materialised in the yard that moment, casting Anabomi's corpse no more than a cursitory glance, before approaching Hirata's position and dropping his head in an apologetic bow.

“I'm sorry, sir, I know you ordered us not to return here, but I felt the Wind Hawk swell and I realised that the fight here was done,” he said respectfully. “I came to report to you at once the conditions within the Ninth — I don't think any time can be wasted in doing so.”

“I see,” Hirata turned his back on his dead comrade with a heavy sigh. “Very well, I'll hear your report. What have you found, Hajime?”

“We have located the survivors of the Ninth Division, cowering in

cellars beneath the Division buildings,” Hajime’s lips curled slightly in disdain. “I sent Nakata and Takaoka to deal with them, and they all flocked around Takaoka as though she were a mother hen when she appeared. It seems they sensed the flares of spirit power and heard screams, so ran to hide, as grown men are apparently prone to do in Kuchiki divisions.”

“In this circumstance, it appears to have been the correct decision,” Hirata said wearily. “How many survivors are we talking about?”

“Fourteen, sir, at last count,” Hajime said briskly. “Takaoka is certain that at least fifteen other officers are currently out on patrol, though, sir. I don’t know the exact figures for Ninth Division, but I believe there may be another ten or twelve officers currently unaccounted for. It’s possible they are undertaking duties in Sixth Division’s territory, due to Guren-sama’s absence. Takaoka wasn’t clear — she said that Mikihara organised all the deployments, and she wasn’t part of it.”

“So we believe that Ninth Division may have weathered the storm better than we first feared?” Hirata’s gaze flitted towards the dead Anabomi, recalling the last, gasped words of thanks, and the relief that had glittered in the grey eyes in the brief moment before they had glazed over. Hajime bit his lip, then shook his head.

“No, sir. I’m afraid it’s not like that at all.”

“Then...?”

“As far as we can ascertain, sir, Takaoka Sakura is the highest ranking survivor of what occurred at Ninth Division this morning. There are no officers currently out on patrol who supersede her rank, and the carnage in Anabomi’s office speaks for the rest.”

“As bad as that?” Hirata’s eyes became grave. “Then... Mikihara too..?”

“We found him, but I couldn’t get a response from him.” Hajime agreed. “I’m not a healer, but he’s not in a good shape and I’m sure he wasn’t breathing. I think we can say that Takaoka’s mercy call came too late.”

“Anabomi was a powerful Captain,” Hirata murmured, glancing at the dead body once more. “More, perhaps, than he ever gave away — but he was a Kuchiki, and what they say about Kuchiki reiatsu is often no exaggeration. Still, Mikihara and the others are also Kuchiki, so I had hoped... maybe...”

“It looks at the moment as though Takaoka wasn’t exaggerating in

what she told us back at Seventh,” Hajime’s expression was grim. “The office is awash with blood. There’s no nice way to say it, sir — it’s a bloodbath. Kikyue-hime and I examined the scene as best we could, then closed the door and left it. We touched nothing, just confirmed that there was nobody with life within its walls.”

“And where is Joumei in all of this?” Hirata questioned. Hajime’s expression became rueful.

“Apparently he isn’t used to quite such scenes of carnage,” he admitted. “Well, he’s not an Endou, even if he has had his uses. I thought he might pass out — so made him stand outside whilst we inspected. When I left, he was fussing over Mikihara’s body, so it seems he can about handle a single corpse, but when it becomes multiple, he starts to go green around the gills. Oh, I forgot to mention it before... Mikihara is in the hallway, not Anabomi’s office. I want you to look at him too, sir. His body seems different from the others. He’s cut to ribbons, but it looks like he fought every inch, and if that’s so, it ought to be noted by a member of the Council that he acquitted himself with bravery, since heaven knows we won’t find a living witness to say as much other than the little Takaoka knows. I don’t know if he has a family back in Sixth, but if so, such details should be conveyed to them with the news of his death.”

Hirata drew a heavy breath into his lungs, then nodded.

“In the absence of the other members of the Council, I will examine the scene as best I can,” he said wearily. “Takaoka’s testimony about how this began is also going to prove very significant, if everything you’ve told me is true. She didn’t see what happened to Mikihara, but the rest, it sounds as though she did. If you say her initial, hysterical report was accurate, maybe when she’s calmer and things are under more control, we’ll know more. I think she was right about him being possessed, though. Anabomi was past all help by the time he attacked us, that much is for certain... and the only thing I know that can make a rational, reasoned man like that turn into such a monster is Keitarou’s *reidoku*. It stands to reason this was one of Chudokuga’s acts... but I had hoped that we would arrive in time to prevent further losses. It seems not.”

“Takaoka and the lower seats *are* alive, though, sir,” As the Seventh Captain began to walk into the building, Hajime fell into step with him, casting him a sidelong glance. “It occurred to me, sir, that Mikihara fought how he did *because* he knew there were others on the premises. Whatever assailed Anabomi-taichou, Mikihara felt he was the only one on site who even had a chance of holding his Captain

back, and so he tried. He didn't evacuate, or try to save himself. It really must've been a fierce fight. I've never given much credence to the Kuchiki and the way they favour aesthetic perfection over a proper battle, but I have to admit that I rather admire Mikihara's conduct here, sir, if that's how it occurred."

Hirata's lips thinned.

And Anabomi's coming out after me, too. Mikihara wasn't the only one who fought to defend the members of Ninth. I never really knew Anabomi, and I'm sure what happened here will receive much scrutiny — but the creature I fought was more than a man possessed. He was something desperate... seeking atonement, or oblivion for what he had done to his men.

"Taichou! Taichou!" As they reached the end of the bloodsoaked corridor, Kikyue's voice hailed them, followed by the sound of her hasty footsteps, and as she skidded to a halt, Hirata put out a hand to stop her from falling headlong on the slick polished floor.

"Careful," he cautioned. "Well? What do you have to report? Hajime's told me that Anabomi's office is not particularly pretty, but..."

"Taichou, it's Mikihara," Kikyue cut across him, her eyes frantic, and she tugged at his sleeve, pulling him back in the direction from which she had just come. "It's Mikihara, sir, please, come quickly."

"Hajime already told me what happened to Mikihara. It sounds as though he fought bravely," Hirata began, but Kikyue shook her head.

"We thought he was dead. Hajime-dono and I, we both looked at him and thought... we couldn't find a pulse," she said excitedly. "But Joumei examined him, and he says Mikihara is alive."

"Alive?" Hirata gazed at her in disbelief. "But I thought... Hajime, you said he wasn't breathing, and..."

"He wasn't, and I couldn't feel a pulse, but Joumei said it was odd, how his body wasn't cold, when all the others were cooling," Kikyue grasped hold of her father's sleeve like an impatient child. "I don't know — I've never learned anything about helping wounded people, and never would've thought any more about it, but Joumei said it was different. He said he knew a way to jump-start a sluggish heart, and that he was going to try it. So he did... and now..."

"He did *what* to Mikihara's heart?" Hirata cast Hajime a mystified look. "I thought you said he was squeamish?"

"I guess not," Hajime looked as confused as his Captain. "But I'm sure Mikihara was dead, sir. True, he wasn't the same as the others, but I'm certain..."

"He has a pulse now," Kikyue insisted. "It was *Tsuzuri Raiden*. Just a little, Joumei said. He said he didn't know if it would work, but he tried it a couple of times, and now Mikihara's definitely got a pulse. Joumei was trying to start him breathing — please come, Papa, because Joumei's not authorised to do anything to a shinigami, injured or otherwise, and all of this could get people into trouble... you're the only person here who ranks above Mikihara. I didn't want to stop him, if it was helping, but if Mikihara dies now Joumei's meddled with him, if you're not there... it might be..."

"I'm coming," Despite himself, Hirata quickened his pace, rounding the corner and stopping dead at the sight that greeted him. Far from being huddled, squeamish in a corner, the young Kitsune had laid Hyakken's body on his side, an engrossed expression on his features as he worked to stem the bleeding from each of the many wounds. It was a messy task, for Hirata could quickly see that the Ninth Division Vice Captain had been torn to shreds by the sharp edge of Anabomi's blade, and for a moment he remembered his son, lying helpless and dying on the bier before him. The image shook him for a moment, then he gathered his composure, forcing the thought away.

"Joumei!" he called, and the Kitsune raised his head, relief glittering in his silverish eyes as he saw the Seventh Division Captain approaching.

"Hirata-sama!" he exclaimed. "You're not hurt... thank goodness. I felt... we all felt..."

"About Mikihara," Hirata cut across his questions, casting the young man a quizzical glance. "Kikyue says you think he's alive. He doesn't look alive to me. He looks like something tried to gut him. Are you seriously telling me that there's something of him left inside that bloody mess?"

"He's alive, sir," Joumei nodded his head. "He's lost blood, but not enough to be fatal. I've tied off the main offenders, and his pulse is a little stronger. He wasn't breathing at all when we got here, but he was still warm, so I thought that maybe... maybe he hadn't completely given up. His eyes didn't look as though he was ready to die... so I decided... I'd try. He's breathing now."

"Kikyue told me that you used *Tsuzuri Raiden* on him," Hirata murmured. "That was foolish — even dangerous — firing off a spell

without authorisation on a man who was on the brink of death. If it had gone wrong, you realise you would have risked being arraigned for his murder. You're here on my orders, but you're not a shinigami, nor a healer, and..."

"I know," Joumei acknowledged. "And my skills are probably unconventional, but I've been utterly useless in every regard so far. I couldn't save Hiko, or protect the sick and injured among my family from Keitarou's blade. I brought danger on your Division, and I know that I will never set aside my guilt in Souja-dono's death. This man, though, I can help. More, I *will* help him. Kitsune learn to treat and heal each other, because there's nobody else to treat them, and sometimes they're pretty sick."

"If you had seen my brother when he was hurt, could you have saved his life, too?" Kikyue voiced the question that Hirata had not dared to ask, but Joumei shook his head.

"I understand that Souja-dono died, essentially, from loss of blood," he said gravely. "His body and his organs shut down because he had no circulation. The men in the office here, they were cut open and the entire floor is a sea of red. Even if they hadn't suffered immediately fatal wounds, they would not have been salvageable, not with that much blood loss. This man, though, the final blow was struck with Kidou. It connected with him awkwardly, and the heat of that blast cauterised the main wounds in his chest. I don't know whether his attacker knew that, or if it was a lucky coincidence, but though that Kidou shattered three of his ribs and knocked him unconscious, it's prevented him from bleeding to death. More, because he wasn't carved open in the same way as the others, his lungs and his heart weren't damaged. Most of the damage is to his gut instead... it's serious, but not as instantly fatal, and I don't think that any of the major organs there have been wrecked, either. As a result, he's clinging on to life — if he gets formal treatment now, I think he will live."

"Then Ninth Division still has a Vice Captain," Hirata murmured, relieved. "Very well. Kikyue, go to Fourth at once. Ask them to send someone — if possible, the girl Shikiki. With this kind of injury, I suspect her powers will be needed."

"Sir..." Kikyue was about to leave, but before she could, Hajime put up a hand.

"Hajime?"

"I beg pardon for my insolence, sir, but I believe that there's still

grave danger in Seireitei at present,” Hajime spoke grimly. “Keitarou was controlling Anabomi-taichou and that control resulted in the slaughter of senior officers here. We don’t know how many other places have been affected. Please, allow me to go. I am more dispensible than Kikyue-*hime*, and whilst I may not be as swift as she is, I promise I can be relied on.”

“I don’t need protecting from everything, Hajime-dono,” Kikyue’s expression became sulky, but Hirata nodded.

“You’re right. Because the fight has ended here, I forgot that it might not be the case that it’s ended everywhere. On the contrary, it’s probably just beginning,” he acknowledged. “All right, Hajime. You go instead. Take the same orders. I expect you back in one piece... I won’t forgive you if you get killed, and certainly won’t pay for your funeral.”

“Yes, sir,” Hajime saluted. “Don’t worry. I’m a lot less interesting to Keitarou than the Endou *hime* would be — I imagine I don’t figure anywhere in his list of targets.”

With that he was gone, and Kikyue sighed, folding her arms and sinking down against the wall, a clear expression of dissatisfaction on her face.

“I’m not a little girl, Otousama. I can fight my corner.”

“And I won’t have you fighting Keitarou,” Hirata said firmly. “We’ve discussed this, and it remains a final decision. Besides, there’s work here you can do. If you aren’t distressed by the state of Anabomi’s office, you can go and catalogue everything that’s inside. I want a clear and detailed report to present before the Council of everything, just as we found it. Since corpses aren’t likely to pose you any danger, you can go do that. I’ll hear the rest of Joumei’s report, then join you. Understand?”

Kikyue’s pout deepened, but she gave a heavy sigh, reluctantly pulling herself back to her feet.

“Fine,” she muttered. “I wish Ohara was here, though. I could make him wade through the mess instead... at least his reaction to it would be amusing.”

With that, she stomped off towards the office with very bad grace, and Hirata sighed.

“I am an unpopular Father, but a Captain who must be obeyed,” he murmured, more to himself than to his companion, but Joumei smiled.

“I think Kikyue-hime understands,” he said softly. “And Kitabata-dono is correct. He is less likely to be a target, and Ninth is in no state to weather a fresh attack.”

He sat back on his heels, wiping his fingers against the cloth of his borrowed *shihakushou*.

“Mother taught Izumi and I to tie off wounds and stem bleeding, when we were young, because accidents below ground weren’t uncommon,” he added. “As for the Kidou, I saw Father use it once on a sick kinsman whose heart had stilled, and it worked, so I thought, if I was careful, I might try the same technique here. Hirata-sama, I’m not a healer. I am a scientist, of sorts, but not a gifted one like Izumi. I’m practically trained, and I try to think my way around things, but I don’t have any overwhelming talent or skill in any particular area. I am good at remembering skills I’ve been taught, and that’s all. I’ve stopped this man from dying now, but I can’t promise that he won’t still succumb to his injuries. Until a true healer has seen him... I am only basing my judgements on scientific principles I learned as a child. Science and medicine cross over, but they are not interchangeable.”

He sighed.

“Still, anatomical knowledge and understanding of how spiritual bodies operate does help,” he concluded.

“It reminds me of Souja,” Hirata admitted, and Joumei nodded gravely.

“I’m sure it must,” he agreed softly. “I’m sorry. This scene is... rather likely to bring those memories back further. The office is... not a pretty sight. I’m afraid I balked at it, slightly... it reminded me of the night my family were killed, and Hiko, and everything else. But when I realised this man was alive... I don’t even know his name, Hirata-sama, but when I saw that I might be able to help him, I felt better. Keitarou caused these wounds, even if he used a shinigami as his blade. If I can thwart Keitarou’s actions, then I have done some good... and repaid, even a tiny bit, the debt I owe Seireitei.”

“Keep him as stable as you can,” Hirata looked sombre. “As a Council member, I must go view Anabomi’s office for myself... when Hajime returns with help, I’ll leave it to you to explain what you’ve told me about your attempts at treating him. You may tell them you acted with my authority in this matter — with any luck they won’t be interested in asking your name and rank, not with their patient in such a critical state.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you,” Joumei raised his hand in a blood-stained

salute, and Hirata acknowledged it darkly, before turning on his heel and making the short trip along the hall to his former colleague's place of work.

Kikyue had left the door open, and the sight that greeted him as he arrived there almost took his breath away.

"Mind the stray head," As he stepped over the threshold, Kikyue's voice came from by the window. "I never knew Anabomi-taichou was so good with a sword. He always seemed very gentle and polite — I guess you never do know your neighbours entirely, do you?"

"Kikyue, that's hardly appropriate," Hirata began, but Kikyue shrugged.

"I know, but still, it's quite a sight," she said matter-of-factly. "More importantly, though, Otousama, come take a look over here. The bloody bodies got most of our attention last time around — but there's something else going on over here that doesn't make a lot of sense."

"Something else?"

Despite himself, Hirata was confused, and Kikyue nodded, gesturing towards the wall. Picking his way over the fallen bodies of the three unfortunate shinigami, Hirata made his way between the pools of blood and debris to join her, his eyes widening behind his glasses as he realised what she had found.

"A secret compartment?"

"Looks that way. Hidden behind that, is my guess," Kikyue pointed in the direction of a crumpled tapestry, the edges clearly torn away. "The key is still in the door. There's a book and some paper inside, but I haven't touched anything. I decided I probably shouldn't... not when I saw... that."

This time she nudged at something with her toe, and Hirata bent to peer at it, his expression becoming grave.

"A vial of some kind... without a stopper."

"The stopper's by the wall, but it does look like Anabomi-taichou drank something, doesn't it?" Kikyue's eyes were burning with curiosity. "Question is, did that cause him to go on a rampage through his Division, or something else? Because that box has an Urahara crest on it, doesn't it? I'm not *au fait* with all of them, but I'm sure that's from District Three."

"It is," Hirata's brows knitted together. "It is, but I don't understand why that crest should be here, in a Kuchiki division office, and that

vial..."

He stood.

"For now, don't touch anything else. We need help with this, and more witnesses before we act," he reflected. "Our first priority is to see to it that Mikihara and Takaoka's injuries are treated, but then we must pursue this further, and probably, cast a wider net. Much as I'd like us to be able to deal with the whole thing ourselves, there's also the matter of where Keitarou is at this precise moment... and whether he has found any other targets than the unfortunate Captain of the Ninth."

Things were hetting up.

In the devastation of the Eighth's courtyard, Shunsui took a step back for a moment, eying the scene with a growing sense of unease. Despite the fact that the front of his Division now looked like someone had blown up a firework factory outside his front door, the struggle for supremacy had quickly shifted in favour of him and his subordinates, for three determined officers against two possessed interlopers had soon given them the advantage they needed. To begin with, Shunsui had shouldered the bulk of Hakubei's determined kidou onslaught, confident that in their released form, Katen Kyoukotsu's blades were a match for anything the other Captain could fire without him having to use his own shikai abilities. Hakubei at one point had seemed likely to release his *zanpakutou*, but Shunsui had seen the danger and had lunged forward with a stabbing thrust of Amaki's blade, forcing the other man to abort his release attempt in order to prevent his body being cleaved open from shoulder to hip. Shunsui had no real intention of killing his friend, but nor did he believe he could successfully overpower the man by trying to play it safe. Much as he hated to recall it, his fight against a possessed Juushirou, long ago, in the snows of District Seven had left indellible memories of the dangers of holding back against a manipulated ally, and the consequences for both. His only chance was to somehow render Hakubei unconscious and immobile, but even if he did, he was unsure as to how long he would be able to hold the man. The Kyouraku was under no illusions as to how deep Keitarou's hatred for him ran, the outlaw having once even blown up one of his shinigami puppets by overloading his *reiryoku* in a desperate attempt to end Shunsui's life. Now it was not just him and a handful of school students in danger, but, potentially, the whole of Seireitei, and he could not afford to be either too lax or too full on. Hakubei's life was as much at stake as his own, and so he had left Kanshi to his subordinates, allowing his full

attention to be occupied in distracting and diverting Hakubei's resolute attacks.

Any concerns he had had about Sora's composure had quickly dissipated as she had set to work with Shindou to disarm and disable Kanshi as best they could. Despite the fact Shunsui knew Sora's spiritual ability outstripped Kanshi's, he had fought determinedly and with more stealth and ingenuity than Shunsui had expected of one of Keitarou's puppets. To begin with it had been hard to pin him down. Sora and Shindou had not worked together as Shunsui's right and left hand for so long for nothing, however, and they had not panicked, not even when a well-aimed bolt of Byakurai had shot the shield off Sora's Vice Captain's armband. It had clattered against the cobbles, careening up against the barrier fence, but Sora had not even cast it a second glance. Instead she had simply redoubled her efforts with a yell to Shindou to cover her back and, as a result, within the next five minutes the Tenth Division's second officer had been brought down to the ground. Once he hit the cobbles, Shindou darted forward, sitting firmly on Kanshi's back to prevent him from getting up, and out of the corner of his eye, Shunsui was aware of his Vice Captain neatly trussing her opposite number with a powerful mixture of binding spells which, privately he felt certain would hold in place several rabid bears. With Kanshi down, it was now simply a case of three on one... and Shunsui was confident that between them they would be able to successfully bring Hakubei down without allowing Keitarou to hit the self-destruct.

No, it was not Eighth that made him uneasy. Kaoru was a responsible individual who would keep everyone of lower rank safe and inside, whilst the attacking Tenth officers had not managed to breach the Eighth Division building at all. Scorch-marks might now decorate the walls and courtyard as though a dragon had been let loose to roam around the region, and the Eighth's side of Anabomi's tall marble wall was now riven with chips and cracks and dusted with charcoal, but all in all, nothing had gone out of control. Yet although he ought to be relieved, Shunsui felt sick when he contemplated what all of this meant.

We're fighting. And not just us. I can feel it... sense it... almost taste it on the wind. Something at Ninth, something terrible, then the unmistakable sensation of Hirata's Wind Hawk flying free from it's roost... far too close for my liking, and on the opposite side of the fence to where it ought to be. I know I sensed Hirata's zanpakutou coming from behind that marble wall — and I'm sure not all the cracks in it were created by things this side. Something has happened at Ninth Division... and maybe not just there. If Hirata's fighting... maybe Juu is too. Which means... maybe Keitarou's

been there... and Koku...

“Taichou!” A yell from Shindou, jerked him back to attention just in time to duck and deflect a fresh barrage of Soukatsui, twisting his weapon around to send them battering into the marble wall once more. It shuddered slightly, sending fresh cracks through the marble, and Shunsui winced as he realised his hurried swing had caused a good section of the topstone to be blasted into smithereens.

“Are you okay, Shunsui?” Sora materialised at his side, Hotarue clutched in her hand. The weapon had not been released, Sora preferring to rely on her kenjutsu and kidou skills than risk inflicting her weapon’s gravitational abilities on her older brother, but despite the charcoal and sweat that streaked her cheeks and matted her hair, the resolution in her gaze helped Shunsui to make up his mind. He nodded his head, shooting her a rueful smile.

“I was just getting a feel for the wider picture,” he said, flicking Seibara’s blade towards the damaged marble divide. “Things are happening there. Bad things, that we won’t like tallying up and that the Council will hate paying out repair money to fix when we’re done.”

“Hirata’s there,” Sora said simply, and Shunsui nodded.

“He is, and I don’t like that he is,” he admitted. “It means things are moving, more swiftly than I’d like. Listen... how confident are you with fighting Hakubei like this?”

“Fighting him?” Sora’s gaze flitted across the courtyard, to where her brother was picking himself up from the ground, having been felled by a section of Eighth’s damaged gate frame. A glance at it told Shunsui that it had not fallen by accident, but had been hit by a bolt of Shindou’s Kidou, and he pressed his lips together, understanding his Third Seat’s reluctance to face the Captain’s firepower head on.

Sora is equal to Hakubei, but she’s his sister. Tetsuya is not as strong as either of them, but lacks the personal involvement. While I’m here, Hakubei’s intent to kill can’t possibly lessen any. Keitarou will have me on his kill list as sure as any other name. If I am here, I can fight Hakubei — if need be, I can kill Hakubei, but if I were to leave... would he come after me? Would he hurt Sora and Tetsuya?

He glanced at the gate once more, then nodded.

“Yes,” he said out loud. “I need to know your honest opinion, Sora-chan. You’re my Vice Captain and I trust your judgement. If you say you can fight, and will fight, then I believe you. But this isn’t just about Eighth Division, not any more. It’s spreading and it has to be

put to rest before lots of people are killed. That's why I'm asking if you think you can handle your brother... you and Tetsuya, of course, without my help."

"Where are you going?" Sora was nothing if not sharp, and she cast him a suspicious glance. "You're the one who said we were here to protect Eighth, and now..."

"Mm," Shunsui eyed her for a moment. "Yes, and I won't lie, it's not what I want to do, either. But the information I received about this attack today... so far seems to be merited. And if that is true, then... other parts of it might be, too. Sora, I have to take a gamble. It's a big gamble, and one I don't know the outcome of, yet. Leaving you and Tetsuya to take down Hakubei safely is only one part of that — and if you say you can't do it, I won't have any choice. I'll have to bring him down myself, through whatever means necessary... because this stage of the fight is a distraction, it's not the main event."

"Meaning what?" Sora tossed her sword from one hand to the other, trying to conceal her agitation, but anxiety glittered in her emerald eyes. "Meaning that Haku-nii and Kanshi were sent to attack us to keep us from going somewhere else? To keep us within the Eighth Division while something else happened somewhere else?"

"No, I'm sure they were sent to kill us — me, at least," Shunsui said grimly. "But keeping people occupied is also a clever smokescreen. Make us fight our own and he can slip among us. Keitarou is here, Sora. I'm certain of it... he couldn't be manipulating so effectively if he wasn't close at hand. Even if he is now capable of controlling more than one person, I imagine he'd find it hard to do over a longer distance, and I have a feeling it's not just Hakubei and Kanshi he's got his claws into. If I'm right about Ninth..."

He bit his lip, then,

"I have to go try and do something about it," he said at length. "Can you and Tetsuya manage here?"

"Do you promise not to get yourself killed?" Sora raised her weapon, a challenge in her eyes, and Shunsui paused, then nodded.

"I promise to do my best," he said honestly. "I'm not going anywhere to get killed, and I'll be careful."

"But you won't tell me where, or what you intend to do?"

"I can't. Not yet, not till later," Shunsui shook his head. "Well? Can you handle it, on your own?"

Sora's expression became sad, and Shunsui felt a pang of guilt at the emotion he saw there, but the Vice Captain lowered her head.

"You said it. Haku-nii has a *haori*, but he's not stronger than I am," she said matter-of-factly, and Shunsui knew that at least half of her composure was an act. "Leave it to us, Taichou. Tetsu and I will handle everything here. You can rely on us, so whatever you need to do, go do it. You said you trusted me... so I'll trust you too. I'll trust you to your word — that you won't get killed and you will come back."

"Make sure you're in one piece to greet me," Shunsui patted her lightly on the arm with the fingers of his left hand, before turning his attention to Hakubei's advancing figure. "And keep your concentration. Remember, it's not your brother — and if I don't succeed, it might never be again. Do what you need to do, Sora-chan... whatever it is, I'll take responsibility with Kyouki-sama later, even if you have to lop off some of his fingers to keep him still."

"I'll keep it in mind," Sora's tones were light, but her expression belied her true feelings. She raised her voice. "Tetsu! Taichou's orders — we bring down Haku-nii and sit on him till he comes back. Are you up for it?"

"Whatever you say, Fukutaichou, I'm just warming up!" came Shindou's reassuring reply, and at his salute, Shunsui grinned.

"Good luck, and don't try to be heroes," he said firmly. "Remember what's at stake. I'll see you later."

Before either of them could respond, he slipped into shunpo, pushing through the streams of light and managing to avoid Hakubei's roving gaze as he sped out into the heart of Seireitei. All around him was a morass of spiritual energy, traces of this person, threads of that, but Shunsui did not let himself be distracted by any of them. He could not sense Keitarou, though as he moved, he felt more and more certain the man was there, and furthermore, that he had had control of Anabomi in the same way he had taken over Hakubei's free will. *Anabomi is dead, though. I felt the Wind Hawk and I have no doubt about what Hirata decided needed to be done.*

Shunsui's lips pressed together in a thin line as he remembered the surge of energy from over the divide.

I didn't see it, but something unthinkable happened over there. I know it was Anabomi, but it felt... like something else, and then with no hesitation, no mistake... Hirata attacked. Unless Sora and Tetsuya can pin Hakubei down, there's a risk of yet another Captain falling — or something worse

than that... so I can't hesitate any more. Keitarou sent Hakubei and Kanshi to Eighth to keep me distracted, but it hasn't worked in the way he expected. The only trouble is, whether or not I still have enough time to change things... before we reach the point of no return!

The blade pricked once more against the flesh of Atsushi's neck, followed by the sensation of something soft and wet dribbling down his throat towards the white inner lining of his uniform *shihakushou*. His gaze still fixed disbelievingly on his longtime neighbour, Atsushi was oblivious to any signals of pain, for his brain was still struggling to process Mareiko's final words. They had been cold, hard and full of resentment, yet in the stony gaze he could now see the thinly veiled tears held back a fierce strength of will, and at the sight of it, his heart began to ache.

So, then. She knew.

He closed his eyes, letting out his breath in a soft rush as tension which had racked his thin frame now flowed out of him. He sank back against the wall of the chamber, and as he opened his eyes once more, there was resignation in his gaze.

He did not speak, and something in his silence seemed to confuse his companion. Had she expected him to deny it? Atsushi's eyes narrowed slightly, trying to read her demeanour, but the eyes had become cold once more, and though she did not push the blade any harder against his throat, nor did she pull it back, either. The point remained there, the needle-sharp tip burrowing lightly into the folds of his skin.

"Nothing to say?" At length she broke the silence, and Atsushi could hear the impatience now lacing her words, cloaking her uncertainty and renewing her resolve. It had not been easy for her to come here, he knew that now. Her body was trembling, ever so slightly, but whether it was from fear, grief or rage, he could not tell. Her heart was closed to him this time, and he could not read her feelings at all.

At his continued silence, Mareiko's lip curled in contempt, and she slid the weapon down, jabbing it against his ribcage.

"You don't even have the courage to admit to it," she murmured, and now Atsushi could hear the anger rising once more in her normally gentle tones. "I've waited a quarter of a century for this, to hear it from your own lips, and yet you can't even bring yourself to speak. Have you *any* idea what it's put me through, living that long

without being able to do anything about it? Living next door to you, seeing you at meetings, dealing with you as though you were my comrade in arms, when instead you were the one who *murdered* my Captain in cold blood? I couldn't stand it. Didn't want to stand it. But I couldn't fight you. Not on my own. Not with my sword arm damaged and useless. I had to think again. I had to use my brain... something I've always been good at."

Her eyes became slits.

"So much for the warrior Captain of the Eleventh," she added derisively. "So much for the man who preaches discipline, loyalty, obedience to commands. So much for all of that, Minaichi Atsushi. So much for the man who I thought was my friend. I heard Taichou say it — that you were the one who knew him best, and worked with him the most closely. I heard him, that night at camp, only to see you soaked in his blood the very next day, standing over his corpse."

She lifted the sword, a sudden burst of anger flaring in her eyes.

"*Talk!*" Suddenly her voice was raised. "Say something, dammit, or I'll take your head from your shoulders and deliver it to Yuuichi-dono myself! Admit it! Tell me the truth, for once in your worthless life — admit it!"

Atsushi gazed at his companion for a moment, taking in her agitation and the emotions threatening to bubble through to the surface at any moment, and his heart clenched once more in his chest. Slowly, and very deliberately, he raised his arms, causing her to flinch warily as his fingers passed the hilt of his weapon. He made no attempt to draw Mokizuki from its sheath, however, simply holding his hands above his head where she could see them.

"You came to arrest me, not to kill me," he said softly. "If you kill me here, you'll be the one who's punished. Vigilante justice never really goes away, Mareiko. It catches up with you, sooner or later. It's not something you want to live with."

"To live with?" Mareiko snorted, shaking her head, and sending her long-suffering hairtie flying across the office, her fair, flaxen mane fanning out around her head in a cloud of straw yellow. "When I've lived like this for this long? You have *no idea* of the agony you put me through, Atsushi-kun. We were friends. Allies. I trusted you. I didn't listen to the things people said — that you were cold, hard, you didn't care... *I believed in you*. You were kind to me, always fair, and my Captain trusted you, so so did I. Yet all the time..."

She took a breath, composing herself as her voice threatened to

crack and break down into tears, and Atsushi could not help but reach out a hand towards her, only to have it slapped away by his companion's damaged right.

"Don't touch me," she hissed, the blade suddenly once more at his throat. "Don't underestimate me, Atsushi-kun. Instead, do as I say. Draw Mokizuki from its sheath, and drop it on the ground between us. I know how fast you are to that weapon... and I want to make sure you really are unarmed."

Atsushi hesitated for a moment, then sighed, lowering his right hand and obediently pulling the weapon from its scabbard. He paused, and Mareiko pricked the sword tip up against his throat again, a warning look in her eyes.

"Drop it," she repeated. "I won't say it again."

Slowly, Atsushi opened the fingers of his hand, allowing the sword to fall onto the hard panel floor. Mokizuki's spirit protested against his senses, but he ignored his weapon's call. Satisfied, Mareiko nodded, drawing her weapon back a bare inch and eying him clinically.

"Good," she remarked. "You remember, don't you? I trained in *kenjutsu*, just as much as you did. I was a good fighter, once upon a time... until a monster in the Rukon raked through my right arm and rendered me useless in battle. Now that's how you see me — how everyone sees me. I'm the mad scientist who lurks around Twelfth, not really a shinigami, no longer a warrior, not even able to avenge the death of my Captain. But I wasn't going to just live like that. I made up my mind a long time ago that, if it took me forever, I'd take my revenge. I only prayed nobody and nothing else would kill you before I had my chance to confront you and make you confess. I locked myself in my lab. Trained in secret to make my left hand as strong and as able as my right. Studied kidou to the highest possible level... developed contingency plans, and reached beyond the barriers of Seireitei, all because one day I knew I'd face you, and fight you, and bring justice to my Captain. To hell with Seireitei, to hell with the Gotei. By the time I was recovered enough to talk about it, the matter of Taichou's death had been buried and nobody wanted to talk about it any more, let alone judge it as the brutal, backstabbing murder it really was. They wouldn't help me... so I had to think on other lines. I didn't care what happened to me, or anyone else... my life and everything I believed in died in the Rukon, with my Captain and my ability to fight back. The only thing that kept me going was the fact I knew Taichou was murdered. I decided to live, to keep quiet, and take the *haori* I didn't want... so long as I got to bring you the justice you'd

escaped, I didn't care what lengths I had to go to to achieve it or how long it took. Despite all of that, though, you aren't even man enough to admit to your own heinous crimes. But I know. *I know*, Atsushi-kun. I know because *I saw it*. I saw what you did... so don't think you can lie."

This last revelation struck through Atsushi like a knife to the heart, and he bit his lip, his gaze running over his fellow Captain with a sense of grief and regret. Yes, Mareiko had been a warrior. Yes, they had fought together, worked together, and he had been fond of her. He had missed their friendship, over the past quarter of a century, but he had thought to sever it for her own sake, rather than for his. Now, though, he understood. It had been in vain, and yet... at least... in one respect... it had not. She knew... and yet... there was so much she did not.

And it's all right that way. She can hate me. Let her hate me. Let her sate her anger that way and be content... it's no more than I deserve, anyway.

He sighed.

"I'm not going to lie," he said softly. "It's the truth. I killed your Captain. My Vice Captain, too. I killed both of them and returned here alive, concealed it and let Seireitei bury them in ignorance of my actions."

He offered her a sad smile.

"Justice comes, eventually," he said, a mixture of resignation and peace beginning to stir through his heart. "Whatever burdens you think you've lived with, they're nothing compared to mine. Kill me, if it makes you happy. I won't fight you, so do with me as you will."

It was a long way to the Third Division's barracks without the use of Shunpo, and at many points, Kohaku had faltered, unsure that he had the physical strength in his body to make it all the way. Keitarou had left him at the archive at the same time Hirata had begun to battle the Hollowfied form of the Ninth's unfortunate Captain, for the shifts in spirit power had distracted the outlaw from his reunion with his son. He had disappeared in a flurry of spirit power to survey his surroundings from the roof before vanishing from the boy's immediate line of sight, and Kohaku had not tried to follow him. Though he could sense his father's reiatsu, moving away from the archives, he knew that Keitarou's instructions were absolute, and that he should not try to linger when there was so much to be done. That much was out of his hands now... he could only do what he was meant to do.

He paused to lean against the outer wall of the division, putting a hand to his head as the world swayed and tilted around him.

He couldn't pass out here. There was no time for rest, and no time to falter. Keitarou had gone in the direction of Eighth and Ninth after murmuring something about the flurry of the Wind Hawk sword. Kohaku knew this weapon was in the possession of his blood uncle, the older brother of his mother and the father of the ill-fated Souja, but a man Kohaku himself had never met. Keitarou was unlikely to try and fight Hirata whilst the man's sword was released and his temper flying, but nonetheless his sense of curiosity had drawn him closer to the scene. He had not put it

into words, but Kohaku had understood that the individual he had been controlling at Ninth had become more unruly and difficult to manage, and that Keitarou had needed to be physically closer in order to reassert any kind of firm manipulation over the fight. It was a distraction, a ripple in the master plan, but Keitarou had been unwilling to relinquish this opportunity to kill Hirata, who had threatened not only his life but that of Eiraki and the unborn Katsura so many years before. He had always been quick to react to circumstances, choosing to use his puppet, not his own blade in a fight to the death, but though he had already known the fight would end in failure, Kohaku had not tried to prevent Keitarou from going. Instead, he had begun his own journey without a word, heading towards the Third Division with determined, focused steps. Keitarou too would come here once he realised his goal was a futile one, probably sooner, rather than later, and given his father's ability with shunpo, there was no time for Kohaku to delay.

Third was big and its barracks old, built and modified from former Clan apartments into an institution which was part military accommodation, part science facility. It was clean and well laid out, and several positions across the yard were clearly guard posts, where, during a normal day, someone would be rostered into sentry duty. Today was different, though. Third were not in situ, the entirety of the Division having left for the Real World some days earlier, and Kohaku was able to cross the threshold unchallenged, gazing around him at what he saw as he padded across the cobbles towards the main building. They had clearly not anticipated any risk of attack in their absence, he mused pensively, for no security procedures had been put in place. But no, surely that was illogical. These were his Father's kin, the people who had adjudged and executed his grandfather, but born of the same cautious, intelligent bloodline as Keitarou himself had been. They could not be so naive as to leave their land unprotected? For a moment he wondered if it were a trap, but a quick sweep of the

area told him that his initial assumptions had been correct, and the Third Division barracks were entirely deserted.

His eyes narrowed as he contemplated this.

Another Division's officers should surely be on duty here? The entire Third is missing, yet no other Urahara are here to guard the place in their absence? I don't know enough about the Divisions to work out what that means or why, but even an interloper like me realises that military officers wouldn't leave their barracks completely undefended. There should be people here, but there are not. Is this your work, Father? Did you deal with the people you consider the devil, and bribe an Urahara to leave this place empty? Is an Urahara your Gotei spy? But if that's the case, what kind of Clan are we dealing with? You were exiled by them, Grandfather was condemned... the foxes were also put out by Urahara law. Now, an Urahara within the Gotei itself is potentially choosing your alliance rather than their own? Whoever leads here clearly has no idea the treason is so close to home. They've left this place in trust and assurance that someone would be looking to protect it... but this place Father needs, so he would have taken steps to keep it unguarded. The spy must be someone with Urahara connections, since only an Urahara would have the power to give those orders. That doesn't tell me any more than what I knew before, though, and nor does it change my plan of action in the slightest. I don't know any of these Urahara. Not a single one.

Despite his heritage, Kohaku knew little of his father's blood family. He knew the story of his grandfather, Keitsune, as told by his bitter father, but little else over the long years of his confinement. He had not thought to ask, either, nor sought to draw the memories forth on his own, so it was with a sense of irony that he gazed up at the tall, imposing building, realising that it had been put together by his ancestors and was governed by men who were, technically, his kin, yet about whom he knew almost nothing.

Are you going to stand here and admire the view, or are you going to do what you came here to do?

Kyouka's voice broke his reverie, destroying his moment of curiosity with the harsh reminder of the reasons for his coming. He frowned, his gaze drawn momentarily to the misshapen sword that hung at his waist, but he did not respond to Kyouka's impatient question, simply beginning once more to plod, methodically and resolutely, towards his target. Though he had never been here before, the route was mapped out in his mind as though he had trodden it many times before, and so he did not hesitate, weaving his way around the accommodation blocks towards his final destination. Like the barracks, it too lay unguarded, and Kohaku was able to take his

time in assessing what stood before him.

Third Division's *Senkaimon* was bigger and more finely constructed than anything Kohaku had ever seen before. The only Gate he had ever travelled through himself had been the one opened by Souja's sword on the ill-fated trip back from Rukongai, and at that time, Kikyue's attack had come so swiftly he had had little time to register his surroundings. Even so, though, he remembered that that Gate had been little more than a black hole yawning itself open within the Rukon atmosphere. By contrast, here, the phenomenon was surrounded by a big, carefully constructed frame that, though closed, still glittered and hummed with the spiritual energy of its activation. Kohaku circled it a couple of times, but he was no scientist, and no matter how he looked at it, he could not fathom how it worked. Souja had thrust his *zanpakutou* into nothing and created a door, but though this almost certainly worked on the same principles, the surrounding controls and dials made it appear much more complex. *Senkaimon* had been his grandfather's science, Keitarou had told him that with some pride, and Keitarou himself had done much to bring the technology forward. Gotei *Senkaimon*, Kohaku knew, were all based on notes — either borrowed or stolen — from one of Keitarou's own laboratories in District Seven, and Kohaku felt sure that, if his father were here, he would know exactly how to operate the Gate without a moment of hesitation.

But I haven't come here to operate the Gate, and nor will Father. I've come here to destroy it, in order to make sure nobody can get back here too soon and change the flow of battle.

Kohaku cast the structure one last, slightly apologetic glance, taking in the finely polished frame and understanding how much care and attention had clearly gone into maintaining it. He curled his hand around the Sekkiseki coated hilt of his sword, pulling it clumsily from its place at his side and gazing at the murky, ill-fitting blade with a mixture of resignation and loathing. Then, very carefully, he took a step closer to the Gate's controls, swinging the weapon around and plunging the thick blade deep into the mechanics. There were sparks and flickers of spiritual energy, as the *Senkaimon*'s technology objected to his vandalism, but despite the static now pricking at his aura, Kohaku did not hesitate. Instead he closed his eyes, allowing the barriers of his spirit power to flow free and wild through the hilt of the sword. As the *reiryoku* within his body collided once more with that sealed in the misshapen weapon, the Sekkiseki around the hilt began to melt away, running along the surface of the blade and dripping in globules onto the ground and into the heart of the Third Division's Gate. The heat burned his hands, but Kohaku did not even

notice the pain, for a far stronger, more ferocious flame had seared its way through the inside of his body. It surged ruthlessly through tissue and bone and into his bloodstream, pumping its way through his racing heart. Kohaku could no longer see his surroundings, nor sense anything about them, for the world in his head had become far too vivid, too intense for him to register its unreality. Everything inside his mind was sent scattering, his thought processes overwhelmed by the force of the images. Somewhere in the distance was the sound of warping, twisting frames and exploding components, followed by a fizz and sizzle of shredded *reiryoku*, as the force of the spiritual energy Kohaku was emitting proved too much for the delicate structure of the Senkai Gate's frame. The young boy did not even react, the memory of his intention to destroy the Gate's activation field long since shattered.

And then, from the morass of light and colour, one image rushed into focus. He saw a silhouetted form, white *haori* flapping against his shoulders, and two scimitar shaped *zanpakutou* blades drawn and poised, waiting to strike. The image had been fleeting, no more than a split-second of consciousness in amongst thousands upon thousands of other thoughts and images, and Kohaku had not managed to see the man's face. Still, he clung onto it, making it his anchor and slowly, using it to bring coherent thought back to the forefront of his mind. He screwed up his eyes, struggling to maintain that control.

Kyouraku-dono, I'm sorry for everything I've done and all the trouble I've caused you and Ukitake-dono. Probably its trouble I'm continuing to cause you, even now. I'm sorry for everything I said to you the other day, and I'm sorry for asking of you such unforgivable, unthinkable things. If you don't forgive me, then it's all right. Probably I won't be here to see the result of this, anyway. I've never unleashed my power like this before, and I'm not sure what will happen when I'm done. But even if that's true, please, don't give up. Please make sure Ukitake-dono is all right... and Kirio-san and Edogawa-san, too. I don't want them to be hurt because they were kind to me.

With that he redoubled his focus on the sword of the blade, gasping as the pain became more and more intense. The images were whirling around him once more, swimming and swirling too fast to carry any particular meaning. Light glinted off them, making it seem as though they were being reflected towards him in the surface of a mirror, and then, as the pain drove him to his knees, the colours began to clear once more, opening up one particular scene and pushing it firmly to the forefront of his mind.

It was raining. Raining in Rukongai, and a shinigami in a white *haori* was fighting Hollow-men.

Tears streamed down Kohaku's cheeks, tears of terror, pain and of grief, but he did not let go.

I don't even know if this is right, or if betrayal is enough of a fear to make a difference, but it's all I have. It's all I have to show them... so I'll show them... that day in the Rukon and hope for the best.

Author's Note: Additional Chapter!

Yes, two chapters this week — because the next one goes with this one, and makes more sense that way... happy reading ;)

65. Interlude: Rukongai, 25 Years Earlier

Interlude: Rukongai *Twenty Five Years Earlier*

The rain was slick against his skin, beating down through the thick, heavy fabric of his clothing and making it stick to his body as it continued to fall relentlessly from a dark, overcast sky. It had never rained in Rukongai before, not during a single one of their patrols, yet on that day the sky had chosen to unleash its load on the unsuspecting shinigami, turning the dry, dusty ground into a muddy marshland. This was not life-giving rain, but dark, grey droplets of spirit-polluted, *Sekkiseki* tainted liquid that would do nothing to nourish the feeble strands of grass that struggled through the earth, bending and twisting upwards in a futile search for light. It was yet another of the grim realities of a world savaged by spiritual disharmony — the unhappy cause, so Seireitei believed, of the mutations in Rukongai.

Believed, but not by everyone.

Atsushi shook the blood and debris from his sword, distaste crossing his thin features as he gazed down at the crumpled body of one of the tormented creatures. Twisted and broken, its entire upper body had been warped into something better resembling a shell, the head sunken in at the neck and covered even now from brow to chin in a white, chalky substance. It was the fifth creature he had killed since they had arrived here, though unlike the others, this one had not dissipated immediately into dust. Perhaps it had still retained its consciousness — Atsushi could not tell, for its tongue, large and swollen, had lolled out of its mouth, making it impossible for it to form any coherent words.

The Eleventh Division Captain sighed, pushing his rain-soaked hair back from his face in frustration. There was no end to the fighting, no end to the slaughter, and the subsequent reports to Seireitei of yet more souls mutated beyond recognition. The rain continued to fall, washing the blood from the *zanpakutou* blade, but Atsushi paid it little mind, turning to survey the field around him. His eyes narrowed as he counted up the damage. Three, no, perhaps four down in this raid. Further over the rise, he could make out his adjutant, almost silhouetted in the gloom, and he pursed his lips.

“Ikata! Yamaguchi! Furizaki!” He raised his voice, shaking the

water and blood from his blade and gesturing to the three officers of rank within his hearing. "This area is clear. Proceed to the next. I'm heading to meet up with Sakanoue and we'll continue south from there. Remember, no prisoners. They're all to be destroyed, irrespective of their level of mutation. Try not to trip over the Twelfth's operations — Sekime-fukutaichou and her team ought to be clearing up the east, so take the western path. We'll meet you back at the *Senkaimon*, when you're done."

"Yes, sir!" The three men saluted, disappearing into shunpo, and Atsushi stepped over the body at his feet, making his way over the rise towards the place where his Vice Captain stood.

Sakanoue was standing over the corpse of another fallen individual, breathing heavily, and as Atsushi approached, he realised with a jolt that something was wrong. Though the body on the ground was still and bloody, just as the one he had dispatched himself had been, there were no signs of mutation, no deformed twisting of limbs nor residual chalky matter marring her face. She was a woman in middle age, her expression one of sightless terror, and at Atsushi's approach, Sakanoue glanced up, a strange, half-wild, half-desperate look in his eyes as he turned to face his Captain.

"Taichou... I... I don't..."

Atsushi frowned, moving to stand at the side of the body.

"Was she about to turn?" he asked softly, and there was no answer. Instead, Sakanoue drew a deep, shaky breath into his lungs.

"Heiji?" Atsushi's voice had a sharp edge to it, a tone that he used when he expected immediate obedience. "I asked a question. Answer it, please."

"I don't know what happened," at length the Vice Captain spoke, and Atsushi could hear the distress in his voice. "For a minute, everything was blurred and there were six, seven of them coming at me, yelling and waving and screeching their war cries. And then... there was my blade going through flesh, and I... I saw her, lying there. Did I kill her? I didn't see her, but Taichou..."

He faltered, raising his free hand to rub his rain-drenched brow in agitation, and Atsushi frowned, glancing around him.

There were no other bodies within the reach of Sakanoue's sword, just that of the woman.

"You saw... six or seven?" He asked quietly. Sakanoue nodded, his breathing once more ragged and uneven, as though he was struggling

to even draw breath into his lungs.

“Taichou, I think something’s wrong with me,” he said unevenly. “I thought it... when we arrived, but I... didn’t... I wasn’t sure. I think... something...”

He put a hand to his throat, grimacing, and Atsushi’s eyes widened in dismay.

“Heiji? Tell me. Tell me now, right away. Did you accept anything from him? Did you accept anything from that man, anything at all?”

Another long silence, then Sakanoue shrugged.

“It was just water,” he murmured. “He was drinking it too, so I thought... he wouldn’t... not to himself. But... perhaps... I was...”

That was as far as he got, his words blurring together into a twisted yowl as he suddenly sank to the ground, clutching his head in his hands.

“Heiji!” Tension coursing through Atsushi’s body, the Captain hurried to his companion’s side, but Sakanoue thrust out a desperate arm, raising frightened eyes to his companion.

“Taichou... please,” he gasped. “I... I don’t... think I can...”

Whatever else he had been about to say was choked and garbled in his throat once more, as a thick, whiteish substance began to pour from the young man’s mouth and eyes, his body twitching in clear agony as he fought in vain against the inevitable. His heart almost dead in his chest, Atsushi watched, numb with horror as the adjutant he had trained from when he was a small boy began to transform into a monster right before his gaze.

There was nothing he could do to stop it, and the orders he had given his other officers now resurfaced cruelly in the back of his mind.

All to be destroyed. No prisoners.

Atsushi’s grip tightened around his sword, distress in his gaze, but there was no time for hesitation. With a bloodcurdling shriek, the creature that had been his Vice Captain launched his body at his companion, blade clutched in his hands and a mad gleam in his glittering eyes. There was nothing of the eager, loyal young man in that expression, just the lust and anticipation of a kill sunk deep beneath the layers of chalky white. The rain continued to beat down, and Atsushi’s feet slipped against the slick surface as he fought to defend his body from this sudden, ruthless attack. They were red eyes, bulging and deformed from a face that now exuded the white chalk

from each and every pore, leaving nothing of his adjutant's features visible.

"Stop this!" Atsushi cried out in vain, pushing wet hair back from his face with his left hand, whilst parrying the weak, drunken shot with the sword in his right. It jerked and twisted against the hand too clumsy to hold it, falling with a soft thud onto the muddy ground, yet the wielder paid it no mind. Instead another ungodly screech emitted from beneath the bare white surface of what had now hardened into a mask, pocked and uneven as it tried to harden under the relentless assault of the rain. The blood on the enemy's clothes and arms seemed in complete contrast to the sudden waxiness of his skin, and he launched his body forward, arms outstretched, yearning for the kill. His fingernails scraped against the white fabric of his opponent's *haori*, leaving bloody prints across the sodden cloth.

The shinigami's blade swung down, almost by instinct rather than by design. With a single sweep it sliced through the corner of the mask, sending cracks through every corner of it and causing bits to fragment and break away. Pale lips became visible, moving with difficulty as though fighting against some unknown force. There was a moment of restraint, as the crimson eyes dulled, and through those chapped, colourless lips came words.

"Help... me."

The tones were hoarse and strained, each syllable squeezed through vocal chords which were no longer responsive to their owner's instructions. In the pall of fighting, a clubbed hand reached out, in desperation, towards the other's blade, and despite himself Atsushi took a step back, no longer wondering if it was rain or tears that saturated his lashes.

"Heiji," he murmured, and at the sound of his name, the creature's body lurched up, true agony in the crimson eyes. For a moment they met gazes, then another blood-curdling shriek broke forth from the pale lips, and the moment of sanity was broken. As the toxic level of reiatsu whipped around them both, a mixture of rage and then despair thudded over Atsushi's body.

Help me.

The enemy's words resonated against his senses, over and over, in time with the beat of the rain. As he raised his sword, defending himself from a clawed swipe with only just enough conviction to push the attacker away, he understood what his companion had truly been asking for.

He glanced at his sword, and a ripple of regret washed through its spirit in answer to his question. Was it the overcast sky reflecting on its surface, or had the silver of the blade dulled slightly, as though going into mourning for an ally well loved?

Summoning his resolve, Atsushi hardened his heart, forcing himself to see only a beast before him, lurching and in pain. It was a Hollow. It was his enemy. To kill it was his duty. It must end now. He had said it himself. No prisoners. All to be destroyed.

The blade came down in a decisive arc this time, sweeping through shell and bone to the soft tissue beneath, and in the cascading spray of blood, there was a bloodcurdling scream of pain and despair as the creature fell to the ground. It writhed and moaned against the mud for a moment, but Atsushi did not hesitate, striking cleanly through the jugular. The moans became gurgles, bubbles forming against the pale lips, then the body lay still. Bit by bit the shell coating began to fall away from the hands and arms, revealing the silent form of his adjutant, Sakanoue Heiji, lying crumpled on the ground.

Discarding the weapon as though it were made of burning metal, Atsushi cradled the broken body desperately in his arms, searching in vain for the signs of life he knew were no longer there. Even the final, gurgling rattle in the man's throat had dissipated into silence. A dull hush fell over the scene, broken only by the splashing drops of the rain which was beginning at last to abate.

Slowly and painstakingly, Atsushi broke the remainder of the mask that still covered the upper part of his protege's face, gently smoothing the flakes of white away from his Vice Captain's skin. The eyes were still open, but no longer that gleaming red and, with a heavy heart, Atsushi closed them, gazing for a moment at the body with hate and grief surging through his veins.

"I won't forgive you," he muttered, reaching for the bloodstained sword with renewed resolve as he got to his feet, swinging around in search of his target. "I won't forgive you for this, *Kusakawa!*"

His final words had erupted into the heavy, damp atmosphere, a scream of anger and revenge as his emotions got the better of him, rushing through his body and ruling both his heart and his head.

"I know you're there!" he exclaimed, the hilt of the weapon heavy in his hand as he scoured the landscape, a hunter searching for his prey. "I know you're listening, watching every single second of this! I can damn well sense your reiatsu, so show yourself and answer for what you've done! If you think I'll walk away and forgive this,

Kusakawa, you're wrong!"

"Forgive me?" As if blown away by the wind, a blur and distortion in the atmosphere told Atsushi that his instinct had been right, and that the target of his hatred had indeed been watching from behind the convenience of a concealing kidou spell. "Forgive me for what, Atsushi-dono? For witnessing you cut the throat of your Vice Captain? For not being able to stop you in time? For what do I require forgiveness? There is only one sword stained with blood here, and believe me, it isn't mine."

He put a hand to his scabbard, drawing forth his own silver weapon and turning it so the light could catch the shining blade. There was something too immaculate about his appearance, and Atsushi's anger flared up yet again as he gazed at his companion from head to foot, realising that despite the lives already lost and the battles going on across large swathes of the affected area, this man had made no attempt to even lift a finger to help. On the contrary, there was a look of interested amusement in his pale eyes, but the smile on his lips lacked all the warmth it usually held, and every word, though light and apparently unconcerned, held a hardness that Atsushi had never heard there before.

His heart lurched then clenched once more with anger.

It was one thing to have suspicions, but yet another to see them brought to life. The man now standing before him was unrepentant, gloating as he watched shinigami die.

"You won't be forgiven for this," Atsushi spoke in low tones. "You shouldn't have done this, Kusakawa. I mean it. You'll regret it — if it takes the last breath in my body, I will carve that regret into you myself! I will make sure you answer to this before Seireitei, so help me — I won't let you play with, torment and slaughter any more of my officers."

"Slaughter?" The pale eyes widened in an affectation of surprise, though that cold smile spread further at Atsushi's words. "You seem confused. *I* have not killed a shinigami today, and Sakanoue-kun doesn't seem to be in any position to offer you absolution. I had thought he was a favourite of yours... but perhaps I was wrong."

He stepped neatly over the dip in the land, skirting around the range of Atsushi's drawn weapon until he came to stand at Sakanoue's side. He bent down, reaching out a long pale finger to touch the man's cheek, then sighed, tut-tutting under his breath.

"A failure in all respects, apparently," he reflected, and though his

comments were only half to himself, the other half Atsushi knew were meant to jibe at him. His expression darkened, but he kept a rein on his spirit power, instead forcing a single word to drop from his lips.

“Why?”

“Why?” The other man glanced up, looking surprised. “Why what? You’ll have to be more explicit, Atsushi-dono. I’m afraid I don’t understand.”

Atsushi took a step forward, jabbing his sword angrily at the white *haori* that cloaked the other man’s shoulders, and the fair haired individual clicked his tongue disapprovingly, taking a step back to avoid being touched by the still bloody blade.

“Careful. This is still clean, and I’d like it to remain that way,” he chided lightly. “Blood is difficult to remove from white cloth — well, given the Eleventh’s reputation, maybe you don’t care about that. Certainly, to look at you now, one would think you preferred your uniform dyed deep with the stuff.”

He sighed, shrugging his shoulders in weary fashion, and Atsushi gritted his teeth at the mocking air in his companion’s aura.

“Well, that’s a combat division for you,” the other man continued. “Savages fighting with no real rhyme or reason behind why. An order is given and they follow it — that’s all. No better than trained monkeys — that’s how my father used to describe your Clan, and apparently, he was right.”

He glanced at Sakanoue once again, then,

“I had high hopes for his ability to withstand it,” he admitted. “I thought a target of higher reiatsu might retain some vestiges of sanity, but it seems I overestimated your skill in training him. He was a capable yes-man, and he mutated beautifully, but he wasn’t enough to be able to kill you. I suppose that means I need to do it myself — which is such a bother, but I don’t see what else I can do.”

“You killed my adjutant,” Atsushi’s voice shook. “You killed him and who knows how many other people. But you’re not as clever as you think you are. *I knew*. Sakanoue and I, we both knew. We played along with you to learn as much as we could, that’s all. Sakanoue knew who really killed him, even if it was my blade that severed his life. He knew, and so do I. I won’t let him die unanswered. I’ll arrest you and take you back to Seireitei, so everyone there can see your true colours, *Kusakawa Shougo!*”

“True colours,” Shougo’s lips thinned into an unpleasant smile, all

levity gone from his voice and his expression now. “Did you think you could bring me here and use the space and anonymity of the Rukon to snare me? You are as much of an idiot now as you were the first time we began working together. The only reason I tolerated it as long as this was because Eleventh Division are notorious for knowing nothing about anything until it jumps up and slaps them in the face. Genryuusai-dono’s lackeys, servants of a family whose head is not even its most powerful or influential member, taking orders and obeying them without questioning their worth. Because it was you, I knew I could operate on my own aims. The fact it’s taken you this long to reason it out is just further proof.”

The cold smile widened.

“I said, not so long ago, that you were the person I worked with the closest, the one who knew me the best. Perhaps even a friend — certainly an ally and a comrade in arms,” he said disparagingly. “Those words were true, up to a point. You are now the one who knows me best, Atsushi-dono. Even better than Seizuku, with whom I trained as a young man, and with whom I shared so many hopes and dreams.”

“Is Anabomi part of this too?” Fury radiated from every one of Atsushi’s words, and Shougo tut-tutted, shaking his head in amusement.

“Seizuku is a proud Kuchiki,” he chided. “Do you think he’d have sanctioned me experimenting on members of other squads to further my scientific progress? People of Clan birth? Don’t be foolish. He would never have allowed anything like that to taint his perfect view of an ordered, settled world. He is my friend, and because he is my friend, I spared him from the unpleasantness. Perhaps he knew I worked on *reiryoku* enhancements. Maybe he understood that sometimes, I did field work here, in the Rukon. He knew I hunted the exile, Keitarou, as all good shinigami ought to do — maybe I discussed with him once, after Shouichi-sama’s death, the possibility that it was Chudokuga who slew my father and put a stop to his scientific research. But experimenting like this? Of course not. It wouldn’t suit his delicate, refined palette to consider something like this as progress. Even now I doubt he understood the first thing about my scientific forays, and I prefer that it’s that way. He never was perceptive enough to make all the necessary connections, and I don’t need to taint him or our long alliance with stories of mutated Vice Captains lying broken on the ground. He never knew what Father’s chief area of research was, — nor that it became mine. He didn’t realise that, when I spoke of creating my own division and making Twelfth stand apart from the

Clan, I meant to remove it by force and kill any people in my path. It was easy, though. Seizuku is a Kuchiki, and because of that it's easy to convince him that all the bad things that happened here happened because of Keitarou. I hate the exile, and I want to kill him — but while he still lives, I can use his reputation as a smokescreen for my own work. Nagesu-sama would never look to me for treason, not when he has such a juicy prize in his sights.”

“You were the one who told the Captains that you felt Keitarou wasn’t responsible in the Rukon!” Atsushi spat out, and Shougo let out a peal of amused laughter.

“Of course I did,” he said condescendingly. “What else would I do? Did you never hear of misdirection, Minaichi? This is not Keitarou’s work, so I told them it wasn’t, but even though I did, it will be believed that it is. Maybe because of it, after this trip, this time, all of it will be blamed on him. My scientific theories on the subject will be discredited by the huge spillage of Gotei blood. Who but Keitarou hates the Gotei and the Clans enough to do this kind of damage? Who else experiments with turning people into Hollows? Of course they will consider it Keitarou’s doing. Because they will, nobody will ever make the connection between me and what occurred here. They will dismiss my errors and continue to underestimate me — until it is too late and everything I have worked towards is complete.”

He looked thoughtful.

“But... perhaps that is too deep a level of planning for you to fully comprehend. Your expression seems to doubt me — I’m sorry, I’d forgotten that your intelligence was so distinctly inferior to my own.”

He prodded at Sakanoue’s corpse with his weapon, then,

“Ultimately, it seems you and I have become closer than even Seizuku could ever boast. How does it feel to know your suspicions have been proven right?”

“I don’t see other Captains as friends,” Atsushi said stiffly, swinging his own blade angrily against Shougo’s and forcing it away from his former adjutant’s body. “I don’t consider the Gotei a social club. When someone is taking souls and turning them Hollow, that’s a reason for investigation. When that person is a fellow Captain, it’s a cause for grief. Anabomi might be a fool, but if he’s only guilty of being fooled by you, at least his hands aren’t stained with blood. That means that I need to round you up, as I initially planned, and this business will be over. Sakanoue will be avenged and there will be no more horror in the Rukon. You’re wrong, too. I wasn’t fooled for as long as you think.

I might be acting now, but I have known for some time. The other Captains might be fooled with Aizen as a smokescreen, but I've been here, I've seen how things are, and I know that the dates and times do not add up with his known movements in District Six. That was what first told me that the enemy was closer to home, in the labs and lair of someone just as arrogant and far more deluded than the one the Council have their heart set on hunting. But you can't just accuse another Captain on a whim. Not one who's smart, and capable of flying the coop and taking shelter in Third District. Inner Seireitei still lacks a firm base for Gotei authority, which meant proceeding in such a way that you wouldn't be alerted to my investigation too soon. You're a Clansman, a landholder and a man of influence within the Urahara. I needed firm, positive proof first, so Sakanoue and I began gathering evidence, biding our time. I could've outed you in Seireitei, but it would've been messy, difficult. So it had to happen here."

His thin features twisted into a scowl.

"I just want to know *why*," he concluded. "Why you betrayed your Clan, your division, your people. Why you betrayed Sakanoue and I. Why you betrayed Mareiko. Why all of those things. Before I take you into custody, I want to hear your story from your own lips."

"Why would you care to do that?" Kusakawa looked startled, then he let out another peal of amused laughter. "Oh, I see. Because of Mareiko. This has all been about Mareiko, hasn't it? You didn't confront me in Seireitei, not because you feared my position in the Urahara and a backlash against the Yamamoto because of it, but because you didn't know *how much she knew*, or how much *she* might be involved in all of this. And here, here too, you hesitated thus far because she was with me. Your weakness has always been Mareiko."

His expression became derisive.

"In a normal person, such reactions might be interpreted as partiality. If you weren't such a neanderthal with a mind fit for nothing but fighting, one might even suggest it was *love*."

Atsushi flushed red with indignation, struck speechless by the temerity of Kusakawa's words, and the Urahara Captain shrugged.

"Why are you glaring? What I say is true. Among *normal* people, such fondness might even be cause for courtship — your rank and hers would suit both Clans quite well. That is, providing Mareiko's family hadn't met you... but such things are quite academic now. I'm sorry to break it to you, but I won't be giving you consent to court my Vice Captain. Well, probably you'd thank me for that judgement..."

given your narrow, archaic views.”

He lowered his voice, eyes glittering with malice.

“*But* I will tell you the answer to your unspoken question. Mareiko was chosen as my adjutant for several reasons. Reasons that relate to the Urahara’s deepest secrets, and a rationale you would never understand. Father saw potential in her when she was just a child, and his expectations were borne out — she truly is a gifted young woman with very special skills. Ultimately, though, she worked so well as my second in command because I knew she would never see beyond her own science to the depths of mine. She’s a talented individual. Intelligent, too. Genius, some might say — I wouldn’t argue with them. Certainly several levels above your own poor intellect. I knew I could use her effectively, and, thanks to her unique position with regards to the Clan, I could count on her loyalty more than that of anyone else. But with people of that ilk, Atsushi-dono, it’s easy to just let them slip into their own world. With that level of genius comes naivety and blind trust — well, you must know that. The fact she considers you her friend when all others sheer away from you is evidence enough. People like Mareiko may be brilliant, but myopic. They see the things they want to see, and nothing else. I helped her with her research, and so she never asked about all of mine. She was never involved with this. That’s why I brought her here with me when I knew things would come to a head today. It was unfortunate, but events forced my hand. That friendship between the two of you was beginning to be problematic anyway... so I decided to cut my losses and move on.”

His eyes glittered.

“I intended to test run something I’d been working on here, on all of you,” he said matter of factly. “On Mareiko, on you, on Sakanoue. You don’t think I didn’t realise your suspicions? I planned a welcome in your honour, for finally managing to string the clues together and find the truth. And I made sure everyone was present, including an appropriate damsel in distress.”

“What have you done with her?” Atsushi was suddenly alarmed, and Shougo chuckled, shaking his head.

“Nothing, yet,” he said dismissively. “She’s unconscious, but that’s all. One of my creations severed a ligament in her shoulder, most likely. I’ll finish her off when we’re done here. You can consider that part of it your fault, Atushi-dono — she was your lure, but to make her so, I had to be willing to sacrifice her. It was a very hard decision to make — Vice Captains are difficult to come by, especially good

ones. Oh, but I suppose you know that. Didn't you train Sakanoue from infancy? Then you'll understand the sacrifice I made to play you at your own game."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I'll make it all worthwhile, though. I'll paint the scene of carnage beautifully," he taunted. "I'll return to Seireitei, report how I fought bravely to defend you all but without success. They'll give you a hero's funeral, Atsushi-kun — won't that be nice? You can smoulder on the Clan barbeque while your family observe the proper mourning. Of course, they probably won't miss you very much — you don't seem to be very liked by them. But I'm sure they'll turn out for show all the same. That's what Clans are for, aren't they? For show."

"You're as Clan as I am," Atsushi snapped, and Shougo nodded.

"I am," he agreed. "You already commented on my Clan rank, and it's truer than you think. My father was a *very* trusted aide and servant of Rikaya-sama, did you know that? A survivor from before the scandal of Keitarou's father Keitsune and the subsequent disgrace of that line. Father benefited from that, all of it, and as a result my family have been at the heart of the Urahara administration for longer than Nagesu-sama has even been alive. I've been in his service for most of my life. For that reason, I was recommended above others of higher rank for the Captaincy of Twelfth. I, my father, we had impeccable reputations. Who better to appoint than me?"

He sighed pensively.

"My father was a brilliant man, and did many interesting experiments, but he died — or was murdered — far too young to bring them all to fruition. Lucky for me he left behind copious notes. A scientist always explores every avenue of investigation, whether it be palatable or even morally correct to do so. This you see here," he gestured to their surrounds and the bloodsoaked remains of the other fallen members of the Eleventh and Twelfth divisions, "is the culmination of my work but also of his. I'm getting so very much closer now to perfecting the technique. Sakanoue's final actions were not as I would've liked them, but they showed some conscious thought and I can draw a lot from it. Maybe I can even apply it to Father's projects — who knows?"

"People are just potential experiments to you, aren't they?" Atsushi demanded. Shougo shrugged.

"And to you they're just individuals you give orders to or receive orders from," he returned neatly. "Of all the people in the Gotei, you

should understand the utilitarian nature of the masses. You choose to train yours to kill on the battlefield, I choose to train mine chemically, for control of a bigger prize and a bigger picture. What that is doesn't concern you, however. You won't live long enough to see its effects, and I'm tired of talking. At this rate, Seireitei will wonder why we're not answering their spirit pages, and I'd really like to be done and dusted before they send anyone to look for us. It would be a hassle to kill more people with this sword when I'd been saving it especially for you. I felt sure the mutations could speak for most of the danger, but though I gambled with Sakanoue, I did expect that it would take a Captain's sword to take out the Captain of the Eleventh Division. What could be more terrifying for Seireitei than that, though? To think that such monsters had the power to kill a Captain — even though, of course, I will tell them how bravely you fought."

He smiled cruelly.

"If you like, I'll tell them you died avenging Mareiko and Sakanoue," he offered off-handedly. "That way your name will at least get some respect in death, regardless of everything said about you in life."

He glanced at Sakanoue, nudging the man's limp arm with his toe.

"You're already tired," he added. "And I know you and your sword, so I know your weaknesses. Mareiko is unconscious, hurt and bleeding. Sakanoue is dead. Those who remain alive are minnows following trails after ghosts far from this place, so nobody will come to your defence. But then, who would? With Sakanoue dead, who else in the whole of Soul Society cares anything for you, Atsushi-dono? It's foolish to try and fight against the inevitable. You might as well submit and let me kill you with the least possible fuss."

"I have enough strength left in me to fight a dozen more of your hollow drones and still bring you to heel," Atsushi said thickly. "If you doubt that, you underestimate me."

"Or you underestimate me," Shougo said smoothly, raising his sword up before his face and tilting the blade so that the smooth surface glinted light in Atsushi's direction. "Enough playing. I'm bored with you — you've never been a viable specimen, which makes you dispensable."

"And you've never been a viable Captain, which makes arresting you paramount," Atsushi lifted his own weapon, giving it a shake as it glittered with eerie, defiant light. "*Kubi o tore, Mokizuki!*"

No sooner had the words left his lips than the hilt of the weapon

lengthened into a long, carved handle, the blade bending around into the crescent moon curved, razor sharp surface of a reaping scythe.

Shougo gazed at it for a moment, then he snorted.

“If you had used that on Sakanoue, it would’ve been so much quicker,” he reflected. “I’ve heard that Mokizuki can slice a Hollow’s head from it’s shoulders in less than a second. Yet you didn’t think to summon it. You really were soft on that boy, weren’t you?”

“He was my Vice Captain,” Atsushi spoke stiffly. “A Captain’s job is to avenge the death of his officers.”

“So you’ll use that ungainly thing to slice off my head?” Shougo taunted, and Atsushi shrugged.

“I’d rather not cover my sword with your tainted blood,” he returned blackly. “I told you already. It’s Seireitei’s justice you’ll face, not mine. It’s the Council’s execution that you ought to face, not mine. I’m not like you. I’m not a vigilante.”

“Hard to believe from a man who just killed his adjutant,” Shougo taunted, and Atsushi tensed, a grim look crossing his features.

“I killed a Hollow. A Hollow you created,” he said flatly. “I will answer to Seireitei’s justice for that, too, without a doubt. If it stops you from being let loose on any more officers... on Mareiko, and on anyone else, I’ll submit myself to their justice, too. So long as it takes you out of circulation, I won’t keep anything back. That’s my duty — and as you’ve probably noticed, doing my duty is my first priority. That’s why the Yamamoto chose me to Captain this division, above any and all other candidates for the job.”

“Sigh. So boring,” Shougo rolled his eyes, but he raised his own weapon, running his index finger slowly and methodically along the blunt edge of the blade and Atsushi saw a prickle of light spread from hilt to tip, engulfing it entirely in its haze. “A sword fight suits me fine, though. You released first, so that will almost make my killing you an act of self defence. *Yo o ogamu, Yachuu Ryoujin.*”

He drew the weapon down through the thick damp air, and Atsushi’s eyes narrowed, taking in the hazy, almost spectral form of the weapon as it cut through the atmosphere. Though he had worked and fought alongside Shougo in the Rukon for many years, it was the first time he had seen Yachuu Ryoujin in full release, and glancing at it now, he realised that it was both as eerie and enigmatic as its owner. The blade’s surface was almost see-through, as though it were a ghost blade forged from reiatsu alone. It was a slender weapon

without a guard, and even focusing his full attention on it, it was difficult for Atsushi to make out exactly where it tapered to a point.

At his expression, Shougo smiled.

“I’d forgotten. You haven’t seen my *zanpakutou* released before, have you?” he mused, sweeping it up and across as though testing his swing, but Atsushi felt the rush of energy as the weapon drew towards him and with a curse he leapt back, only just avoiding being slashed across the front of his uniform. “Yes, you see, it’s hard to judge, isn’t it? You never know how close to danger you are when it’s released. Apt, don’t you think — considering how much danger you’ve walked into now. Your scythe won’t be able to cut me down, not if you can’t risk coming into my space. You won’t reap my soul so easily.”

“I thought I already told you I didn’t intend to,” Atsushi spun the scythe around in his grip, deflecting the spectral blade’s second and third swings as he steadied his own footing on the muddy ground. “I know you like the sound of your own voice, Kusakawa, but I’m sick of it. Nothing more you have to say interests me. If your sword is capable of defeating me and ending my life, prove it with your skills, not your boasts. We’re not negotiating, we’re fighting... something which we do properly in Eleventh, even if you don’t in Twelfth.”

Shougo snorted, wrinkling up his nose in distaste, but he made no further comment, and for a while the only sound that could be heard across the windswept, bloodsoaked plain was the clash of weapon against weapon, and the grunts and breaths of the two fighters as they worked to avoid the other’s swings.

Despite his snappish comments to the contrary, Atsushi knew only too well that Shougo had an exemplary military record as well as a scientific one. Though they had never trained together, he knew that Shougo’s close friendship with Anabomi of the Ninth had led to many invitations and training sessions in Sixth District, and that one of the main reasons that Shougo had been so trusted to carry out these missions to Rukongai was on account of his superior ability with his sword. So far as normal weaponry went, Atsushi was fairly confident that his own training experience and regime was superior, but now, in the heavy, grey atmosphere of the wasteland Rukon, he was discovering that Yachuu Ryoujin in released form was a whole different kettle of fish to a sealed blade. More than once he thought he had the weapon pinned, only for Shougo to ghost away from him with an amused chuckle, the look in his eyes condescendingly wishing him better luck next time. Was the blade fragmenting to avoid making contact with Mokizuki’s razor sharp edge? Atsushi redoubled his focus

on the point of his opponent's blade, but try as he might he could not see the weapon divide to avoid his thrust. On the contrary, as his own *zanpakutou* sliced down towards Shougo's shoulder, he felt a sharp pain embed itself in his lumbar region, and he let out a grunt of pain, instinctively using Mokizuki's substantial staff to push his opponent away. Blood trickled through the torn fabric of his *shihakushou* and soaked into the cloth of the *haori*, but the wound, though painful, had not done any major damage. Shougo tut-tutted, shaking his sword as if to remove invisible traces of his companion's blood.

"Now look. You've dirtied her," he scolded lightly. "I told you, didn't I? You underestimate me. Mokizuki's swings are too direct and I can avoid them."

"You think a scratch like this bothers me?" Atsushi's eyes were cold. "Do you know how the Yamamoto train their children in the top military families, Kusakawa? If that's as much as that ghost sword can do to me, you'll be swinging a long time before you put me in my grave. Reinforcements from Seireitei will come if you don't answer their spirit pages promptly, and time is moving on. Time isn't on your side."

"Fine words from a man for whom no more time remains," Shougo's expression hardened, and he drove forward, drilling his blade resolutely towards Atsushi's midriff. The Eleventh Captain was ready for him, swinging Mokizuki back down to deflect, but once more the two weapons missed making contact, and Atsushi's eyes widened slightly as at last he understood the nature of his companion's blade.

When he wants it to hit me, it can cut. But when he doesn't, it's as though it's no more than an illusion — a cloud of reishi but nothing more. It is a true ghost blade... and a physical attack against it won't do any good. It will only lay me open to his way of fighting — so I have to disrupt it. I have to become more forceful, and make it impossible for him to use that sword in the way he wants.

He took a few steps back, eying the tip of his weapon thoughtfully, and Shougo tilted his head on one side, a quizzical look on his features.

"Giving up?" he challenged. "You insult me. I know Mokizuki can do more than just slash around like that. Release your weapon properly, Atsushi-dono. I can see from your eyes that you've understood the nature of my weapon — for that I complement you, since most of its opponents are dead before they figure that out. But if you've done that, you'll know that, like this, Mokizuki can't reach me.

I told you, didn't I? You can't break into my space if you can't trace my weapon's movements."

He lifted his weapon once more, preparing a new assault, but Atsushi had no intention of waiting around for his opponent to strike.

"*Hebi no Kari!*" he exclaimed, swinging his weapon in a sweeping arc towards his companion's sword arm. This time, instead of simply slashing through the air, the crescent shaped blade unfolded into a concertina of six or seven identically sized and shaped lesser blades, which shot out like a snake lunging forward with its fangs bared. Despite himself, Shougo cursed, only just managing to withdraw his arm in time to avoid it being sliced cleanly in two, and as he hopped back away from the reach of the snake's blade, he cast his opponent a rueful look.

"I see. You're not interested in my head, but my sword arm, that's another matter," he observed casually, and Atsushi shrugged, watching the divided blades click back into their original position.

"You asked me to use Mokizuki properly," he responded quietly. "Don't regret it when I oblige."

He lifted the weapon again, swinging it in another arc and the snake-like blades unfolded, this time lunging towards Shougo's right lung. The scientist dodged, using Yachuu Ryoujin's ghostly surface to bat the weapon away, but Atsushi was on the front foot now, the fang-sharp edge this time burrowing deep into Shougo's left shoulder. Blood spurted from the wound, and Shougo muttered a curse, using his bare hand to rip the weapon away from his skin.

"Now you have ruined my *haori*," he said blackly. "I told you, didn't I? They're difficult and expensive to clean."

"I was aiming for your right side, but never mind," Atsushi withdrew the weapon once more, spots of blood spattering from the ends onto the muddy ground. "You're lucky I'm going so easily on you. The rumours about Mokizuki decapitating Hollows in less than a second? All true. Mokizuki has the sharpest edge of any sword in the Yamamoto Clan, so if I really wanted to kill you, you'd probably be dead by now."

"It's a pity for you that you don't, then, because it gives me the advantage," Shougo snapped back, and Atsushi saw a haze of energy cloak itself around his sword as he raised it, thrusting it out between them as though ensuring that the other man kept his distance. "*Moumokujin!*"

Atsushi was not sure what happened next. One minute Shougo had been standing before him, blade outstretched and a look of angry determination on his fair features, and the next, a cloud of something grey and eerie had begun to spread all around him, concealing not only Shougo but the entirety of his surroundings from view. Alarmed, he thrust out a hand, trying to gauge what was going on, but his fingers slipped through the mist and disappeared, strange, fragmented energy prickling against his skin. He took a step back, then another, and from somewhere nearby he heard a disembodied laugh. Frantically he tried to place it, but the cloud of fog that had surrounded him was growing darker, as though night had begun to set at an alarming speed.

“What did you do?” His words bounced out into the ether, muffled and echoey, as though he alone had been confined in this night-like prison, and from somewhere beyond, he heard a derisive snort.

“My sword’s name is Midnight Hunter,” Shougo had moved, but try as he might, Atsushi could not pinpoint his companion’s location. “Now, perhaps, you understand why. Shinigami can’t see in the dark, Atsushi-dono. They rely far too much on their eyes and their spirit senses, but Yachuu Ryoujin foxes both of those. The mist that surrounds you is Yachuu’s aura. Do you feel stifled? Blinded, perhaps? Well, you should. My sword has penetrated deep into your eyes, slipping into your pupils, cloaking your retina and preventing the light from getting through. While you stumble about in darkness, you can’t hope to defend yourself against me. You are as helpless as a vole when an owl is hunting it... you can consider me your owl.”

Something sharp suddenly pierced through the cloud, digging deep into Atsushi’s stomach, and he gasped, flinching back from the pain. Though he looked, he could not see anything, his own body now concealed from view, and as he felt the sharp implement being withdrawn. It had only been a test swing, to judge how impaired he had become, and he dragged a heavy breath into his lungs, struggling to suppress the waves of panic now ruling his system. Shougo had imprisoned him, and he did not know from where or when the fatal attack would come. He could not sense his companion’s reiatsu through the heavy mist against his skin, and though his eyes had begun to water, irritated by Yachuu Ryoujin’s enforced presence, no matter how hard he blinked, he could not bring back his sight.

“Are you crying? A tough man like you?” Shougo’s words were light, mocking, amused, and they ricocheted cruelly around the midnight prison. “How pitiful. Still, don’t worry. I’ll dry those tears for you, Atsushi-dono. Time is up. I’m done here.”

Atsushi's heart began racing in his chest, his grip around the staff of his sword tightening. He could still feel his weapon, even if he couldn't see it. He could feel it, there between his fingers, and if he focused, if he used all of his energy on Mokizuki, then surely... surely he could still fight. Shougo would aim for a vital spot — a lung, his jugular, even his brain. If he could keep the other's sword at bay...

Slowly he began to swing the weapon round, growing faster and faster as he attempted to use its spinning motion as a shield against any potential attack. Blind, he took a faltering step forward, then another, struggling in vain to listen for any sign of his opponent. A soft footfall from behind sent shockwaves through his body, and more by instinct than by design he swung around. If he was going to live through this, he had no choice but to keep fighting, but against an enemy he could not see...

"Akuin Akka!"

The words left his lips before he knew he was going to say them, his entire energy flowing into Mokizuki's staff and lighting up the whole weapon like a sudden, spiritual beacon. His life was his weapon's life, his every breath in the blade of his *zanpakutou* and, as the bond between them grew deeper and steadier, Atsushi could make out the faintest of silhouettes, grainy and unclear, but unmistakably...

The blade had come out towards him before he could counter it, plunging deep into his back and striking clean through his heart, burrowing through bone and splintering his ribs to break through on the other side. The pain was an excruciating one, turning his entire vision red then black then red again, but still he clung on to Mokizuki's staff, refusing to loosen his grip for even the briefest of seconds. From the world outside there was a gasp, then the blade that had stabbed through him began to disintegrate into nothing. His body still a world of blood and pain, it was all Atsushi could do to keep his hold on Mokizuki, trusting his existence to the sword which had always worked so dutifully at his side. Seconds passed like minutes, minutes like hours in what seemed like complete silence, then, little by little, the haze of midnight began to disperse, chinks of light breaking through the fog and illuminating his vision once more.

His hands were sticky with blood, coagulating against Mokizuki's fine staff, and for a moment all he could do was draw air into his lungs, focusing on one breath, then another, then another. The light surrounding his sword began to dim, little by little, as he allowed his energy to return to his body, seeping slowly back through his limbs

and his veins and into his vital organs. The heart which, for a moment had almost stopped beating once more jerked into life, and as he glanced down at himself, he could see the tear across the front of his uniform, where Shougo's blade had pierced him through.

But there was no wound, and there was no blood.

Atsushi dragged further gulps of air into his lungs, exhaustion and dizziness threatening to rob him of his consciousness. It was several moments before he could raise his gaze to look for his opponent, and when he did, he felt a sick sense of realisation creep over his battered senses.

Shougo lay face down on the ground before him, a pool of blood spreading out around his body. Even without getting up, Atsushi knew that his companion was dead, a fatal blow through the heart which had struck the life out of him in a single moment.

Akuin Akka.

Atsushi swallowed hard, feeling physically sick as he realised what he had done.

Was that your will or mine, Mokizuki? I put my heart and my soul into you and trusted you to protect me — but was it you or I who said those words and condemned Kusakawa to his fate?

He lifted a clumsy left hand, pressing it against his unhurt chest.

Akuin Akka. Sowing evil, reaping evil. What you do to your opponent rebounds upon you. Had I struck him, I would have lain dead... and his attempt to kill me... ultimately...

You trusted your life to me, Master. Together, we saved it. You should not regret this. He was not worthy of life.

It wasn't our judgement to make.

Slowly, unsteadily, Atsushi dragged himself to his feet, using Mokizuki as a support and taking a hesitant step towards his companion. Kneeling at the other Captain's side, he paid no heed to the blood that now covered his own uniform, turning the other man's body over and gazing down into the glazed, glassy eyes.

His aim was extremely good. Scientifically precise, I would say. An inch or two either side — well, he might've lived.

And all evidence of what he did died with him.

At least it did not die with you.

No.

Atsushi sealed his weapon, resting the blade against Shougo's body as he used his free hand to close the other man's eyes.

But now there's nothing I can do about it. I have no proof of anything without Kusakawa himself. More, if it were to be known that I killed him, even if I did do it in self defence...

There is no need for the other shinigami to know any of this.

Mokizuki was dismissive.

This may not be their justice, but it is justice all the same. There are no other suspects. The incidents will stop. His death is the same here as it would be there.

Atsushi sighed heavily, sheathing his sword and, fumbling at Shougo's *obi* for the spirit device that he knew his companion had carried, he got unsteadily to his feet. He took a few steps away from the body of the Twelfth Division Captain, returning to where Sakanoue still lay silent on the ground, and for a moment he just gazed down at his adjutant, pain in his heart. He had avenged his young Vice Captain, but his doing so could not bring the man back to life. He gazed around him for any sign of witnesses to his and Shougo's altercation, but he could see nobody within his immediate line of sight, and, inwardly, he made up his mind.

He wrapped his bloody fingers around the spirit pager, using the last of his *reiryoku* to activate its sensors. At his touch, a pair of dark, gossamer wings like those from a Hell Butterfly spread out from either side, and a haze of *kidou* engulfed his hand, opening up a spirit connection to the world on the other side of the Sekkiseki divide.

"This is Minaichi," he spoke gruffly, his voice weary and out of breath. "Send help, urgently, over. Kusakawa, Sakanoue down. Sekime, condition unknown, but likely injured, need medical help. Enemy force far worse than we thought. Heavy losses. Need urgent assistance, over."

As someone's voice crackled through on the other end, Atsushi found he could no longer make out one word from another. The world blurred and swam around him and, with a little gasp, he crumpled, toppling forward onto the muddy, bloody ground.

Author's Note: Swords... and...

Atsushi's sword is Mokizuki 喪忌月 "Mourning Moon", and Shougo's is Yachuu Ryoujin 夜中獵人 "Midnight Hunter". The release command for Mokizuki, *Kubi o tore* means "take his head", as in decapitate. *Yo o ogamu* means "worship the night." Mokizuki's attacks are "Hebi no Kari" (蛇の刈り) Snake's Reaper), which is the unfolding of multiple blades from the one

— if you’ve seen Inuyasha, it’s similar to what one of the Shichinintai uses in its function. The other release, Akuin Akka 悪因悪果 is a bit more sinister. Atsushi cannot use this attack easily. By entrusting everything to his sword, even his life, it is the ultimate and last ditch attempt at self-defence. As explained in the story, it takes any hit aimed at Atsushi, and rebounds it on the striker. Bringing his body to the level of using Akuin Akka drains almost the entirety of his spirit power, rendering him extremely vulnerable to attack and he is at risk of dying if he loses his grip for even one moment on Mokizuki’s staff while the fight is still going on, as doing so can reverse the effects of the technique back on his own body. Shougo was killed because he stabbed Atsushi through the heart, and this rebounded back on him. In short, Akuin Akka = you reap what you sow.

Shougo’s sword technique, Moumokuji 盲目刃 literally means, “blinded blade”, and I think it’s effects are pretty self-explanatory.

So there it is people. The real truth about the Rukon, and Kusakawa junior’s identity, the former Captain of the Twelfth Division, Shougo-dono.

Do people still hate Atsushi-kun? O.O

In case you are wondering, Kusakawa Shougo is the son of Kusakawa Daigo, the creator of the Kamen no Gunzei fighting in the Real World. It was Daigo who set up the mountain lab in the Real World, which Shougo later inherited and Keitarou took control of. It was also Daigo who was the first victim Keitarou slew with Chudokuga’s bankai release. Shougo’s science was never quite at Daigo’s level, and so he was unable to replicate the conditions which created Aki, Haruya and Moe, despite his best attempts — nor was he able to stabilise their spirit energy. Both Daigo and Shougo treated the three Kamen no Gunzei unforgivably, breaking the sanity of both Moe and Aki, and creating the deep hatred of the Urahara possessed by all three.

Shougo is loosely number two on the “modes of death” chart. Though Shougo doesn’t really fit “aging”, he represents the inevitability of death and the arrogance of Barragan. Despite being already dead and no ally of Keitarou, his actions, his creations, his work and even his death have all operated in Keitarou’s favour — an ally by proxy because the truth of the past was never fully known.

Everything up to this point should, of course, have now rendered the identity of the spy completely obvious. ;)

66. No Way Back

Chapter Sixty Four: No Way Back

A sudden chill had settled over the woodland copse, and, as the creature's hands brushed against the charred edges of the damaged *haori* once more, Kyouki swung her sword down, slicing through the Hollow-man's fingers. He let out a yell, falling backwards in surprise and dismay, but no blood spurted from the wound, and Kyouki wondered if she was now fighting a beast who was too much Hollow to continue to bleed. If that was the case, killing him might require a completely different line of approach. Gekkoushin was shimmering with an eerie blue light now, as the Night Moon took over from the Day. The sweep of her blade had clearly caused her opponent some agitation, for he was keeping his distance from her, favouring his injured left hand and glaring at her like a wounded animal adjudging how best to settle the insult. With their confrontation creating such a ruckuss, Kyouki felt certain there were no wild critters anywhere at hand, but she did not know how much strength he had already absorbed from consuming Ryuusei's arm and the squirrels in the trees. Would his limb once more be able to heal? She waited, but nothing happened. With a frown, she glanced at the edge of her weapon, noticing for the first time the smear of blood that tainted the proud blade. Her eyes became slits as she contemplated this. There had been no spray of blood, but that was not because her opponent no longer had the capability to bleed. On the contrary, the sheer edge and freezing temperature of Gekkoushin's blade had sealed the wound the moment the two had made contact, and any blood had frozen and congealed on the spot.

Knowing he still had a beating heart gave Kyouki some reassurance. She had fought Hollows before, and she had fought men, but she had never had to fight an amalgamation of the two. It had thrown her and she had been frightened, but now she berated herself for that weak reaction, hardening her spirit and rallying her resolve to win. Gekkoushin had been right, her son was bleeding and injured, and he needed her. She had no time to waste on fighting this creature, not when Ryuusei's life was in the balance. Whether her son lived or died, she knew that, as long as he was able, he would be asking for her, worried about her absence from his side. He would know that she had released her sword, and was fighting. Anxious patients often bled more, and suffered greater complications. She needed to put an end to

things here so she could go and reassure him all was well — and that took priority over everything.

Yes, even over finding the exile, Keitarou.

Kyouki slipped Gekkoushin through the thin Real World air, noting how her every move was being followed by her companion's predatorial gaze. The mood of the battle had changed— he was no longer playing with her, nor was the confrontation going according to his plans rather than hers. Her shift in spiritual approach had alarmed him, but the respectful distance that he was now giving her told her once more that this creature was far from the mad, reckless beast she had first considered him to be. His thought processes were not hers, but they were rational and calculated and she could not underestimate him. The more time she gave him, the more likely it was that he would find a way to counter her, and so she had to use this moment of hesitation to push home her advantage.

Gekkoushin's Night Moon could be used freely through the forestland, as it caused less damage to the local environment by freezing it than by setting it aflame. It had proven more effective in holding off her foe, but unless she could get a direct blow in on a vital organ, she was unlikely to be able to stop him. If he lost interest in fighting her, or decided she was too much of a risk, he might retreat into the dense woodland thickets beyond. He was hunting her for food, but if the hunt proved too dangerous, he would give up and move on elsewhere. Fifth Division were still too close to this place for her to assume he would not find them — and with wounded men among their number, it would be easy pickings. The creature had stopped attacking them only because she had come and confronted him, sending up a challenge he had read and responded to. He knew as well as she did that there were other, more viable victims out there — and he had already tasted the spirit-rich blood of her eldest son.

The longer he did not attack her, the more Kyouki felt certain that he was weighing up his options, deciding whether to continue or whether to turn tail and flee. There was no longer any time left to strategise how Gekkoushin's Night Moon might be used to bring him down — if she wanted to stop him, she would need to act bigger, and throw him so completely off his guard that this landscape which he considered his territory became foreign and alien, a place of danger, rather than his safe haven. She had to make this place her own, and there was only one way she could do that.

Her gaze flitted to the edge of her sword, seeing the smear of blood again, and drawing reassurance from it. She could hurt him. If she was

clever, and quick, and decisive, she could kill him. There was one chance, and she would take it. Gently she moved her left hand to cover the hilt of her sword, and the creature flinched, tensing up at her movement as though anticipating a flare of Kidou magic. Fragments of energy surrounded his body, as though he were beginning to pull together shreds of his aura to fire a Cero in defence, but Kyouki was not about to wait for that to happen.

“*Bankai*,” she murmured. “*Gekkoushin Nisshoku*.”

As soon as the words had left her lips, the entire forest began to grow dark, a spreading shadow of energy that stretched long, tendril like fingers across the small, claustrophobic copse, each one winding itself lovingly around the trunk of a tree.. The creature started, confused and alarmed as the rays of sunlight filtering through the boughs began to disappear one by one, and the woodland became cloaked in night. He fidgeted, taking a step or two back towards the ring of trees that flanked the clearing, but the darkness was soon all around him, blocking out his familiar pathways and occluding even the tiniest fragment of light from penetrating the shield. As the air grew thicker, denser and darker, Kyouki could sense her opponent’s rising agitation, hearing the rustle of his feet against the ground. He wanted to flee, even without words she understood his panic, but still he hesitated, no longer sure of where to go or how to hide.

He could no longer see her, nor the smile of satisfaction that had spread across the Fifth Division Captain’s lips. Though his peering, penetrating eyes and his bloodstained mask were now hidden from her line of sight, too, she did not feel afraid. On the contrary, even if she could not see her opponent, the blackness was soothing, for it proved she was not fighting this battle alone. Gekkoushin had brought the darkness, luring night-time into the bright sun of midday, and, even in this pitch black, Gekkoushin could see her way. Kyouki closed her eyes, allowing her sword’s senses to take over from her own. In the black of her own mind she could now make out the faintest of outlines, a soft, bluish aura that told her her opponent was still close at hand. On fours, he was padding and pawing around in a small circle, still a safe distance away, and his agitation was clearly growing. Flickers of spiritual energy danced against the shape, growing bolder as the creature attempted to figure out some form of defence for what was happening, but it was not that which had most attracted Kyouki’s attention. Through the gloom of her mind’s eye she could see the proof that this individual was not yet all Hollow, for, in the region of his left chest was a soft, hazy outline of something she had not seen before. Something which was gently, rhythmically moving.

His heart.
Gekkoushin?

Kyouki resisted the urge to open her eyes, instead reaching out her thoughts to her sword's spirit.

You've never had to use this skill to kill a living soul before, Kyouki.

Gekkoushin's response answered the question she had not known how to ask.

Our Bankai is still young. In the past, you've seen Hollows, and struck them apart, but this one is different. He has not completely turned yet. To kill him, you must still his heart, not break his mask. My blade is still frozen from the Night Moon release. Be careful. The longer you hesitate, the more likely he will find a way to evade you. He is not like other souls. He is feral, and wild animals understand dark and light and find ways to adjust that tamed ones cannot.

Understood.

Kyouki focused her attention on the hazy outline, watching him pad up and down along the edge of the trees. The head was lowered towards the ground, as though he was using his sense of smell to try and regain his bearings. Kyouki's own spirit power was heavy and cloying in the air, claiming the territory for her own, but still he persevered, searching for the glimmer of a familiar track into the woods. If she lost him in the trees, it would be impossible to snare him, for Gekkoushin's Eclipse could not follow an individual, it could only cover the area in which it had been released. If the creature broke out of the copse, she would lose track of him — and in that time, he might find and kill more of her men.

There was no more time to wait.

Her eyes still tightly closed, Kyouki redoubled her focus on her target, forcing her thoughts down, down, down towards the beating, vibrating shadow of her opponent's spiritual heart. As she did so, he paused, then turned to face her, as though something in the intensity of her aura had drawn him to sense out where she was. He was considering, she realised, gauging his chances of launching an attack in the darkness, and with a sudden sense of concern she wondered whether, as Gekkoushin had feared, his eyes had adjusted to the darkness quickly enough for him to see her. He was no longer so agitated, and the sense of excitement that had pervaded his aura was beginning to return. Did he think the game was still on? Well, he would soon find out that the rules had changed.

Slowly, Kyouki parted her hands, feeling the judder of her sword's pull as it fought to break free of her control. Taking a final deep

breath to calm herself, she released her grasp on Gekkoushin's hilt completely.

"*Tsukiya*," she murmured. There was a whoosh of spiritual energy, and a freezing shaft of air blew back against her skin as the sword shot forth like a barb from a crossbow. The next minute something dazzling and bright tore apart her internal vision, and there was a terrible, awful howl of pain and terror as, somewhere in the flare of light, something was cut down.

The thud of a body against the ground was followed by sudden, eerie stillness, and Kyouki opened one eye cautiously, noticing that the darkness that had enshrouded the copse was beginning to fade and shred away at the edges. As the clearing grew brighter, she could make out the shape of her opponent lying crumpled on the ground. Blood pooled weakly from a wound in his chest, from which penetrated the distinctive ice blue blade and carved hilt of Kyouki's *zanpakutou*. The force of the attack had shattered her Bankai release, but the weapon still remained in full shikai, and as light penetrated the copse once more, it glinted off the weapon, giving it an eerie glow. As the Fifth Division Captain made her way across the grass to retrieve her weapon, she saw with some relief that the mask that had covered the creature's face had begun to crack and chip away, and, as she pulled Gekkoushin free, a further lazy trickle of blood leaked out from the open wound. Wiping her weapon clean on her *obi*, she set it aside on the ground, turning her attention to her opponent to make sure he was really dead. A touch of his throat confirmed Kyouki's convictions. Although Gekkoushin's frozen blade had only glanced across the edge of the heart, it had caused enough damage to freeze its rhythm, preventing the Hollow-man's body from effecting any emergency regenerative repairs. Ice had been his weakness where fire had not. The pulsing rhythm had ceased, and the fight was done.

Retrieving her weapon, she sealed it, returning it to its sheath, then turned the body onto its back. As she did so, the last of the mask fell away, revealing the face below, and for a moment Kyouki faltered, struck by the human visage that had lurked deep below the layers of chalk. He looked young, she realised, young enough to be the same age as her own second son, and this disturbed her more than she cared to admit. He no longer looked like a monster, but simply a scrawny, skinny young man, with fair hair, and a delicate complexion. His eyes were half-open, enough that Kyouki could see the pale shade of the iris lurking beneath the lids, but his expression was not twisted into a grotesque mask of pain, madness or fear. He seemed more like he was half-asleep, and she brushed his eyelids closed, unnerved by what she had seen.

Not a man and not a Hollow, but both at the same time. A vicious, feral hunter who had run wild through these forests and savaged both the native people and her own division members... but in that moment, Kyouki's maternal instinct made her wish that, somehow, she had been able to help, not hurt him.

Don't lose your wits, idiot. This isn't the time or the place, not when he might have killed your son and heir.

Gekkoushin's judgement was less sympathetic, and, allowing herself a wry smile, Kyouki got to her feet, nodding her head.

"We'll go to Ryuusei and the others now, Gekkoushin. Don't worry, I haven't lost my mind," she said aloud. "I was just curious... I wanted to see what I had really been fighting."

And did you get your answer?

"No..." Kyouki's brow creased. "No. I'm not sure that answer is possible, not now. He looks... like any young man might, now. Not a Hollow, not a monster, just... a young man, like my son or no... more like one of Nagesu's. He looks like an Urahara, Gekkoushin. Strikingly, in all respects."

And now he's dead, so let's get back to the people who matter to us. Carrion isn't for us to hover over — you're not a vulture.

"Fine. Message understood," Kyouki sighed, but nodded, patting the hilt of her sword lightly before slipping into shunpo. As the wielder of a light-based *zanpakutou*, shunpo was one of Kyouki's gifts, and it was not long at all before she was dropping out of the flash-step in the vicinity of abandoned human stone ruins, to where the remaining members of Fifth Division had retreated.

"Taichou!" At the sight of her, Arai was on his feet, hope and relief in his gaze, and at his exclamation, a murmur went up from around the camp, more than one officer stirring from where they had sat, hunched and dazed in huddles on the ground. "Taichou, your *haori*!?"

"Better the *haori* than me," Kyouki's words were far more nonchalant than she felt, and she greeted her Third seat with a tired grin. "He was a bit more of a problem than I anticipated, but it's done with. He's dead, so he won't come back. What do you have to report, Arai? What state are we left in, following his ambush?"

"Yes..." Arai's eyes flickered for a moment, but he nodded his head, turning to glance towards the edge of the group. Kyouki's eyes narrowed as she followed his gaze, her heart clenching slightly as she made out three or four bundled forms, covered over with a rough camp sheet taken from their supplies. She turned back to her officer,

arching an eyebrow, and Arai nodded.

“We lost four men, Taichou,” he said softly, his words shaking slightly as he recounted this fact. “Three were dead before we left the scene, but you said everyone, so we brought everyone, regardless. The other, he died when we got here. We couldn’t do anything... he wasn’t alone, Taichou, we made sure of that, but I don’t know if he saw us or not before he slipped away.”

“I see,” Kyouki took a deep breath that sounded like a sigh, but was, in reality, her steadying her own composure. “And what about injuries? What about that?”

What about Ryuusei, she wanted to scream, but as a Captain, she knew she could not. Still, Arai had worked with her long enough to understand her thoughts, and he offered her a weak smile.

“The injured are in the shade of the wall, Kyouki-sama, out of the sun, as there were flies bothering them,” he said simply. “Seikyou-dono is watching over them. He volunteered to, and I thought it would be as well to let him, since Fukutaichou was among them.”

“Ryuusei is alive?” Kyouki’s question came out more sharply than she had intended, and Arai nodded.

“Yes, ma’am,” he agreed gravely, “but... I don’t know what else to do for him. We’ve stopped his bleeding, but there’s not much we can do for the pain. It’s a bad wound, and he’s been in and out of consciousness. He claims it doesn’t hurt, but I’m sure that can’t be the case. When he’s awake, he’s trying to give orders, but they’re not making a lot of sense. I’ve tried to keep people from bothering him, as much so as they don’t get frightened by seeing him as for any other reason. I hoped... you would come back soon. I’m not a healer, but I think... probably... Ryuusei-dono needs to get back to Seireitei pretty soon. Otherwise...”

“We should’ve brought healers with us,” Kyouki muttered, unable to suppress her maternal anxieties any further. Pushing past her Third Seat, she hurried in the direction he had indicated, noticing three officers laid out in the shade of the wall. One of them was propping himself up on his arm, sipping water gingerly from someone else’s gourd, and the second lay unconscious on the ground, but there was little blood and Kyouki soon realised he had escaped being savaged, his pale complexion suggesting he had passed out from the shock and horror of the whole incident. Closest to the wall lay another, motionless figure, and as she approached him, the shadow that was crouched at his side got to his feet, moving to greet her.

“Obaasama.”

Seikyou's cheeks were stained with tears, his lashes still wet, but he gazed up at his Grandmother bravely.

“I'm sorry, I mean... I mean, Taichou. I've been... tending to... to the injured, like Arai-san told me. Can I report, please?”

“Report, Seikyou,” Kyouki nodded, patting the boy on the shoulder. “What do you have to tell me?”

“Yes, Taichou,” Seikyou's head bobbed forward in a relieved nod. “We have three injured officers. Inamoto-san's got a wounded leg. Oguchi-san hit his head and I think he has a concussion. And... and...”

“And your father?” Kyouki's question was gentle, but pressing, and Seikyou's young features trembled at the question.

“I don't know what to do,” he admitted, fear and panic in his tones. “Arai-san managed to stop his bleeding, and I helped, but... but... Obaasama... there's... nothing left. It's gone. Completely. His arm. And he says... he says it doesn't hurt, but... I know he's just trying to reassure me. He doesn't want me to feel to blame, but I do. He protected me, and because of that... because he did... I...”

“Ryuusei did what any parent would do when their child is in danger, Seikyou. You're not to blame at all,” Kyouki assured him. “Stay there and stand guard for me, will you? I'll speak to your father myself, all right? That's an order.”

“Yes, T... Taichou,” Seikyou managed a tearful salute, and Kyouki offered him a brief smile before crossing the short stretch of land to where her eldest son and heir lay. His head was cushioned on a pillow of grass that Seikyou had probably gathered from the local area, and a torn scrap of *obi*, folded and damp lay across the man's brow, as though to stem a rising fever. He was breathing quickly, the rise and fall of his chest reassuring to the anxious mother, but though the left shoulder was wrapped heavily in makeshift bandages, an ominous, seeping stain and the evidence of blood on the ground told her that it had not been easy to stem the wound. Ryuusei's arm was gone, and no amount of bandages could conceal the extent of the disfiguring injury. Kyouki knelt down at her son's side, her heart in her chest as she considered the implications of his wound. Though she had encountered officers who had had to have part or all of an arm removed through injury in the past, she had never encountered a situation in which a shinigami had had his arm ripped clean off. Had Ryuusei been bitten, too? Tearing to the man's *shihakushou* suggested the attack had been more savage than simply the gargantuan throw

that had severed arm from body, and she bit her lip, struggling to hold on to her usual composure.

Her son was alive, but Arai's judgement was right. Ryuusei needed proper treatment, else he might not make it back. Fleetingly, Kyouki remembered Souja, savaged and alone far from his kin, and she wondered whether her family were about to be the next victim of Keitarou's ruthless purge.

"Okaasama?"

A soft whisper from the patient drew her thoughts from such horrific ideas, and she turned, meeting her son's hazy gaze with a troubled one of her own.

"I'm sorry... I've caused... such a fuss," Ryuusei lifted his right arm weakly, moving it to touch Kyouki's hand. "I... wanted to take... charge... but Arai... thought..."

"Arai is doing fine, and I'm here now, so you can rest," Kyouki told him firmly. "Seikyou is doing a fine job of standing guard, and the threat has been eliminated. There's no sign of Keitarou in these parts, and so I will be arranging to return to camp base point as soon as I can work out the best way to transport our injured men to the Gate. Hang on a while longer for me, all right? The Fourth will see to you, and then you'll be right as rain."

"I know... my arm is gone," Ryuusei's brows were creased, but he made no complaint. "Arai... told me it was... torn... but I don't think my shoulder is broken."

"We'll leave that to the experts. For the time being, you're as good as you can be, and shouldn't worry about a thing. Arai's stopped your bleeding, and so you're in no danger," Kyouki knew she was lying, but she had no idea what else to say. "Try to bear with it a little longer, all right? The men will be scared otherwise."

"I'm fine, Okaasama. It doesn't hurt that much," Ryuusei's voice was fading, and Kyouki could see his eyelids becoming heavy. She rested her hand gently on his chest, feeling for his heart. It was still beating, but faster than she would have liked, and she sighed, watching her son's eyes flutter closed.

This is the cost of fighting a war against an enemy who hides in shadows and plays games. I won't lose my son too, Keitarou. You might've stolen Hirata's, and you might've stolen Guren-dono's, but you won't take mine, no matter whether I have to take him back to the Gate myself in full defiance of our orders here.

“Kyouki-sama?”

A fresh voice on the scene made her jump, and she swung around, meeting the horrified gaze of Shiketsu, Vice Captain of the Third.

“Shiketsu-dono!”

“Kyouki-sama... what...” Shiketsu was clearly speechless, his eyes fixed on Ryuusei’s battered body, all the colour draining from his cheeks. As she gazed up at him, Kyouki was again reminded of the pale skin and fair hair of the young man she had killed in the forest, and she frowned.

“Ryuusei is alive, Shiketsu, and you didn’t come here to gawp at him,” she chided briskly. “You have a message from your Captain, correct? I’ll hear it.”

“Oh. Yes. Yes, I’m sorry,” Shiketsu shook himself out of his reverie, clearly flustered. “I didn’t know Ryuusei was injured, and it was a shock, seeing a friend... but Father sent me to summon Fifth back to the *Senkaimon*. He and Midori-sama have discovered something that changes the situation and we have to reassess our action plan.”

“That suits me, although I intend on taking my son back through the Gate as soon as it can be activated to take us,” Kyouki got to her feet, raising her voice. “Arai! Prepare everyone to return to base camp. Our mission here is done. I’ll need six officers to help with the wounded — and you too, if you please. Leave the dead somewhere secure for now — we’ll return for them when there’s more time to do so.”

“The... dead?” Shiketsu paled again, and Kyouki grimaced.

“We faced a vicious opponent, half Hollow, half man, who now lies dead in that forest,” she said categorically. “If your father wants to use his body as a lab study, he’s all yours... but I have more pressing needs. Ryuusei needs proper medical treatment and it can’t wait.”

Shiketsu looked troubled, but nodded his head.

“Yes, ma’am,” he said softly. “I’ll return to base camp and inform Father you’re bringing wounded men back with you. Yunosuke has some healer training and he might be able to make Ryuusei more comfortable whilst Father is prepping the gate. In the circumstances, it might be best if Fifth go straight back to Seireitei.”

“Do that,” A flicker of hope flared in Kyouki’s heart, and she nodded. “Tell Yunosuke, whatever he can do will be most welcome... and we’ll be there as soon as we can manage it.”

So, Kyouki had resorted to Bankai.

In the mud-clogged village, some distance away from the forest in which his comrade was fighting, Guren had felt the swell of spirit power as keenly as if she had been right in front of him, and its meaning was not lost on him. Kyouki was a competent, accomplished fighter who had made even the most misogynistic of Clan Leaders sit up and take notice, and as a result Gekkoushin was one of the most respected weapons among the current class of Captains. It was not a sword whose considerable power Kyouki used lightly, and Guren's brows knitted together as he contemplated what kind of opponent had forced her to resort to such tactics. Had she come up against such a formidable opponent that she had had no choice but to use the skill she had only mastered such a short few years before, or had some other sense of urgency driven her forth? Had she encountered the exile they all sought? But even though Guren longed to rip Keitarou's heart out on the end of his *zanpakutou* blade, he knew that he could not abandon his duty to his companions by fleeing this fight.

When he had arrived on the scene, the level of spirit power the Hollow man had emitted had been intoxicating and somewhat nauseating, the levels of rage rippling over him in intense waves. He had sent Shirogane and Ryuu back as soon as he had realised the situation, for it had been clear to him that neither one of his two subordinates would be able to continue the confrontation on such a level. Unwilling to lose his nephews in the way he had lost his son, he had given the order, and, to his relief, neither man had hesitated in obeying.

Now it was for him to finish what they had begun.

The creature had calmed following the explosion Guren had unleashed on the remaining village shack, the blast bringing him back to a measure of rationality. Anger still seeped through every pore of his body, pooling into the toxic reiatsu his body pumped into the atmosphere, but the flares of red energy and the destabilising reiatsu had dissipated, and the hulking figure was once more in control of his actions. There was hate in his eyes, his fingers clenched and clawed as though longing to grab and rip Guren limb from limb, but despite it, the man had held back in his attack, gauging his new opponent before launching himself recklessly into the fray.

"Your friend seems to have got flustered," now he spoke, his voice low and rasping, as though the mask that cloaked his face and head like a helmet had seeped through his skin and engulfed his vocal chords. "Maybe she found Moe too much for her to handle. He's like

that, if he finds prey that's worth his time to hunt."

Guren's gaze narrowed.

"If you have time to focus on other people's battles, you must misunderstand the danger you're currently in," he said softly, and the man snorted, shaking his head. He kicked at the dirt on the ground, sending splatters of mud up against the leg of his peasant's robes, and Guren felt a flare of suppressed anger radiating from Haruya's body. Clearly he was still fighting the rage impulses, then, in order to remain rational enough to fight. Guren slotted this information away in the back of his mind, his gaze never leaving his opponent for one moment.

"You sent my playmates away," Haruya's words had a malicious edge to them. "I was about to carve my name into them, and send them back to entice a proper opponent to come out and show himself, but it seems you reacted prematurely. You Kuchiki are overly protective of one another, I must say. Does nobody in your Clan fight his own battle, one on one any more? What a cowardly group you must be."

"Careful," Guren's eyes glittered with contempt. "You might start believing your own lies, and falling foul of them. Contrary to your belief, none of us came to the Real World to find you, or to fight you. I sent my men back to attend to their real duties, whilst I cleaned up the minor annoyance that distracted them."

"Minor annoyance?" The words reverberated out from behind the mask, and Guren saw red light glittering around Haruya's fingers, as though he was contemplating firing a Cero. "Do you not understand what you are faced with? I'm not a fool. I know that that's a *haori*, and that means you're the person I was waiting to lure out and fight. You're the Kuchiki Captain, correct? I don't need to know your name, it's all the same to me. You're my opponent, and I'll fight you properly. Your people are arrogant, but you don't understand the first thing about what I am or what I can do."

Guren's mind flitted back to the mutated form of his brother, howling and screeching across the ruined landscape of his manor estate, and his lips thinned.

"You would be surprised what I understand about deviations like you," he said coldly. "I didn't come here to converse with you, however. Unless you intend to provide information about the target we seek, I have no interest in you. Therefore, if it's all the same to you, I'd like you to save your self-aggrandising bragging for the

afterlife. I find it rather tiresome to make smalltalk with creatures of no consequence, and I would rather not waste time. I do have a proper mission to attend to.”

At the derision in Guren’s words, Haruya’s aura flared with electric crimson energy, but, just as it seemed as though he was about to unleash another violent explosion of energy, the light dulled, and he let out a bitter chuckle.

“Ah yes. You want to find Keitarou,” he spoke mockingly. “That’s all your underlings squawked about. Keitarou. Keitarou. As though I intend to tell you anything about him.”

“I very much doubt there’s anything you could tell me about him that I don’t already know,” Guren’s grey eyes became ice cold, and he darted forward, swinging his *zanpakutou* down towards Haruya’s horned helmet mask. Haruya ducked, dodging his considerable bulk out of the way of the swing, but Guren’s *zanpakutou* was in full release, and, as the weapon passed within close proximity of the remaining horn, it shook then shattered, crumbling into fragments of powdery dust. Haruya let out a curse, dropping to the ground and rolling away to avoid further damage, and Guren’s lips twisted into a cold, even smile.

“You thought you were playing games with my men, but you will find that fighting them was preferable,” he said darkly. “I have barely begun to utilise Tenkyourei to its full capacity.”

“Then use it,” Haruya spat out, picking himself up from the mud and giving his body a little shake to remove clods of excess mud. “Use it. Release it. Show me what you’re made of, Kuchiki Captain. I’m not afraid of you. I was told, long ago, that my spirit power was good enough for me to rank among the best in Seireitei — but I was never given that chance. People like me, we aren’t given those chances. We’re blocked, by people like you. It doesn’t matter, though. Whatever I had to go through to get here, right here and now, I’m able to use that power at last. I could’ve been a Captain, just like you, if things had been different. Well, now I have extra options. That makes me more than a Captain — and that’s more than you.”

“You appear confused as to which Captain you are fighting,” came Guren’s riposte, and he darted forward again, vanishing into shunpo before reappearing at Haruya’s rear left side and sweeping his weapon towards the man’s upper body. Again, Haruya avoided the contact, bringing his left arm up as an automatic shield, but the vibration of the sword blade sent an invisible pulse across the gap between weapon and limb, and despite himself, the Hollow man let out an

exclamation of pain as the energy crashed against his forearm.

“Your bone is probably shattered,” Guren was unconcerned. “The next time, it will shatter through the skin and scatter into the mud, much like you scattered my nephew’s sword fragments. Oh yes,” as Haruya cast him a startled look, “I am aware of it. I know where Ginkyoujiki was, and I can sense its aura in this thin atmosphere. I told you once, you need to understand the enemy you are fighting. I am Kuchiki Guren, and I am the Head of the most powerful Clan in Seireitei. You understand what that means, I trust? I am not an average ‘Captain’ that you can smite down with whatever illicit powers you’ve gained from consorting with that man. At even this level of power, I am capable of hurting you. You should...”

“You should stop talking!” Haruya’s rage surged into a yell, the red flares of energy surrounding his aura condensing and thickening around his damaged limb, and to Guren’s astonishment, it twisted and bent out of shape, before clicking unnaturally back into position. “Your sword tickled me but it did *not* hurt me! A Hollow doesn’t suffer from broken bones! We can repair such minor injuries. You are a fool if you think you can use that glorified tuning fork to do me real damage. I told you you were arrogant and you didn’t understand. Now I’ll make you realise it for yourself.”

An explosion of crimson spirit power, malevolent and toxic burst forth from his hands, barrelling towards the Kuchiki Captain, but Guren had anticipated the shift in his opponent’s spirit power and he let out a sigh, swinging Tenkyourei’s blade through the blast and scattering it into its component atoms, sending sparks flying in all directions. He disappeared into shunpo, re-materialising within a couple of feet of his opponent, grabbing the man’s cheap *hakamashita* in his free left hand and flinging the other man down into the slick mud. Though Haruya was taller and more broadly built than his opponent, Guren had inherited his father’s substantial warrior’s physique, and despite himself, Haruya found himself floored, Tenkyourei’s juddering blade pointed towards his throat.

“Can you recover from a broken neck?” Guren’s words lacked any mercy, his eyes glinting with a cold, uncompromising light. “Enough empty threats. I have come to kill you. The only way you might save your sorry life is to tell me all I want to know about the man I seek. You are not on my radar, but if you persist in being unhelpful, I will take my time in dissecting you, shattering bone by bone. Tenkyourei is not a sword that likes negotiations, so I suggest that, if you value your miserable existence at all, you stop protecting the man we both know I want.”

“What is your obsession with Keitarou, anyway?” Haruya demanded, defiance in his eyes, and Guren’s eyes narrowed to slits.

“He owes me a debt for the life of my son,” he said flatly. “A debt from which I don’t intend on letting him walk without paying. His life is owed to my sword, and therefore I have come to take it. A creature like you might not understand, but in Clans like mine, the ties of blood are strong.”

“The ties of blood, huh,” Haruya spat on the ground, and Guren noticed that there was blood in the saliva, the vibrations from Tenkyourei’s tip bursting the uppermost bloodvessels in the man’s tongue and gums and causing the area of mask around the lips to crumble into dust. “Yes, I understand. People of worth to you — that’s all men like you care about. People who fit the right profile... who provide the right impression.”

Something flickered across his gaze, something other than rage, then,

“I don’t care for my life,” he said simply. “I didn’t come here to defend myself against you, I came to *kill* you. You, and any other shinigami I could get my hands on. Why? Because of Keitarou? Maybe it was him who first asked us for help, but the reality was that we had a grudge to settle on our own terms. You talk about the ties of blood as though it’s something only a man of good Clan stock could possibly understand, but we all have our reasons to fight. Shinigami killed my sister today, so now the grievance is personal. Whether it was a Kuchiki or someone else who killed her, it doesn’t matter. They came with you, and so you are all targets for my rage. I am not afraid of you, Kuchiki Guren. You might be a King in your own domain, but here you’re just another ghost floating through existence, invisible to the native people. We are evolved beyond what you can comprehend. I have nothing to say to you about Keitarou. If you think you can kill me, then try. Your sword has a nasty power, but my body is already building defences against it. My bones and skin are strong, and they repair quickly, so do your worst.”

He reached up his hand to grab at Tenkyourei’s blade, as if to prove his point, and Guren watched with a mixture of horror and fascination as the man’s fingers shattered and jerked out of their sockets, only to reform and repair themselves the moment Haruya drew them away. Though much of the Hollow-man’s face was concealed from him, Guren felt certain that the man was sneering, smug in his convictions. He sighed, shaking his head.

“Your logic is flawed by your anger,” he said simply. “If shinigami

killed your sister, it's because you sent her to fight them. You just said that Keitarou asked you for help, and you spoke in the plural. If you hadn't thrown your sister into a battle, she would probably still live. Those are the rules of war, my friend, and you can't hold me responsible for such things."

"And the death of your son?" Haruya spat out, his eyes glinting angrily at Guren's dismissive tone. "What of that? Was that not a part of the rules of war?"

"No. That was not," Guren's voice hardened, and it was all he could do not to plunge Tenkyourei through the man's neck, but he realised that, even if he was to do so, his companion's odd regeneration system would likely find a way to counter its effects, leaving him vulnerable to a close range Cero assault. "My son was poisoned, murdered by a coward's hand to further a madman's plan. That was not war, Hollow. That was murder."

"Shinigami define things by strange rules," Haruya said coldly. "Our lives, your lives, they all have different values. Shinigami is just another word for Clan, and a synonym for dynastic perfection. You look at me and see a monster, but even without my mask, people like you would shun me. You have, all of my life. My sister and I were never given any chance in this world because of people like you. If there was a war, it began the moment we were born, and the most basic of rights was denied us. Gates shut in our face, simply because we were born the wrong side of the blankets. Scandals to be hushed up, children to be drowned down wells or pushed into rivers. You have no idea of the childhood we had or the way they treated Aki, when all she wanted was for her Father to help our Mother live through another famine. You have no idea of anything outside of your own perfect, aesthetic castle. The mask doesn't make a monster. Clansfolk, shinigami, therein lies the true evil. If Keitarou kills all of you, then he's a hero, not a villain. He didn't make us this way, Kuchiki Guren. We were taken as worthless lives, and mutated by Clan shinigami into what they wanted us to be. The creature you see now is the product of Clan greed, and so it's poetic justice that I should fight and kill you, even if it costs me my life. Even if we die, it's a cause worth fighting for — I understand that better now than I ever have before. Keitarou is the first who treated us as worth something, and his cause is right. It's about time your society reached its sell-by date, and your proud, primped, peacock sons learned their place in the true order of things."

Guren's eyes widened with shock at the genuine bitterness in Haruya's tones, then he frowned, shaking his head.

“You mistake me,” he said quietly. “I have no knowledge of your creation, nor does it interest me to know. I don’t disdain you because of the mask you wear, nor do I consider you beneath me because you claim to have been born in less than ideal circumstances. Your sobstories mean nothing to me — you are not a product of my family’s indiscretion, nor will I offer any consolation for your having been born so. You are a monster because you consort with a child’s murderer, not because you wear a mask. I told you I understood your deviation, and I do. My brother suffered from your affliction, and I fought to save his life. He is my twin in whom I have the greatest trust, not a monster to be shunned, whatever he has suffered in the past. As a boy, my closest friend was my cousin, though her mother was a serving maid, and her birth frowned upon in Clan circles. You are the one who judges me based on how I appear, not the other way around. The world you describe may yet exist, but it is changing. I am a Clansman and a Shinigami, but these days, that is no longer enough. I am also a Captain who fights to protect the lives of the ordinary people who live in my District and any other land in which my squad patrols. I pay from my own pocket when Hollows destroy villages and lay waste to crops, even if the funds of the Gotei are lacking. Your experiences may be true, or they may not, but I have no pity for you. You have assaulted my men unprovoked, causing fear and suffering to those I lead, and most of all, you have chosen to ally yourself with a man who murders innocent people for his own personal gain. That makes you beneath me, so I will kill you.”

“Give it your best shot,” Haruya retorted defiantly, no hesitation in his tones. “Even if you were able to kill me, it’s probably too late anyway. You can search, but you won’t find what you’re looking for. Everything you hold dear has probably been ripped apart by now. Keitarou is cleverer than you are, and by the time you figure out where he is, it will all be too late. Then you’ll really understand, won’t you — what it means to be fighting a war.”

Guren stared at him for a moment, dismay fluttering in his heart as he digested the implication in Haruya’s cryptic words.

Figure it out? Figure what out? Figure out where Keitarou really... but surely... surely not. Surely that’s impossible. Surely...

His eyes narrowed.

Enough wasting time. This fight is done with, and I will end it now. Maybe Kyouki-dono realised what I just have... in which case, I understand her sentiments only too well.

He drew back his weapon, gazing at Haruya pensively.

"I am sorry that I even considered negotiating with you for your life," he spoke out loud. "You said you would die here, and that suits me, too. If you will tell me nothing concrete about Keitarou, our dialogue is over. Your body may be strong, but you have misjudged Tenkyourei's native strength. I have fought with you at arm's length in the hope of discovering some useful information. Things have now changed, and, I'm afraid, our conversation has ended."

His eyes glittered slightly, though had Haruya but known it, a mixture of anxiety and the memory of his son's death had brought the Captain close to tears.

"*Bankai*," he murmured. "*Myouon Tenkyourei*."

The moment Guren spoke his Bankai's name, the blade of his sword seemed to disappear, and for a split second, a complete hush pervaded the entirety of the area. Though Guren saw Haruya's lips moving faintly, he could not make out the man's words. It was too late in any case, for there was a tremendous explosion of sound, then a sucking rush of air and energy so potent that it ripped through the entirety of the unoccupied village, obliterating the stumps and posts of the miserable dwellings to little more than dust and causing the earth beneath their feet to shake and judder, sinking and rising with the force of the sound waves. Birds that, moments earlier had been flying in the sky dropped dead like rocks to the ground, sinking into the swampy surface as it shook and undulated around them. On the ground before him, Haruya's eyes had almost bugged out of his head at the initial explosion, as the mask that had cloaked his features vaporised into white dust that disintegrated into the ether. Blood began to pour from the man's ears and nostrils, crimson tears running down his cheeks as, one by one, every blood vessel in the man's body exploded and burst, sending its contents flooding out of every available orifice. As Haruya's pores began to seep a congealed mix of Hollow-chalk and spirit blood, he let out a faint grunt, and Guren thought he saw a smile touch the now bloody lips. The impression was nothing more than a fleeting chimera, however, for the next moment Haruya's body gave a little jerk, slumping against the mud, and a thin line of red trickled from the corner of the mouth onto the soft ground beneath.

Guren eyed him impassively for a moment, then gave his weapon a tap, watching with some impatience as its extreme vibrations slowed to a complete stop. It hazed with light, returning to its ordinary katana form, and Guren thrust the weapon into its scabbard, stepping over the corpse and extending his spiritual wits to pick up any signals from the local area. At the river, he knew that his men were far

enough away to have avoided the fall out from Tenkyourei's intense explosion of sound-waves, and a quick scan of the surrounding area told him that the only decaying reiatsu presence he could detect in the close vicinity was that of the man he had just defeated. Haruya's heart would have burst inside his chest with the pressure, Guren knew, but he had fallen short of exploding the whole body, reluctant to stain his *haori* more than was necessary. Perhaps the pristine was important to him, he pondered absently as he set off towards the river, but that was simply the Kuchiki way.

Besides, there had been no need for overkill. He was not an Endou, and he had more pressing matters on his mind. If he had interpreted Haruya's taunts correctly, it meant Keitarou was not in the Real World at all. He had been there, almost certainly, but he had left guards and decoys, distractions to occupy anyone who came investigating. As he travelled, Guren re-evaluated the sensations he had picked up from the direction of Kyouki's fight, and as he broke it down, he felt certain that his neighbour had been fighting a creature similar to the one he had encountered. Haruya had called it "Moe", he remembered, and he had also mentioned a sister, killed, almost certainly, by one of the other Captains in a similar confrontation.

Keitarou knew that we would send forces here looking for him, and he took us at our word, planning a welcome for us.

Guren's eyes narrowed in anger, and he clenched and unclenched his fists.

We've wasted who knows how much time. Seireitei is Keitarou's target, and Seireitei is undoubtedly where he now is. That means Seireitei is where we ought to be.

"Taichou!"

As he emerged along the river-bank, Shirogane hurried to greet him, bowing his head in wary obeissance, and Guren sighed, pushing stray strands of hair out of his face.

"Is everyone here?" was all he said, however, and Shirogane nodded, raising quizzical eyes to his uncle. He did not speak the question the older man knew was burning on his lips, and Guren was glad. for he felt certain there was no time to discuss what had occurred in the muddy village.

"Taichou, Shiketsu-dono was here," Fortunately, Shirogane was perceptive enough to understand his Captain's urgency, leaving the matter alone. "Nagesu-sama and Midori-sama have made a discovery and they want us to return to base camp. He didn't give details,

because he was heading direct to report the message to Fifth, but it sounded important. I had Ryuu get everyone chivvied and ready to move, and so we're awaiting your orders to decamp."

"Even the wounded?"

"Yes, sir. We've made provision, and I don't believe any lives are in imminent danger."

"Then we return to the river, and, I trust, open the Gate." Guren said bleakly, turning his gaze in the direction he knew the *Senkaimon* lay. "We go back to Seireitei, Shirogane. Unless I miss my guess, what we're looking for has slipped our attention and has invaded our home... and we can waste no time in getting back to put things right."

"It's no use."

Nagesu took a pace back, gazing hopelessly at the feeble sparks of spiritual energy that prickled across the atmosphere before him. Though he had used the *Senkaimon* many times before, it was the first time that it had refused to respond to Sekizanha's command to unlock, and as more time passed, the Third Division Captain was feeling an increasing sense of unease.

"What do you mean, no use?" Midori cast him a sharp glance, concern in her own golden eyes. "I thought you said that this was the easiest pathway back to Seireitei that existed in the Real World? It connects directly to Third Division's managed portal, doesn't it? Why wouldn't it open?"

"It's a good question," Nagesu sighed, running his fingers through his messy fair hair. "I don't have an immediate answer, at least not one that will suffice. This is exactly as you say, Midori-dono. I've been using this Gate for a long time, and it was the pathway between here and the Real World where I first consolidated and stabilised the scientific principles needed to allow so much more interdimensional travel. Of all the Gates dotted all over Seireitei, this one has never let me down. However, last time I used it... last time Third used it..."

He trailed off, his gaze drifting to the malformed mountain, and Midori groaned, clapping her hand to her head.

"Great," she muttered. "Are you saying that something in your Bankai earthquake did some permanent damage on this side of the pathway?"

"I didn't think so," Nagesu admitted, running his fingers speculatively through the air with a sigh. "I managed to open it, and

though I was battered and exhausted when I got back to Seireitei, I don't remember there being any particular problems. We got here safely, and with so many officers, if there had been a rip or a tear in the Gate's control, it would've been apparent long before this. Besides, Shiketsu and Yunosuke and I went over the whole thing with a fine tooth comb in the days before we left. All the readings were normal and the Dangai was as stable as it's ever been for this kind of a transfer."

"Dangai is never stable," Midori said darkly. "I might not know much science, Nagesu-dono, but I do know about that place. The Shihouin know things that are dark, shady and secret, and probably a good deal about the lost souls that are rumoured to haunt them. Maybe one of the long discarded dead was woken up by our tramping here and decided to put a spanner in the works — stranger things have happened."

"With all respect, Midori-dono, I do not believe in ghosts in the Dangai," Nagesu's tone was edged with censure, and he pushed his spectacles back up his nose, trying to hide his growing apprehension. "Your family, and mine, and others in Seireitei may once have committed the less than savoury act of throwing convicted felons into the Dangai to rot and die, but that was a long time ago. Since the proper development of useful *Senkaimon* technology, that practice has been terminated — and besides, no soul, living or dead, would manage to survive in that place for long. There are no remains of those unfortunate convicts — and I am a scientist, not a witch doctor looking to commune with the long deceased."

"An ironic stance for a shinigami," Midori said acidly. "I wasn't meaning it in the way you took it, though. I was wondering at the possibility of a former Onmitsukidou lurking around these parts, waiting to sabotage our mission — such dead folk become a nuisance when they refuse to remain dead."

"Suzuki Naoto?" Nagesu looked stunned, and Midori shrugged.

"Kai's men haven't found him," she said matter-of-factly. "We sent agents to the village where his widow lived, but she's packed up and gone, too, with no forwarding address. Her home is cleared out, her wares and all evidence of her vanished. It's like she didn't exist. Almost certainly she was complicit in whatever he was doing, and may still be — but they're long outside of Shihouin jurisdiction now, if they were ever truly in it. The village they come from straddles your land and mine and has open borders because of trade... and I believe that the dead can walk again — in certain circumstances."

“I still think it unlikely,” Nagesu pursed his lips. “I grant that Suzuki Naoto is a loose cannon, but I stand by my belief that nobody would be able to survive in the Dangai for long enough to properly destabilise the Gate from this end. The odds are very low, and besides, Sekizanha says the Gate here isn’t broken. It simply won’t open. It won’t form a connection.”

“So something’s wrong with the Gate in Seireitei, not this one at all?” Midori looked alarmed, and Nagesu chewed on his lip.

“I’m beginning to fear so,” he admitted. “Mareiko’s forces are meant to be guarding it, and the Third in general, so I had trusted all would be well — even if there was some technical glitch, she’s a far more competent scientist than most of the men I’ve brought with me here, and can probably fashion a fix that I would take days to think of in a much quicker time. It shouldn’t be a problem, since the Gate was fine when we left through it... but...”

“Gates can be sabotaged,” Midori said bluntly, and Nagesu looked horrified.

“Are you suggesting *Mareiko* sabotaged my Gate?” he demanded, and Midori snorted, shaking her head.

“Nagesu-sama, for someone who’s done so much good for spirit science in Seireitei, you’re being impossibly dense right now,” she retorted. “I wasn’t saying anything of the sort. Whether Sekime is there or not is probably irrelevant. I’m not even thinking about who you left in charge of your Division. I’m thinking about the person from whom you essentially stole the designs for the Gate in the first place — the person whose research made all of this travel possible, and the person who is, quite conspicuously, not in the middle of the Real World where he laid his trail. We already discussed the possibility he was elsewhere. We talked about Rukongai. The Spiritless Zone, even. Well, now I’m tabling a new suggestion. I’m going to hazard a guess that the man we’re seeking, the exile Keitarou, your cousin and the man responsible for the deaths of too many innocent people is currently setting up home *inside your vacated Division*. Sekime may be dead. Twelfth may have been decimated. Keitarou’s sword is a Bankai-level weapon that I doubt anyone in that Division would be able to counteract. We’re talking about a weapon which manipulated Endou Shouichi to take his own life, and Ukitake Juushirou to attack his best friend with the intention of killing him. Even if that is tempered by the fact Juushirou was a student at the time, I’m sure I’m not the only one who’s heard the rumour that, one day, Sougyo no Kotowari might rival Kinnya-sama’s Raiurei. As for Shouichi-dono, foul as I found his

personality, I would never have second guessed his strength. Given the track record, I would not hesitate for one second in suspecting Keitarou'd do the same again to anyone who happened to be in his way — and we need to open this Gate and get back there, before he can hurt anyone else.”

Nagesu was silent for a moment, then, slowly, he shook his head.

“Everything you say is true, and I acknowledge it,” he said helplessly. “I’m not as dense as you think — I had thought along those lines myself, but was unwilling to voice such things aloud. Shiketsu said that Kyouki-nee was bringing injured men. Ryuusei-dono’s condition may be critical. We came here on my information and my guidance and it may have been a flawed judgement... but even if all those fears are true, I can’t open the Gate. Whether it be sabotage or something else, our way is blocked. If Sekizanha can’t open it, no other weapon can. It’s locked to us and we can’t go through.”

“Nagesu!”

Kyouki’s voice broke across the clearing at that moment, and both Nagesu and Midori turned, seeing their comrade materialise in a flurry of shunpo, a bloody, bandaged figure clasped in her arms. Though Ryuusei was a grown man of substantial height and build, Kyouki was strong in her own right, and as she laid him down on the ground, Nagesu could see for himself the severity of the man’s injury.

“His arm...” he murmured, and Midori’s brows knitted together in consternation.

“Nagesu, get the gate open! Get it open right now!” Kyouki made no attempt to leave her son, bellowing her orders across the space between them. “Ryuusei and I are going back. The rest of you can do as you please, but Shiketsu said that provision would be made. We’re going back, so get that damn Gate up and running.”

“I’m sorry, Kyouki-dono, but nobody is going back right at the moment,” Nagesu shook his head, and overhearing this, Shiketsu hurried forward, bowing his head hastily towards his father.

“Taichou, please. Ryuusei’s injury... please... open the Gate!”

“No, you don’t understand,” Nagesu rested his hand lightly on his son’s shoulder, raising his gaze to meet the incredulous Kyouki’s from across the grass. “Kyouki-dono, I’m sorry. I’ve tried to open the Gate. Midori-dono and I have just been discussing the problem at hand.”

“Problem? What problem?” Kyouki’s expression become one of alarm, and Nagesu hesitated, then let out a heavy sigh.

“Something is blocking the Gate from opening,” Before he could find the right words, Midori spoke up, her words succinct and clear and her voice carrying across all of the gathering shinigami. “There’s no going back to Seireitei — at least, not through this portal.”

“Not going back?” Shiketsu’s face drained of all colour for the second time that day, and Nagesu saw a mixture of emotions cross Kyouki’s features — fear, rage, frustration, and ultimately, disbelief. In a moment she was beside him, her bloodstained hands grasping the collar of his *hakamashita* and giving him a short, sharp shake

“I thought you said that this Gate was the most stable in all of Seireitei,” she spoke in low tones, suppressed and trembling as she fought her rising emotions. “Now my son is injured, and may be dying. He needs emergency care, and you say we can’t go back? What are we meant to do, stay here? Are you going to make me watch my son die, Nagesu, because you forgot to bring your key?”

“More likely this is Keitarou’s work,” As Nagesu tried to muster a reply, Guren’s voice cut across the conversation, and there was a gentle ripple of spirit power as he, followed in dribs and drabs by the other members of the Sixth Division materialised on the edge of the campsite. He strode towards them, *haori* flapping in the gentle breeze, and pausing a few feet from where the two Captains stood.

“Keitarou is in Seireitei,” he said frankly. “There’s no doubt in my mind that’s where he is. The ingrate I killed more or less told me so. If the Gate is blocked, then we will just have to find or fashion another. There isn’t time for emotional outpourings. This is a war and we need to be fighting in it.”

“Guren-sama, my son...” Kyouki began, and Nagesu saw storm-clouds settling in Guren’s slate grey eyes.

“My only son was murdered on the orders of that man twenty six years ago,” he spoke softly, but every word seemed to penetrate right through to the bone, and despite himself, Nagesu shivered, feeling Kyouki’s fingers loosen from his clothing. “More than anyone here, Kyouki-dono, I understand what he can do to families. I can see from here that Ryuusei is hurt, and that it is a bad wound. But *your* son is not dead, nor can I imagine he has any intention of dying.”

His gaze flitted towards Shirogane, who gave a quick salute, disappearing into shunpo and reappearing at the injured man’s side.

“Well?” The Kuchiki Captain’s question was cryptic, but Shirogane seemed to understand what he wanted to know, for he nodded his head. Guren, apparently satisfied, turned back to the indignant

Kyouki.

“My Vice Captain is not a healer, but his cousin, Edogawa Mitsuki, is,” he said softly. “Shirogane decided, of his own accord, to undertake some basic training with her before her deployment to the Rukon, and, later, studied healing Kidou with the Fourth Division in order that he could apply it where and when it was needed among the wounded of the Sixth. I have never yet had cause to utilise that training, but Shirogane understands better than even I do the pain of being present and unable to save a kinsman with whom he shared a bond. For that reason, I have every faith that you can entrust Ryuusei to his care. He will not let your son die. You have my word.”

“Kyouki-sama, Shiketsu-sama also asked me to help, if I could,” Yunosuke got hesitantly to his feet. “I’m not a healer, either, but my closest friend is, and he taught me enough to get by. With Shirogane-dono’s help, I’m sure we can keep Ryuusei-dono stable until the Gate is fixed and ready to open.”

“A Kuchiki and an Urahara coming to the rescue of a Shiba,” Nagesu murmured, more to himself than to any of his companions, but Midori turned to gaze at him, a thoughtful look in her clever eyes. “The future is indeed a different world from the one Keitarou imagines.”

“Perhaps, but I’d still rather get him somewhere safe,” Kyouki had calmed somewhat, but there was still an agitation to her aura that she could not quite conceal. “Very well, Guren-sama. Nagesu. I will entrust my son’s life to your men, but you had better hope that the confidence you have in them is merited. I made a promise to myself that I would not let my son die here and I meant it.”

“A promise is a promise, and Kuchiki do not break promises,” Guren said simply. “In the meantime, our more pressing concern is with the Gate. Can it be fixed?”

“From this end? Probably not,” Nagesu clicked his tongue against his teeth as he considered. “The problem is at the other end. Whether it be a technical glitch or something more sinister, I can’t reach out to find out from here. We’re too far away, and there’s too much Dangai inbetween.”

“So the question is, how are we going to get home?” Midori interjected. “All this mutual healing is very nice and positive and I fully approve, but the reality is that both Yunosuke and Shirogane-dono are makeshift at best. I’ve seen injuries like Ryuusei-dono’s before, and they’re fifty-fifty. If the bleeding’s been stopped, which it

looks like it has, maybe seventy-thirty, but it's not necessarily about the wound. It's shock and infection that does it."

"Midori-dono, is that really appropriate?" Guren shot Midori a dark look, and Midori shrugged apologetically.

"It's the reality. I don't want him to die, but I don't believe in sugar-coating," she said frankly. "I don't want anyone to lose sight of the real problem here. If this Gate can't be fixed, how are we getting back? If Keitarou is running rampant around Seireitei, what are we going to do to stop him?"

Nagesu hesitated for a moment, then his expression hardened, and he nodded his head resolutely.

"We're going to go back and slit his throat, if that's what it takes," he said firmly, and Kyouki started, staring at Nagesu in disbelief.

"Nagesu? Don't make promises you can't keep — if the Gate is broken, how..."

"We'll go through the *other* Gate," Nagesu said simply. Immediately there was uproar.

"Another Gate?" Shiketsu, who had been doing his best to make himself invisible during the Captains' angry dispute spoke up now, casting his father a confused look. "But there isn't another... I mean we don't..."

"No, not *our* Gate," Nagesu shook his head, turning to gesture towards the neatly bound piles of documents and volumes that littered the landscape. "There isn't time to explain clearly now, but Midori-dono and I discovered some less than pleasant evidence in that mountain. Keitarou was undoubtedly behind those masked monsters we all apparently saw and fought, but he didn't create them. That — and from the bits I read, a whole lot more — was the province of another kinsman of mine, a man called Kusakawa Daigo. His son was Kusakawa Shougo, the former Captain of the Twelfth — and it looks as though he continued that research, illegally and in secret."

"You said there wasn't time to explain clearly," Kyouki snapped impatiently. "We need a Gate, not a history lesson. So Shougo-dono was doing some things he shouldn't — he's been dead a quarter of a century, so how does that help us now?"

"Simple," Nagesu smiled, turning to gaze at the slopes of the mountain. "Shougo-dono conducted experiments here, but he did so without us knowing. So did his Father. That means that, in order to sneak around at their own convenience, they'd need a means of

travelling from here to Seireitei without being caught. Third Division's *Senkaimon* might be broken or barred, but it's not the only option. Daigo-dono once worked under my Uncle Keitsune, Keitarou's father, who was the one who initially developed *Senkaimon* technology in happier days. Undoubtedly Daigo-dono and his son had the science and chose to exploit that fact to their own advantage. Shougo-dono must've therefore had his own *Senkaimon*, and since he was killed unexpectedly in the Rukon, it's highly unlikely that he ever shut it down."

"Which means that, somewhere in this area, there's a *Senkaimon* just waiting to be opened?" Guren's eyes widened, and Nagesu nodded.

"Exactly that," he agreed. "Daigo-dono's lab was within the volcano, so it's probable that such a Gate would be in this vicinity. Maybe hidden inside the mountain itself. Moreover, it's highly likely that it connects to the disused Gate exit somewhere near the Twelfth. Twelfth were originally quite a nomadic Division, and if Shougo had built a new Gate, it would've been looked on suspiciously if he had failed to connect it to the overall route map. More to the point, getting clearance for new Gates when so much building was still to be done would've aroused people's suspicions. It would also have been too inconvenient for him to keep using a Gate at the Kusakawa manor — he had no wife or children, so constantly going back home when Twelfth were often stationed far from Third District would've looked suspicious. He would've needed another option, and so he probably gambled on an existing Gate that — although part of the official route network, clearly saw little regular usage. The Gate between Twelfth and Thirteenth has since been erased from plans and is no longer in service, but it is operational, because Keitarou used it to have Kotetsu Tenichi abducted. The layout of Inner Seireitei has changed substantially since the establishment of proper, separate barracks, and it may be that, in Shougo-dono's day, it would've been difficult to see anyone using that particular portal from the main street. This is all only hypothesis, but if I'm correct, there ought to be a *Senkaimon* here, active and undamaged, which is already honed in on that particular location. The Gate outside Twelfth may have been manipulated by Keitarou to go to Rukongai or wherever he felt it necessary to go — but there's a good chance that the one here has been left alone. Keitarou's always had his own Gates — our technology is based largely on his science. He used the one by Twelfth to snare the Kotetsu boy, and so he had to take a risk on using our openings, not his own, but in the case of the one here, I doubt he could be certain whether we knew of it and whether it was being monitored... especially since

he saw Third Division members lurking around this vicinity. Maybe we knew, maybe we didn't... safer to use his own just in case. I imagine that means Shougo-dono's Gate is still here, somewhere, waiting for us to dig it out. Every man not currently injured or occupied should be dispatched to begin searching immediately. The sooner we find it, the sooner we can go home — and the sooner we can put this business to rights."

"At last, an action plan," relief glittered in Kyouki's eyes, and she nodded, Gekkoushin already half-drawn from its sheath. "If we're all looking, it surely can't take that long. Let's go."

Author's Note: Swords

Kyouki's sword was first introduced in Third Chronicle, with its Day Moon and Night Moon powers. Then, Kyouki did not possess Bankai, but now, like Nagesu, she does. Her Bankai release is Gekkoushin Nisshoku. Gekkoushin 月光神 means "Moonlight Goddess", and Nisshoku 日食 is the word in Japanese for an eclipse in which the moon covers the sun. The crossbow like release of her blade in Bankai has the command Tsukiya 月矢, or "Moon Arrow." Gekkoushin's Bankai is very intense, but has its limitations. It cannot follow her target, it is fixed in the area where she released it, and spreads only as far as her eyes can see, so cannot be fired around corners. That is why the clearing was the perfect place to release it, because it was a confined area she could see clearly. However, had Moe fled into the woods, he would've once more broken through into the light. The Eclipse also has the limitation of Kyouki's focus and concentration. She cannot usually hold it — yet — for more than one release of the Tsukiya attack. Like Nagesu, she is still inexperienced with her Bankai.

And, finally, Guren. I refused to reveal Guren's Zanpakutou in Fourth Maki, much to the annoyance of a few people. Now, finally, at last, here it is — probably for the first and the last time.

Guren's zanpakutou name is 天響霊 Tenkyourei (Heaven's echoing spirit). His release command Hibike 響け means "resonate" or 'echo'. Yes, Guren's sword is related to sound. But probably that was clear from the last chapter. His bankai name is Myouon Tenkyourei 妙音天響霊. In this context, I think you can interpret "Myouon" as "blessed sound" and I guess it's pretty obvious what it can do. The "rei" at the end is the same as at the end of his father's sword, Taiyourei, and his uncle's, Raiurei. It is possible that Ribari's sword would also have inherited this tag, as a direct continuation of Senaya's main line. For Ryuu and Shirogane, whose parents did not have zanpakutou, the line was broken. The same is true, of course, for Kinnya's daughter Raiko, who never had the opportunity to

raise a sword. Guren is, therefore, the only one who could inherit the “rei” (spirit) tag on the name of his sword. I did it this way to underscore the fact that the old line ends with Guren, and Shirogane will be the beginning of a new line, which leads directly to modern canon. Byakuya’s petal-shattering Senbonzakura is a direct descendant of Shirogane’s Ginkyoujiki. It’s no accident that Shirogane has the name he has, considering that his name means “white gold”, or “silver”. The first character of Byakuya’s name is, of course, white, whilst his grandfather, Ginrei, begins his name with “silver”.

Guren was one of the shinigami already in possession of Bankai at the beginning of Second Manuscript. He is not new to his sword’s power, and it is not a gentle power. It really wouldn’t have been suitable to use it at the site of Seiren’s crumbling manor house in Fourth Maki.

Kind of makes me wonder what Kinnya and Senaya were like in Bankai — but since I won’t ever have cause to write about it, I guess it doesn’t much matter ;)

While Ryuu and Shirogane have the potential to move beyond their current level, till either of them have Bankai, neither of them can match Guren’s scary in the field ;)

The Vaizard and their place in Canon.

Here endeth the involvement of the Kamen no Gunzei, bar the dissecting. I hope they have been worth their appearance time. It is from their existence and the mutation of Anabomi Seizuku that Seireitei develops a law for the disposal of Hollowfied souls, a law which survives down to the Pendulum age, and which Shinji and the other Vaizards consequently fall foul of when Central 46 condemn them to be destroyed. Of course, at some point between Sukuse and now, the notes from Kusakawa Daigo, Kusakawa Shougo and Keitarou himself become dispersed and lost, bits of them falling into Kisuke’s hands, and other bits into Aizen Sousuke’s. And so the illegal studies, and the term, “Kamen no Gunzei”, later to be glossed as “Vaizaado”, ultimately reemerge. It’s too much to me for it to be a complete coincidence that both Sousuke and Kisuke are doing the same kind of research at the same time. It’s far more likely that there was an older trigger point that inspired both of them, which is the main reason why I chose to involve Vaizard in Meifu and Sukuse. At this point, it is impossible to manage Hollow powers in a shinigami soul, and so the only option is to destroy them. However, Aki, Moe and Haruya provide the hope that such control is possible — and therefore, the interest in future generations of shinigami scientists to perfect the break between one set of power and the other, finally resulting in Shinji’s group — and, perhaps, Tousen Kaname. Ultimately, it was not Aizen Keitarou who developed the

blueprint for manageable Vaizard powers — but Kusakawa Daigo, an Urahara ;).

67. Aftermath

Chapter Sixty Five: Aftermath

The world was shattering into tiny pieces.

Like a mosaic crumbling into tiny grains of sand, the vivid images fragmented and broke away, leaving an empty, black and white void that flickered in and out of range. From the colours and revelations of the Rukon, Juushirou suddenly found himself in a dark tunnel, the walls juddering and closing in around him as they tried to bury him in their silent, hollow world. It was like the inside of a *Senkaimon*, he realised dully, yet at the same time, he knew it was not. The walls that surrounded him were as dead as stone, yet their undulating movements belied their stoic appearance. Was it him that was shaking? Juushirou put a hand out to touch them, but to his dismay, his fingers brushed right through, like he was touching a ghost. Spectral fingers reached out from nowhere to brush against his, and he raised his gaze in alarm, meeting two sad brown eyes staring at him from deep within the wall. The figure was barely visible, the outlines of his face like grooves in the intransient stone, but Juushirou could make out the thin line of his features, and he knew he had seen the individual before. The young man's lips moved, and although Juushirou could not hear any sounds, he realised that the ghost was saying his name. The next moment he was gone, and the wall lit up in a sudden burst of eerie blue flame.

Juushirou let out an exclamation, drawing his hand back, and as he did, something seared across his palm, burning into his skin and causing a deep, scorching pain to run through the whole of his nervous system. He stumbled, falling backwards onto the ground, only to find there was no ground, and he was falling, down, down, down into a deep, shadowy chasm. He opened his mouth to scream for help, but no sound came out, his vocal chords spasming and choking off the words he wanted to say. The burns on his fingers blistered and began to bleed, but at the same time, the pain he had felt so sharply moments before had begun to numb and fade away. The digits were growing black, he realised with a jolt, like charcoal ready to break away into fragments of ash. It didn't seem real, and then, just as he thought he was going to be falling forever, he landed with a bump, the crack of stone beneath his spine reawakening every one of his pain reflexes.

He opened his eyes, momentarily dazzled by the light of the sun and he raised his hand to shield his gaze, disorientated. His fingers were no longer burned, he noticed, and, as his vision came back into focus, he knew he was back in the barracks of Thirteenth Division. Already the tunnel and the deep, dark chasm were growing fainter in his memory, like a dream he could not properly draw to mind, but his heart was still pounding in his chest and he knew that it had been more than imagination.

He had seen Atsushi and Shougo, fighting in the Rukon. He had heard their conversation, and the true depths of Shougo's deception, but it was not this that had him scrambling hurriedly to his feet, anxiety burning in his hazel eyes. The potency of the earlier images was now all he could think about. He knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, what had caused the potent hallucination, and whose eyes it had been, staring at him so desperately out of the darkness of the wall.

Kohaku.

Though his head still ached and span, Juushirou pushed the discomfort aside, assessing his surroundings in sudden panic. Where was the boy? He had been here... no, now he remembered. Keitarou had taken him. Kohaku had gone with his father in order to prevent Thirteenth being attacked, but the strange sensation that had momentarily overpowered him had definitely come from his waif and stray. Had Keitarou made him do it? He glanced around himself, noticing Naoko huddled on the ground a short distance away. She had pulled herself into a sitting position, holding her head, and Juushirou gathered his wits, realising that it had not just been him this time that had seen Kohaku's delusion, but others as well.

Last time, Koku had to touch me, before I saw the image of the Kitsune being killed. This time, he's not even here, yet whatever he did knocked me off my feet and Naoko... maybe Naoko too. Is that what he meant, when he said I had no idea what he could do?

"What the hell was that?" Naoko's blurry words confirmed his fears, and he hastened to give her a hand, hauling her to her feet. "Taichou, did you see that? Pictures... Minaichi-taichou fighting someone called Kusakawa, and before that... a man who became a Hollow?"

"Sakanoue Heiji," Juushirou's expression became grim, fear suddenly surrounding his heart. 'Naoko, it's Koku. Don't ask me how I know that,' as Naoko shot him a startled look, "just trust me that I do. I don't know what's happened, but I don't imagine it can be considered good. If it laid you and I out, there's every possibility it's

laid others on the ground, too. We've kept a physical attack from our borders, but one like this..."

"You're saying that kid pumped some hallucinogenic power at us?" Naoko demanded. "Taichou, you let him go with Keitarou — don't you think its time we did something about it?"

"We're going to," Juushirou said grimly. "At least, no. *I'm* going to. *You're* going to stay here with Enishi, and make sure nobody gets hurt. Before I do, though, I want to make sure nobody is already hurt. You seem all right... and I'm fine, but given that it's Keitarou, I'm taking no chances. You and I are immune to Chudokuga, but if he's acting through his son, he might have done harm elsewhere."

"You think Keitarou's using the boy?" Naoko's eyes became slits, and she nodded. "I suppose that makes sense, since he came here for Koku. I don't understand what it is about that kid, but clearly you do. Since you're my Captain, I guess for now that'll have to be good enough — though I'll remind you later, if we have time, that you usually run this Division based on sharing important information with Houjou and I. I'm not splitting hairs over hierarchy, but when it's something that can knock us off our feet with one blast... and besides, what did we even see? Was any of that true? Was it a lie? What was it?"

"I think it was true," Juushirou admitted, already halfway across the cobbles towards the main doorway, and Naoko sighed, but hurried to join him. "If it was Koku, Naoko, I'm certain it was true. But if it was Keitarou, I don't know. Right now, more important is to assess the damage and to find the boy. If he's acting under Keitarou's impulses, we need to take him into our custody and prevent Keitarou from doing any more damage. I don't believe that's possible, but it may be that my information is inaccurate and I can't take chances. If he's acting on his own, we need to find him and work out what he's doing and why he's doing it. Either way, letting him roam loose is too risky, not now it's clear he's stronger and capable of more than any of us realised. We need to find him and bring him back here, since I'm starting to think this battle will be won or lost on who has custody of that boy."

"That sounds like a huge over-exaggeration, but like I said, you're my Captain, even when you say mad things I don't understand," Naoko sighed again, yanking open the door of the Division barracks. "Houjou-kun! Makoto? Kirio! Kira? Anyone alive in here?"

"We're about hanging on," Enishi emerged from the back of the building, giving his head a rub and then shrugging his shoulders.

“Couple of the recruits are out for the count, and there are a few dizzy heads back here, but no fatalities. What was that, Taichou? Some kind of psychic attack or something?”

“Something like that,” Juushirou nodded. “I can’t guarantee whether or not it will happen again, but I intend to head out and see if I can make sure it doesn’t. Naoko will explain to you the rest, but you’re in charge — between the pair of you, I want you to keep everyone calm and try and settle them down. I don’t know if we’re going to come under a physical attack, but if this is Keitarou’s work, it’s a possibility.”

“Understood,” Enishi agreed. “Tell you the truth, what we saw is bothering the hell out of me, especially since everyone seems to have seen the same thing. Atsushi-dono is a friend of my father’s, and a kinsman, even if I don’t see eye to eye with the man — and seeing stuff like that, well, it messes with your head.”

“Which is probably what it’s meant to do,” Naoko interjected succinctly. “Put it on the back-burner for now, Houjou-kun. Taichou wants to find our missing stray. He’s gone AWOL, and Taichou thinks it’d be a good idea if we bring him back.”

“I’m going to pretend I understand the orders, and just obey them right now. My head doesn’t really want to reason it out beyond that,” Enishi owned. “If that’s what you want, Ukitake, then Shikibu and I will hold the fort.”

“If they’re not too dazed, I’ll take Kirio and Makoto with me,” Juushirou decided. “Kirio, because she has a rapport with the boy, and Makoto, because he’s strong and usually not given to sudden panics. Koku’s not well and not healed, and he might not be able to walk. If there are three of us, that gives us a better chance of defending ourselves — and him, when we happen to track him down.”

“You really do think this kid is important, don’t you?” Enishi realised, and Juushirou nodded.

“Like I said, having custody of him suddenly seems very important indeed,” he agreed grimly. “Listen, Enishi. I don’t expect to meet trouble, but it might come to meet me. I can take care of myself, and if necessary, I’ll send Kirio and Makoto back with or without the boy, I won’t let them come to harm. Till I come back, you’re to hold the fort here and nobody is to leave here until there’s some word from Kai. Also, I want you to make sure Izumi keeps her head down. She’s not to venture out from hiding on any account. Keep Ketsui with her, and make sure she understands how dangerous this whole situation is.

Keitarou is the enemy and he has tried to kill her brother once already — but he doesn't seem to know about her and I'm hoping to keep it that way. Last thing we need is any additional complications."

"Yes, because everything is so smooth and problem-free right now," Naoko muttered. "All right, instructions are accepted, if not entirely understood. Houjou, lets go chivvy Kirio and Makoto, and make some semblance of order out of the rest."

"Right behind you," Enishi assured her. As she disappeared into the gloom, he turned to follow, then paused, glancing back at his Captain pensively.

"Be careful," he said gruffly. "If it's Keitarou, we know he'll try and take you out. You can take him down, if you have to. Even if you don't want to, Ukitake, it might be best if you do."

"I'd already thought about that," Juushirou said simply. "I'll come back in one piece, Enishi, you can count on that. I'll come back with Koku, if I can... whatever it takes to get to him. My priority is Thirteenth's safety, though — I won't jeopardise that. If Keitarou attacks here, send me a message. I'll come back directly, and he'll wish I hadn't. All right?"

"All right," Enishi's broad features cleared and he looked relieved. "You sound as though you've made your mind up, so I guess I'm saluting and getting down to business."

"I guess so," Juushirou nodded. "Don't worry, Enishi. This time, Keitarou is not going to escape from Seireitei alive. Too much is at stake — this time, he's not getting away, no matter what."

For a moment Atsushi had been flailing and lost, submerged in the cruel memories that had refused to release him from their grasp, and then he was back in his office, the hard walls and floor reassuring to his shaking body as he fought to regain control.

His eyes were closed — when had he closed them? He could not remember, but when he opened them, he quickly wished that he had not. The potent images still burned into his thoughts had not just been a flashback of vivid recollection, regrets flashing before his eyes in the moments before his death. On the contrary, they had been something else, and, as his dazed eyes rested on Mareiko's face, he knew they had also been seen by *someone* else. Tears of horror and disbelief glittered against his companion's lashes, the sword which had been held so resolutely to his throat moments before now shaking and drawing back, as though the Twelfth Division Captain no longer knew

how she was there or what she had come for.

Her skin was pale, paler even than the day he had first seen her following the return from Rukongai. On that day she had lain still and silent, swathed in bandages on one of Retsu's many pallet beds. He had dismissed the attentive healers and discharged himself from Fourth's care as soon as he had been able to stand, and as he eyed at his comrade's chalky complexion now, he remembered the pain and dizziness of that day, stumbling through unfamiliar halls and corridors, taking wrong turns and fighting through his discomfort to make sure she was all right. He had been far from well, but he had had to see her, Shougo's taunting words resonating in his dreams and granting him no relief. Her face had been scratched and bruised, but superficially, and he recalled how he had pressed his hands to the glass of the door, knowing that from that point on, more than just physical divides would separate them. That same pane of glass seemed to have slipped between them again now, for though Mareiko still held her sword, the killing intent he had felt in her aura had all but gone.

"Atsushi... kun?"

The word was uncertain and confused, then the next moment her entire expression twitched into a mask of disbelief and agitation, and she grasped at her hair, waving the weapon towards him without any real understanding of what she was doing.

"What did you do?" she exclaimed. "*What did you do!*? What did you put into my head? What are you trying to do to me! You won't... you can't..."

Her voice trailed off, and at the pain in her words Atsushi flinched, half tempted to grab the wildly waving weapon and pull it through his body himself. All the things he had fought to do and protect had now been laid bare, not just inside his own mind, but inside the one person in Seireitei who still mattered to him. Mareiko had never been further from him emotionally than she was at that moment, and though he knew that he could reach out physically and touch her... comfort her, even... his arms remained rooted to his sides.

He was the killer of her Captain, a man who had always held the biggest place in Mareiko's happy-go-lucky heart. The man who she had loved more than anything had betrayed her in the cruellest of fashions, and, despite all of his efforts, Atsushi had failed in his one last duty to her as her friend. He had failed to protect her from the truth of Kusakawa Shougo's betrayal.

“I didn’t do anything,” at length he found his voice, his words hoarse and his consonants sticking together as though he had to force each syllable through his vocal chords. “You had unfinished business, Mareiko. I suggest you finish it. I’m the murderer of your Captain, remember. I confessed to the crime. I’m currently unarmed... if you want to kill me, then now would be your chance.”

“What are you trying to make me do?” Mareiko demanded, her tones becoming more agitated, bordering on hysterical. “What were those pictures, Atsushi-kun? Where did they come from? They came through your eyes, your thoughts... don’t tell me you did nothing! You put some kind of spell on me, to make me see... to make me think...”

“I’m not capable of that kind of witchcraft,” Atsushi said frankly. “I don’t know who is. I’m not a scientist, nor a magician. You’re the one with the Kidou knowledge, and the scientific genius. I should be asking you for an explanation. I never invited you to see into my memories, and you shouldn’t have done. Things which are private to me are mine to deal with as I see fit — at the very least, if you intend to kill me, you should let me take such recollections to my grave.”

Mareiko shook her head, tears trickling over her lashes and down her pale cheeks.

“Taichou would never have said those things,” she murmured. “You’re lying to me. *Lying!* They’re not real! None of it! I don’t care what you say, you must have... somehow, you... you... you...”

Again, words failed her, and to Atsushi’s surprise and dismay, she crumpled to her knees, her sword slipping from her hold and clattering onto the hard office floor, coming to rest alongside Atsushi’s own discarded weapon. Unable to maintain her composure any further, she buried her head in her arms as the tears overwhelmed her, and, as her sobs filled the small, sparsely decorated chamber, Atsushi felt his heart ache in regret one more time.

“You should have killed me sooner,” he murmured. “Maybe if you had, you wouldn’t have seen. I’m sorry, Mareiko. If I had had any power over it, I would never have let you see anything of that day. My guilt or innocence are beside the point. Making you see things that upset you was never my intention. You should’ve killed me more quickly. Then it would’ve been over, and you wouldn’t have to suffer like this.”

Mareiko raised her gaze, and Atsushi saw hopelessness in the pale eyes.

“I *trusted* you,” she whispered. “I trusted you as my friend and my comrade, and you always told me the truth. Why didn’t you tell me the truth this time, Atsushi-kun?”

Atsushi did not answer, but her question tore into him all the same. Despite his silence, and her own protestations, Mareiko had seen every inch of the chimera that had assuaged his own senses. Where he had relived painful memory, she had seen, for the first time, every slither of truth. It was not the shock of witnessing her Captain’s death a second time, nor the anger or fierce denial that had broken Mareiko’s composure, but the real understanding of what had occurred between the two Captains that day in the Rukon. Whatever she said, Mareiko knew what she had seen had been real, and Atsushi’s brow creased in distress.

She was there and she saw it. She saw the fight. She saw what I did. She saw enough to know that the memories were true. What power projected them between us I have no idea, but once seen, they can’t be unseen. Mareiko knows the truth, now... and neither one of us can walk away from that.

He bent to pick up his weapon, sliding it carefully into its sheath and saying a silent apology for treating it with such disrespect. Mareiko watched every move he made, but her eyes were suddenly empty, as though what she had seen had caused her to give up completely, and at the sight of it, Atsushi gritted his teeth, understanding what it was he needed to do.

I am the Captain of the Eleventh Division and protecting Seireitei is my duty. That means dealing with this disturbance... and making sure it doesn’t spread further than it must.

Flexing his fingers, he took a step or two past his companion’s huddled body, then, before she could react to him, he brought the edge of his hand sharply against a point on the back of her neck. She slumped, unconscious, and Atsushi was quick to catch her falling body, turning it over so that he could see her face. Her skin was still pale, but blotched with tears, and he sighed, pushing the stray strands of wild fair hair back from her brow.

I’m sorry, Mareiko. I’m not strong enough a person to kill you, even if it would make things easier for you, and even if you would’ve killed me. Mokizuki’s blade is stained with too much blood already, and I wouldn’t ever stain it with yours, anyway. For now, I must simply do my duty. That involves making sure you’re somewhere secure until I can find a way to put this whole thing into some kind of perspective.

He lifted his limp burden up in his arms, striding across the office and nudging the door open with the toe of his sandal. As he stepped

out into the hallway, he stopped dead, dismay crossing his features yet again as he took in the sight before him. Strewn around the corridors, legs poking out of doorways and arms hung haphazardly over railings were the members of his Division, each one of them completely insensible to the world. In the midst of these was the unmistakable form of Ikata, and he paused alongside his Vice Captain's body to make sure his hated adjutant was alive. To his relief, the man was breathing, a soft snore erupting from his huge nostrils, and Atsushi sighed, slowly shaking his head. A quick check of the other officers confirmed that not a single one of them had been physically injured — and that all of them were simply sleeping, sedated by an unknown force or spell.

Atsushi glanced at Mareiko.

Not quite so unknown. But at least you didn't hurt them. Thank you, Mareiko. Your grudge was with me, but you could easily have unleashed it on my men and made things more complicated. The fact you didn't makes me grateful.

He stepped over the straggling limbs and torsos, heading along the hallway towards his own private quarters. His chamber door was locked, but he did not have any time for niceties, and, shunting Mareiko's unconscious form up more securely in his arms, he raised his right leg, giving the door several hard kicks until the panels splintered and broke away. A further shove with his shoulder and the doorway was clear enough for them to pass through, and he ducked beneath the hanging remains of the divide, stepping into his spartan quarters and moving to lay Mareiko's still body on the top of his bed. Removing his *haori* from his shoulders, he lay it gently over her, pausing to gaze down at her with some misgivings.

I don't want to leave you here alone, but I have no choice. Twelfth Division must have had orders today, and you derelicted them to come attack me. I need to make sure your own officers are all right — and more, what else has been happening. I couldn't sense it before, but now I can. Swirls of spirit power, and the unmistakable scent of molten metal and charred wood. As a shinigami Captain, my duty is to fight when I'm needed to defend this place from harm, and that means I can't stay here and watch over you in the way that I'd like. My Kidou is no match for yours, and even if I were to cast it to confine you in here, you'd find a way to break free. Yet staying here with you is out of the question. I trust you won't wake up too quickly. Whilst it's just between us, it doesn't need to go further.

He brushed his hand against Mokizuki's hilt, then turned to go, casting his fellow Captain one last glance before stepping over the

splinters of his doorway and out into the hall beyond. A quick flashstep and he was out in the main thoroughfare, and as soon as he set foot outside Eleventh's gates, he could tell that something was seriously amiss. Everything was deathly silent, yet the unmistakeable traces of violent battle were drifting his way from further into Inner Seireitei's core, and for a moment he hesitated, unsure which direction he ought to proceed in first.

"Minaichi... taichou?"

The decision was made for him, as a dazed and drunken figure staggered out from the gates of the Twelfth, clinging desperately onto the gate-posts to prevent himself from falling headlong.

"Michihashi!" Muttering a curse, Atsushi hurried towards him, grabbing the younger man by the shoulders and meeting his gaze. "What is it? What's happened?"

"Must... find... Taichou," Aoi swallowed hard, and Atsushi thought that he might be sick, so green around the gills did he appear. "Taichou... something... wrong. Must... find. Must... stop..."

He faltered, swallowing again, and Atsushi sighed, pushing the younger Vice Captain forcibly down until he was sitting on the ground.

"You stay there, and report as clearly as you can," he instructed. "If it's your Captain you're worried about, she's fine. She took a trip to my Division, but I was able to subdue her and there's been no harm done."

"To Eleventh?" Aoi looked alarmed, colour beginning to return to his cheeks now he was no longer having to maintain an upright position of balance. He rubbed his brow, then, "Minaichi-taichou, something was possessing her. If she did anything... I mean... whatever she did... it wasn't her. I saw her... it wasn't her. Something was making her."

Atsushi's glanced back towards the Eleventh Division, and his lips thinned.

Yes. Twenty-five years of unrequited hate and resentment, boiling up inside.

Out loud he said,

"I told you, there's no harm done. Quite likely you're right, and something was controlling her. She certainly acted unlike her normal self, but she's no match for me with her damaged arm and I was able

to take her into safe custody without having to hurt her. I came to make sure the Twelfth was all right — though if you're the evidence, it certainly doesn't look that way."

"I think... the others were drugged," Aoi rubbed his brow once more, and Atsushi could tell he was trying to remember. "All of them, with supplies kept locked away. Only Taichou and I have the key, but whatever made her come to you also made her drug the others. I wasn't with them, so she cast *Hakufuku* on me. I was out cold. Then, something woke me. I don't know what it was, or how long I was out. I saw bits of colour and light, but nothing coherent, and then I woke up in the courtyard and remembered what had happened. I looked for Taichou, but she'd gone, and I knew I had to find her before she did something she'd regret."

"The rest of Twelfth were drugged?" Atsushi remembered the Eleventh Division officers, and Aoi nodded.

"They're still flat out," he agreed. "I'm the only one... not. Minaichi-taichou, if Taichou is all right, can I..."

"I don't know that she's all right. If something was controlling her, it's hard to know whether it's stopped," Atsushi cut across him, shaking his head. "I told you, she's safe for now. You can be more helpful taking care of your squad and recovering your colour. You're a useless solder if you can't get to your feet and fight a battle, and I'm starting to realise that that's what we're in the middle of right now. First off, you can tell me what Twelfth Division were scheduled to do before your Captain was possessed?"

"Guard the Third!" Alarm flashed into Aoi's gaze and he stared up at Atsushi in clear dismay. "Minaichi-taichou, we were supposed to be guarding Third Division's *Senkaimon* and labs! If someone made Taichou come attack you, then that means nobody was there! What if Taichou was used as a decoy... in order to cover up something else?"

"Third Division, huh?" Atsushi's lips set in a grim line. "All right. You go back inside and nurse your fellows. Leave Third and your Captain to me. That's an order."

"Yes, sir," Aoi's eyes were anxious and doubtful, but he was quickly coming back to himself now, and Atsushi thanked his lucky stars that Mareiko's Vice Captain was quick-witted and not given to emotional reactions. For a moment he remembered the dead Sakanoue, but quickly pushed the thought aside as he watched the Twelfth Division adjutant scramble clumsily to his feet, resting against the gatepost to steady himself before disappearing back into the barracks. He could

leave Twelfth now, and it appeared that, despite the intent in Mareiko's attack on him, she had not seen fit to make any further sacrifices along the way. It was like her, he reflected absently, turning away from his neighbouring Division with a sigh. Even when they had been friends, she had disliked bringing suffering to innocent individuals, often stopping to speak to frightened Plus Souls who had been left homeless by the insurgent waves of Hollowfication. At this memory, Atsushi's eyes became sad.

Rukongai changed us both, drove us apart, and built insurmountable walls between our values and our intentions from that day on. Even when you've had your sword at my throat, Mareiko, I'm still drawn to remembering the way it was before. Maybe I've been fooling myself, believing that shielding you from everything Kusakawa did would allow you to move on and heal. You've never got over his death, and the light I used to see in your eyes went out the day they told you he died. No matter how others see you, I knew a different you — and today, I saw the change clearly for myself. Yet despite how much you hated me, you didn't kill my men and you didn't kill yours. You stopped, planned, schemed and worked out a way to catch me with my guard down.

This wasn't done on the spur of the moment. Michihashi's words confirmed that to me. He thought you were being controlled, but I know better. I know you, even if the person I knew has drifted far away from me. I know the woman who Kusakawa chose as his Vice Captain, and I know she's not foolish enough to act on chance. You said you'd waited twenty five years for this opportunity, but there was no need to wait. With your Kidou skill and intelligence, you could've settled the score sooner. There are any number of ways a scientific genius could commit a murder and not put herself under any suspicion. But you didn't. You wanted to confront me. You wanted to hear my confession — or maybe... my explanation.

He faltered, turning back to glance at the Twelfth gate with new eyes.

Maybe you hoped I'd deny it. Maybe you looked for a reason... and I didn't give it. Whatever happened and however you saw my memories, I never put those things into words. However, if Michihashi is telling the truth, it's probably not just a matter between the two of us. There's reason in the lad's suggestion. You weren't possessed, Mareiko. You came to me by choice. You could've waited till your men had deployed to Third and avoided anyone seeing you, but you didn't. You actively stopped your squad from going to Third. That means you decided Third should be left undefended. And... that means that the opportunity you were waiting for... the opportunity to kill me... was a moment when you would have been able to do so under the guise of something else. You were going to kill me and blame it on the control of someone else. Someone Seireitei has been

investigating... and someone who may well now be at Third.

He bit his lip, not liking the way his thoughts were heading.

Complicity with someone like Keitarou is a treasonable offence, and murdering a Captain is also punishable by death. But killing one whilst possessed by an enemy, that's different. You could reveal your true intent in front of me, because you intended me to die — but you gave Michihashi the impression you weren't acting on your own impulses, so he could act as witness for you. Which leaves me with a problem.

He turned his head in the direction of the Third Division, then back towards the Twelfth, interpreting the traces of spiritual energy as they drifted past on the breeze. Some he recognised, some he did not, but in the midst of everything was something acrid and potent, something he had smelt when he had been moving Mareiko to safer quarters.
Charred wood.

He squinted, certain that he could make out hazy smoke in the distance.

Something is going on at Third. I'm right. Mareiko abandoned her post in order to kill me, which means anything that happens there is partly my fault. I should go there, and settle it. I should go there..I should.

Still he hesitated, his mind flitting back to Mareiko's agonised expression and her tears.

Can I betray her again? If she's betrayed everyone and everything, can I stand by and... am I even considering...

The next minute, his decision was made for him, for, from the direction of the Third Division, he felt a sudden, unmistakeable flare of spiritual energy. Though the battleground was far from here, something still prickling in the air had amplified the sensation for miles around, making the release of Katen Kyoukotsu's *reiryoku* seem twice as oppressive, and despite himself he swallowed hard, his expression becoming one of disbelief.

Kyouraku... Shunsui? Since when has he possessed spirit power like that?

He took a step backwards, then another, then another, each moment moving further and further away from the source of the release. There was anger and darkness in the blade's release, different from that he had seen in Mareiko's eyes and heard in her accusations, yet somehow more intimidating. For the first time he realised that the lazy, lackadaisical Captain of the Eighth was more than what he seemed, and, furthermore, he was in no mood for negotiations, either with friend or foe. To intervene would be to put one's own life on the line — and as a strategist, Atsushi understood that his involvement in

whatever was now beginning at Third would almost certainly be to Seireitei's detriment. Shunsui had released his limits to fight a lone battle, determined resolve in every flicker of energy. Atsushi's lips thinned, and he made up his mind, turning his back firmly on the direction of the Third and heading the other way instead, towards the hated Thirteenth. With every step he moved more quickly, eventually dropping into shunpo until he materialised outside the gates of the Captain he most resented. Enishi was standing beneath the Division's snowdrop logo, and at the sight of him, he let out an exclamation, almost bashing his head on the base of the sign in his surprise.

"Atsushi-dono!" he exclaimed, and there was something in his eyes which made the Eleventh Captain deeply uneasy. Though he had never considered the other man perceptive, in that instant he felt as though Enishi was looking right through him, and he bristled, instinctively tensing.

"Stop standing around gawping at me like you don't have anything else to do!" he exclaimed, his words impatient. "I want your Captain! I want him now!"

"Taichou isn't here, sir," With a gargantuan effort, Enishi recovered himself, offering an apologetic look. "We've had some things happen... he's left the barracks and I don't know how long before he'll be back. He left me in charge in his absence."

Of all the bitter ironies.

Atsushi stared in sudden resentment at the taller man, remembering how he had snubbed the Eleventh's Vice Captancy in favour of joining Ukitake's District Division. A moment of silence passed between them, then Enishi scratched his head, offering an awkward smile.

"I could take a message," he hazarded, and Atsushi sighed, shaking his head in resignation.

"No time," he said briskly. "You'll have to do. I want some people from Thirteenth and I want them now. Listen to me carefully, and don't let it fall out of those flapping ears of yours, because what I say is important."

"Yes, sir, I'm listening," Enishi looked startled, but he nodded. "But Taichou said we weren't to leave..."

"Eleventh and Twelfth Division have been attacked," Atsushi cut across him impatiently. "Drugged, or laid out unconscious with Kidou. Michihashi is a drunken zombie who ought not be let out of his

barracks if he doesn't want to get trampled, at least not while he can't walk straight. He's no use whatsoever, so I sent him inside to sober up. The rest of his squad — and mine, including that useless lump Ikata — are still lost to the world."

"What?" Enishi's vague confusion vanished in an instant, consternation crossing his features. "But... how..."

Atsushi offered him a flinty smile.

"You can take it as read that it wasn't a part of normal drill," he said waspishly. "A hostile force took control of Sekime-taichou and caused her to render her men and mine unconscious, before she made an attempt on my life. I overpowered the woman and laid her in my quarters out of harm's way, but I can't guarantee that she won't wake up and I don't know what the person at the controls might try to do with her next. Sekime's not a fighter, not with that damaged arm, but I don't want this to become a bigger incident, especially since there's clearly been combat elsewhere. Here, however, seems so far unaffected. Either invading rebels consider Thirteenth an unattractive proposition, or they've seen the lack of provisions and think they've already raided it. Whichever it happens to be, I decided to take advantage. Since my squad and Twelfth are both out of commission, I want people from Thirteenth to come help put things to rights."

Enishi's eyes narrowed slightly, then he turned, poking his head back into the division.

"*Shikibu!*" he bellowed, and moments later the red-head emerged, slightly dishevelled but as quick off the mark as ever. She too shot Atsushi an odd look, sending that same sense of unease through his body, but she said nothing, casting her Vice Captain a quizzical glance.

"You yelled?" she asked softly, and Enishi nodded.

"Something's gone down at Eleventh," he said gravely. "Minaichi-taichou's been attacked."

"With respect, Minaichi-taichou, you seem remarkably unscathed if that's the case," Naoko turned her penetrating gaze on the older man, who glared back at her.

"If I wanted the opinions of a Third Seated officer on my combat prowess, I'd ask," he snapped. "There isn't time for me to waste repeating the same orders to each one of Ukitake's underlings individually, so pay attention. Sekime has been possessed, and attempted to kill me, but she's no match for me, and I have her

unconscious within the Eleventh. My Division and Twelfth's officers are under the influence of some kind of drug, so I have nobody to call on for back-up. Instead of staring at me, maybe you could prove that Thirteenth is more than decorative and send me some officers to help contain the situation in case there's a second wave of attack?"

"Sekime-taichou?" Naoko's brows twitched together in concern. "It's Keitarou. I *knew* it. I knew that man would be trouble. I knew..." She trailed off, letting out a heavy sigh, and the Eleventh Captain had the impression she was gathering her composure. "I'm sorry, Minaichi-taichou. I didn't realise it was anything so serious. We suspected Aizen Keitarou had placed an attack on Seireitei, and now your words directly confirm he's controlling Captains. Taichou was awaiting further orders before we deployed, but things got more out of hand than we expected."

"Shikibu, I'm going to go with Atsushi-dono," Enishi cast the Third Seat a glance. "When the Captain comes back, tell him, and tell him I'll see him in Ugendou for a reprimand later if he sees fit. Ask too if he can spare more officers to Eleventh, since it seems as though we're the only force in this area capable of taking on trouble, just like he feared. For the time being, I'll take Tsukabishi with me. He's good with Kidou, and if Sekime-taichou's still feeling feisty when we get there, that'll be a help. You take charge here — and remember what Taichou said before he left."

"I'm not you. I don't have a sieve for a brain," was Naoko's acerbic reply. "You can rely on me. Go with Minaichi-taichou. I'll find Tsunemori and send him after you."

Enishi's expression became sheepish at her jibe, but he nodded, and, as she disappeared into shunpo to carry out the instruction, he turned to face the impatient Eleventh Captain.

"I'm at your disposal, Atsushi-dono," he said firmly. "Whatever I can do to help — lead the way."

At the same time Atsushi had been dealing with Mareiko's breakdown, across the military settlement the world had returned to the dust and stone of Seireitei's military barracks with a startling jolt, and Shunsui had had to put a hand out to steady himself, half afraid that he would fall headlong. What he had been doing for the previous few moments he could not say, but as his awareness returned to itself he realised that he was at the gates of the Third Division, his body having carried him there on momentum even whilst his mind had been roaming far and wide.

Kohaku.

He took a deep breath of air to suppress the rippling nausea in his gut, gazing around him for any sign of the young boy, but he could see no sign of him.

But a flare that intense... invading my thoughts like that... means he must be close. And that means...

He took another breath, steeling his nerves and pushing resolutely forward into the deserted Third Division grounds, taking in its untouched appearance as he went. Nobody was patrolling here, he realised with surprise. Kohaku had come here, he was certain of that, yet there was no sign of any struggle, nor any evidence of unconscious Twelfth Divisioners, knocked out by the force of Kohaku's hallucinogenic *reiryoku*. The significance of this was not lost on the Eighth Division Captain, and he frowned, unease setting in once more. *Well, that was outside of the brief. Twelfth ought to have been here. Does that mean that Keitarou's spell spread wider than I thought... and something happened to Mareiko-chan and her people before they could get here? It's possible. We were occupied by Tenth's officers, and Seventh were busy at Ninth. There's been no opportunity to travel the other way... but if Twelfth have been affected, who knows what state Eleventh might be in. Or... or Thirteenth...*

He shook his head, quickly dispelling this thought from his mind. *No. I'm trusting the boy. I decided to trust him, and do things his way. If I falter now, I might not have time to do what needs to be done. If what Kohaku said is true, then I still have some time before I need to worry about Juu. I can't stand and worry about things I can't change, and so I'll focus on the things I can.*

He slipped through the side entrance of the division, making his way through the halls and checking as he went for any signs of life, but as with the outside, there was none. Third had been left completely abandoned.

Shunsui's eyes narrowed, his mind flitting back to the images he had seen in Kohaku's hallucinatory vision. They had been vivid and disconcerting, but despite their revelations, he had felt no particular jolt of shock or horror at witnessing the scene. He alone among his companions had anticipated Kohaku's intentions, and though he had not imagined such a powerful, impactful vision, it had not stopped him in his tracks the way he suspected it had afflicted others. Whether this was because of what Kohaku had said about the nature of his *reiryoku*, he didn't know, but even whilst his mind had been distracted, his body had not stopped in its pursuit of Keitarou. For him, perhaps, the effect had been less all-encompassing than it ought

to have been, an unreal kind of dream state through which he had still been, subconsciously, aware of his own self, and as a result he had felt only a dull sense of understanding, as, piece by piece, the gaps in his knowledge had slipped into place. He did not know how the vision would have affected his enemy, nor whether Kohaku's gamble had truly paid off— but if his particular resilience had bought him any extra seconds, it was now he had to use it. Kohaku had hoped to destroy the *Senkaimon* and free Keitarou's immediate victims, but he could not count on the young man's assistance any further. Kohaku had admitted that he wasn't sure whether his weakened body could endure such a flare of spirit power as would be needed, and Shunsui knew that there was a possibility he might find the stray's corpse at the scene of the crime. He had steeled himself for this possibility, telling himself that, unlike Juushirou, he had no personal bond with this youth — but as he ducked through Third's property, he felt a sense of unease about what he was about to see. Alive or dead, Shunsui knew the only way his strategy would work would be if Keitarou could not place his son's whereabouts, and so, if there was a body, there would be no time for squeamishness.

He pursed his lips, considering the hallucination once again. It had tallied with what Juushirou had said, about Minaichi's actions against his Vice Captain, but had gone so much further into the Eleventh Captain's past actions, exposing everything else that had followed Sakanoue's unexpected death. It was interesting information, tantalising to their other investigation, but Shunsui's emotions were tempered by what he now knew was at stake, and so he found he could view it clinically, almost detached from the scandal it would undoubtedly cause.

So, if Koku can be trusted, Kusakawa Shougo-dono was the one killing people in the Rukon. Another Urahara with a God complex. Minaichi killed his adjutant, just as Koku first described it to Juushirou, and more, he killed Kusakawa, but more by accident than by design. His role in all of this is suddenly, mind-blowingly clear, and now I know for certain that he's not the one we want. That was a Minaichi I had never seen before, but his reasons and his rationale I understand.

A rueful smile touched his lips, but his eyes remained sombre.

In one sense what I'm doing now is part-way the same as what he did then. True, I'm not in love with Juu, and it really looks as though Minaichi has a flame for Mareiko-chan. It's also not as though, ultimately, this will remain any kind of a secret. But I am acting on secret information, preparing to do what is necessary to bring an end to these hostilities. Juu will be angry when he finds out I've come here without him — and that I knew what was afoot and didn't tell him. Just like Minaichi was trying to

make sure Mareiko-chan didn't get hurt, well, I'm trying to prevent Kohaku's other visions from becoming real. I don't intend to see Juu dead and broken on the ground if it can be at all prevented, even if it costs me my life to achieve it. I've been there, once, and I won't be there again. Well, who'd have thought that I would ever understand Minaichi's point of view on anything — but I do. I really feel that, at present, I do. He's not the spy we're looking for — which means we have to think again.

He pushed open the rear door of the Third Division barracks, following the neatly marked stone path towards the *Senkaimon*, where he and others had met to be transported to Rukongai what now seemed a lifetime ago. The gate then had been a glittering entity of life, the delicately constructed frame only just managing to hold together all the spiritual fibres needed to connect Seireitei with the worlds beyond, but as he approached it now, he could quickly see that his first suspicion had been correct. Instead of a fine, polished structure, the frame was shattered and in ruins, dark, acrid smoke still pouring out from all around it. The opening into the Dangai was probably still intact, Shunsui mused, as he approached the smouldering structure cautiously, but the means to activate it from this position was now gone, and, as a result, the corresponding gateway in the Real World location would, almost certainly, not allow the Captains in the Real World to make a quick and predictable return.

More reassuring, however, was the complete absence of Kohaku. There was no body, nor any discernable sign of blood. Either Keitarou had beaten him to it, securing his son's damaged body and escaping the scene, or Kohaku had survived his rush of power and had left on his own account. Shunsui knew he couldn't rule the first option out, but the more he looked at the scene, the more he felt the second scenario was the true one. There was no sign of Keitarou's presence here, and Kohaku had assured him that the intoxicifying flare of *reiryoku* would have affected the scientist's speed and movement. It was not much, he had said, but, probably, enough of a time lapse for Shunsui to reach the scene first, and the more he examined his surroundings, the more Shunsui found that they fitted with what the boy had said.

He let out a low whistle, circling the damaged control panel more closely and noting the wide, warped hole in the middle, the metal bent and twisted by an intense heat and the wooden surrounds little more than patchy pieces of charcoal and ash.

Well, Koku-kun. I suppose you were right, when you said you had to wait for your father to bring the sword before you could access all of your

spirit power. The gate probably acted as a conductor or a transmitter, the vibrations of its death throes allowing you to transmit what you wanted people to see over an even further distance. I imagine this will take some explaining to Nagesu-sama, when he gets back — but since he doesn't look likely to return for some time, perhaps we'll have room to come up with something. Or maybe the Kyouraku will have to make a sponsored donation towards the rebuild... since it's probably Kyouraku reiryoku that's responsible for this vandalism.

A faint smile touched his lips, and he rested his hand against one of the less scorched areas, sensing for the first time the clear reiatsu signature against the surface. It was Kohaku's *reiryoku*, he noted, yet different from how it had ever felt before. Whereas the young boy's spirit power had been intoxicating, it had lacked any real thrust or power, but this was a different matter. He clicked his tongue against his teeth pensively.

Keitarou confined your reiryoku in a sword before you were ready or able to do it yourself... but now you've redressed that balance. I can feel it, Koku. It's here, the demon that haunts you, rearing its head and screaming its name loud enough that you finally heard it. Or maybe it wasn't the real demon. Maybe the real demon is the one stalking the both of us through Seireitei, looking to bring people to death.

Glancing at his hand, he hesitated, then made up his mind. Slowly his fingers began to glitter with bluish energy, and he pressed the tips more firmly against the remains of the gate controls, murmuring the words to *Soukatsui* and channelling his *reiryoku* through his body, sending it pulsing into the ruined device.

I think it's better right now that this looks like my handiwork. It seems more politic... and probably, less complicated in the long run if it turns out Nagesu-sama has issues with someone trashing his Division. More, though, I think it provides a more convincing scene... for when the visitor I'm expecting to arrive turns up. If Koku was right, he'll be here soon, and it will complicate my strategy if he knows the one who really blew up that thing was his son. I'm sorry, Koku, I'm adlibbing away from the script a little... but I have to do that, because I know your father in a completely different way from the way you do.

He flexed his fingers, firing one last *Soukatsui* into the mangled structure, then drew his hand back, testing once again for the potent waves of *reiryoku* he had felt on first arrival. They were still present, dispersed in the atmosphere all around him, but, to his satisfaction, it was no longer possible to discern Kohaku's reiatsu around the wrecked *Senkaimon*, and he eyed the incriminating charcoal dust that now covered his hand with approval.

“I should’ve known that I’d find you in this place.”

A voice, cold and accusing, suddenly penetrated his senses, and Shunsui did not turn around, unstartled by the other’s sudden presence.

“I’m surprised,” he said levelly, his calm tones belying his words. “This is Third Division, and my *haori* reads Eight. I thought you were capable of counting. Numeracy is a basic foundation of science, or so I’ve been told, Keitarou-san.”

“Where you are concerned, no boundaries or limits seem beyond your interference,” Shunsui could hear the sound of footsteps growing closer, and at the last minute he turned around, swinging Seibara’s sealed blade up to meet the speculative point of Chudokuga’s glittering edge. The scientist hopped back before Shunsui could follow up his defence with a swing of the other blade, clicking his tongue pensively against the roof of his mouth.

“Yes, I didn’t think I’d take you off guard so easily,” he admitted. “You knew I would come here, didn’t you? I wonder how.”

“I am not as stupid as you think I am,” Shunsui offered him a benign smile. ‘Even lazy mutts like me learn from past experience. Where you seem to be, most likely, you’re not. Therefore, where is the most illogical place to find you? An empty Division, far from where the fighting is? Of course. And which Division is the most attractive or useful to you? Obviously, the one which contains the most scientific bric-a-brac to play with. I might not understand what most of Nagesu-sama’s gadgets do, but I understand enough to know that, probably, they’d become an untapped arsenal if they fell into your hands. Though,’ he added, “I think you’ll find you’re misjudging the situation. You appear to have found me... not the other way around, so perhaps it was you who knew I would be here. I can’t imagine you’d want to risk me escaping, not when you’ve gone to such pains in the past to try to kill me.”

He turned, gazing at the smouldering *Senkaimon* with a pensive gaze.

“Still, your expression makes it clear that you didn’t come simply for the pleasure of renewing our acquaintance,” he added. “From the way you’re glaring at me, I assume it has something to do with that. I guess you had a use for it... it is based on your technology, so it’d be a very simple thing indeed for you to activate it, providing there were no shinigami guarding it. Well, there don’t seem to be any others, but there is me — so I’ll have to do. And desperate times call for desperate

measures... which I'm not afraid to deploy."

Keitarou's gaze narrowed, his muddy brown eyes also darting to the remains of the *Senkaimon*.

"So, like a heathen you destroyed it, trapping your allies in the Real World and preventing you from calling for back-up, based on the very slim possibility I might come here?"

"Perhaps I did," Shunsui shrugged his shoulders, his nonchalant smile widening. "I can't build things, Keitarou. Kyouraku aren't very good at that. Destroying stuff, however — in that field, we have our uses. I think you'll agree that it's a pretty thorough job. Even you, with all your *Senkaimon* experience, probably couldn't open it easily, not now."

The smile froze on his lips, and he shot Keitarou a sidelong glance.

"And, even if it was a longshot, it worked. You did come here," he pointed out. "Plus, I had no intention of calling for back-up of any kind. I suspect you know that, and it explains your annoyance with me, but if you're hoping that Nagesu-sama and the others will come back on cue and you can use that demon sword to make them dance like you did Hakubei and Anabomi, you'll have to think of another strategy. They won't be coming back here — not yet, and not for a considerable amount of time, if my calculations are correct. In the meantime, you've stumbled into a physical problem of your own."

He drew Amaki's sword, crossing it casually across Seibara's, and Keitarou flinched, as if in anticipation of a sword release, but Shunsui grinned, lowering the weapon slightly at the man's caution.

"Yes, you realise it. You don't want me to release Katen Kyoukotsu, because you're not sure if you have a means to fight against it. I wonder how much you understand about my *zanpakutou* from our brief encounter so many years ago — some, perhaps, but I bet not enough to satisfy your scientist's brain. Not to mention the fact you know that, whether I liked it or not, I was raised in the heart of a military, *bushi* family who take sword-play and combat seriously and expect every son to be able to use a sword by the time they reach their majority. Your coming here has proven to be a more reckless gamble for you, I think, since you've run into someone you can't make a puppet of so easily, haven't you?"

"You think I can't take control of you, with my sword?" As Shunsui twitched his sword provocatively once more, Keitarou leapt back warily, his eyes angry and defensive. "Is that why you came here? You thought you could take me on and fight me to the death? I don't know

what you think you know about my spirit power, but I am more powerful than I was when you put that dirty blade through my shoulder, and more, you have no element of surprise, not here. Your assumption that you're immune to me is a dangerous gamble, Kyouraku Shunsui. You've never taken my sword's power, so don't imagine that because you got the better of me once..."

"It's another gamble," Shunsui admitted blithely, swinging his swords casually away from one another. "I'm guessing, just as you said. But Katen Kyourakutsu and I, we rather thrive on playing games in which we can't be certain of the outcome. And, whenever you gamble, it's better to have a back-up strategy, just in case you need it."

"You're saying you have such a strategy?" Keitarou demanded suspiciously, and Shunsui nodded.

"Whether or not you can possess me with that thing remains to be seen. A hypothesis which I'm not really interested in seeing tested," he agreed lazily. "So I took some insurance, to make sure you don't feel tempted to try."

"And that is?" Keitarou arched an eyebrow, and Shunsui offered a sweet smile.

"How about the life of your son?" he suggested lightly, but there was ice in his eyes. "What about Kohaku's life?"

"Koku?" There was a momentary flicker in Keitarou's gaze, just the faintest glimmer of uncertainty, but Shunsui launched himself after it as he tried to ram his bluff home.

"Yes, Kohaku. Koku," he agreed lightly. "Either is fine, it doesn't matter which. Aren't you a bit concerned for his safety, whilst you stand there in front of me making idle threats?"

"You don't know anything about Kohaku!" Keitarou snapped, and Shunsui laughed, shrugging his shoulders.

"Perhaps you hadn't heard, but he's been lodging with a good friend of mine," he said dismissively. "You remember Juushirou, I'm sure you do. The idealistic one who believes in throwing his full heart and soul after everything he does."

He spun Seibara's *wakizashi* blade around, tossing it up in the air and catching it deftly between his fingers once more.

"Juushirou's idealistic, but you see, I'm not. I'm different," he added calmly. "He saw a boy in trouble. I saw a way to get to you. And so I waited here. I followed his *reiryoku*, and I waited for you to

come after him. Kohaku is in my custody, Keitarou. If something happens to me, well, maybe my subordinate officers are under orders to kill him.”

“The Tenth and Ninth Division Captains danced to my tune, and your subordinate officers have been fighting their friends too hard to take any such order,” Keitarou looked derisive, and Shunsui shook his head, inwardly hoping and praying that his gamble was right.

“Eighth Division is bigger than you imagine, and my remaining forces are already divided,” he lied. “You’ve assumed I came here alone, but that doesn’t mean that I did. I’m not a school boy acting on my own whims, now, but a Captain with a large resource base of subordinates to whom those impulses can be delegated. Not all of my people are where you think they are, and not everything is happening according to your plan.”

Keitarou snorted.

“You’re bluffing,” he accused, and Shunsui shrugged, offering him another level smile.

“Then use your own senses to test me out. Do you sense fighting now?” he asked softly. “Do you, or do you sense peace? Can you sense your puppets moving at all, Keitarou, or have they vanished from your line of sight?”

Keitarou opened his mouth to retort, then hesitated, and Shunsui saw that flicker of dismay surface in the muddy gaze once more. He faltered, and Shunsui pushed forward once more.

“Your son is in my power,” he repeated frankly. “I can’t do anything about you or your sword, but I can take an injured, helpless boy prisoner and force him to do my bidding, in fear of his life or of yours. Kohaku is subject to a kill on sight order, and so are you. At any moment, his throat could be slit, but for my instructing him to be kept alive. Are you still sure you intend to use Chudokuga to meddle with me? My subordinates have been told that, if I should fall under your spell, Kohaku dies. And, if you leave this place without my permission... Kohaku dies.”

He reached over to tap Keitarou’s shoulder with the long end of Amaki’s sword, and Keitarou cursed, flinching back.

“You’re a smart man. I’m sure you’ve got the pattern without my explaining any further,” he said casually. “The *Senkaimon* was your draw here, but it’s gone, so we have some time to kill before Nagesu-sama and the others find a way to come back. I realise that he’s smart

enough to find an alternative path, so I don't want to waste my time talking to you. If you want to save your son, you're going to have to dispatch me, so I can't send a message back to my subordinates to have the boy killed. And, to kill the people holding him, you have to go through me, now."

"I knew there was a good reason why I despised you," Keitarou's face twisted into a mask of hatred and frustration. "You think too much like me, and you aren't fooled by smokescreens as much as your fellows. You were dangerous when first we met, and most people I try to kill don't survive as many attempts as you. You were always a problem for me... and here you are again, rearing your ugly head and preaching your twisted values. How far the shinigami of Seireitei have sunk if they have to use a hostage to try and control my actions! Do you really think that your officers can contain Kohaku in his current state? He has his sword."

"And he is in my control," Shunsui repeated calmly. "You're a man of logic, and of probabilities. You can judge for yourself if my words are true or a lie. But, if they're a lie, explain this to me. How was it that, just now, this entire area was filled with a hallucination only your son could have projected? Your son, who is the only one other than you who is capable of breaking through your control over other people... if he's not under my power, Keitarou, why would he do that? Why would he free the shinigami, if I didn't have a knife to his throat?"

The horror and dismay that flooded Keitarou's expression this time was unguarded and real, and even Shunsui was taken aback by the depth of fear in the other man's pale brown eyes. For a moment, he wondered whether Keitarou had known or suspected Kohaku's actions from the start, and then he shook his head, letting out a heavy sigh.

"You are really too clever for your own good, or mine," he murmured, and Shunsui was surprised to hear the grudging respect in the other man's words. "If we were not so ideologically opposite, I might even praise you for such a twist. I had never proven for certain that Kohaku was able to break my power's hold, but I had theorised that he might... one day... have that ability. For you to have learned it, and manipulated it to free your friends... the only way you could've discovered such a thing is by having Kohaku in your power. I sensed your reiatsu on the move, and I know that Koku came in this direction. My son's aura is all around here, telling me that you took him and probably by force. What you told him, I don't know. He's young, and impressionable, and sometimes, highly foolish. But I cede that, probably, the evidence suggests that your account is true. He

might obey you, knowing that my plan is not yet finished and that breaking my sword's hold wouldn't prevent me from using Chudokuga on other people... that judgement is also something I can recognise as my son's mind. He would rather cede to you than attack you if there was another option... and if you came here and took him off guard, likely he didn't know what else to do."

"You sound remarkably unconcerned about it," Shunsui remarked, and Keitarou shrugged.

"You just told me that you have him, as opposed to killing him outright, despite your Council's order," he pointed out astutely. "That would make *me* gamble... that you don't intend to kill him at all. So long as I am here, Kohaku is safe. He might be a lever to get me to do your bidding, but staying here and killing you is convenient and it won't prevent me from continuing with my original plan. As you said, there's some time to kill before Nagesu-nii and the others return, and I need them to progress with my business here. You won't kill my son, and so I have nothing to fear."

"Why would you think that?" Shunsui arched an eyebrow. "I thought I'd already established that I am not the same as Juushirou. Had you forgotten that my sword pierced his heart, once, to rid him of your control? A man capable of killing his best friend is surely capable of ordering the death of his enemy's son without a moment's hesitation? He is useful to me. Bait to lure you here and keep you under my control... it means nothing to me whether he lives or he dies."

"Perhaps that is true," Keitarou's eyes narrowed, and Shunsui could see that he was calculating his position, trying to work out how much he could push and how much time he could buy whilst he thought his way around the damaged *Senkaimon*, "but I also know your weakness. Juushirou is your friend. You reminded me of that fact yourself, that day we met in the forests of the Real World. You stabbed him to free him from Chudokuga, but you made it clear to me that you would protect him. And you might not have been fooled by Kohaku, but Juushirou was. Hurting that boy will hurt your closest friend, and you know it."

"Juushirou is my friend, but other friends are fighting and dying," Shunsui said evenly. "I'm not as honourable as you're trying to suggest, not if I see a way to get out of a messy situation. This is your war, you began it, and everyone here sees you as the villain. Me, I'm different. I understand that, the moment we began fighting you, we were no better than you. You need to be stopped, and I've decided to

stop you. I don't care what lengths I have to go to to achieve it — even if that means Juushirou hates me. Because, if he's alive hating me, Keitarou, that's preferable to his being dead. And if your plan continues, there's a very good chance that more people will die."

"Like the Ninth Captain?" Keitarou's words held a challenge, but Shunsui maintained his gaze, unphased.

"Yes, like Anabomi," he said softly. "So, enough talking about it. If you're as strong as you say you are now, maybe you'll be able to kill me and free your son from my custody. Maybe you'll be able to win this game of life and death. I'm willing to gamble my life on it — are you?"

He swung his swords around, pressing the blades against each other in a cross formation, and this time both weapons began to glimmer with light, recognising their master's call to arms.

"We do have some time to kill," he added, "so I suggest we settle the differences between us once and for all."

Author's Note

I realised today that I've been writing about Juu and Shun for about four and a half years now, since Meifu's prequel was posted in December 08. That's staggering and very scary. I had no idea I had that many words in me or that much fan babble to share. I am blaming the reviewers for encouraging me. It wouldn't have happened without all of you — have cookies on me. Only hope that Orihime didn't make them...

I shall feel very lost when this story is over as to what I should be writing about o.o.

68. Ninth

Chapter Sixty Six: Ninth

Suddenly, everything had stopped moving.

Sora opened her eyes, staring up blankly at the haze of blue and white that now filled the whole of her vision. For a moment she lay still, unable to make sense of what she was seeing or where she was, but, little by little awareness began to return to her, and she realised with a jolt that she was lying on her back on cobbled stone, her sword nowhere near her right hand. Scrabbling at the stones in vain for Hotarue's hilt, Sora hurriedly pulled herself into a sitting position. The next instant she regretted it, for her vision swam and blurred, a dull ache setting up in the base of her skull. Still, the world around her appeared surreal. Hadn't it been raining? Hadn't she been holding her sword, fighting against a man... a man in a *haori*...

She groaned, burying her head in her hands as she struggled to make sense of her memories. Shards of her fight against her brother were sliced and shuffled in between images of two men in the Rukon, *haori* damp from rain and blood, and swords glittering in the hazy light. Were they one battle or two? She couldn't recall, nor could she clearly separate herself from the men she had seen fighting so vividly moments before. She had been on grass then, she remembered dully, lowering her fingers instinctively to the hard stone that lay beneath her. Was this reality or was this the dream? Her sluggish brain could not tell her.

Gradually, Sora's vision began to return into focus, bringing her surroundings into sharper view, and she raised her head, gazing around her gingerly so as not to excite her aching head once more. This was Eighth Division, she realised absently. She was not in the Rukon any more — or had she ever been? She struggled again to remember, but it was to no avail — the images were too jumbled for her to put into coherent order.

A dull moan from across the cobbles made her turn cautiously, registering for the first time that she wasn't alone. Her fingers finally brushed against Hotarue's hilt, curling around it as she instinctively anticipated an attack, but it did not come. Instead, she saw her brother, head clutched in his hands and *zanpakutou* lying discarded and sealed on the ground before him. He was ash pale and shaking,

and, gazing at him, Sora could not believe her memories of fighting him were any more real than the ones she had seen in the Rukon rain. Not far from Hakubei's shuddering form lay his Vice Captain, tightly bound with a vibrant *Hainawa* spell and apparently unconscious. Although she could sense her own reiatsu emitting from the glowing ropes, Sora could not remember firing the Bakudou. On the other side of the yard, Shindou was sprawled in ungainly fashion face down on the ground, and though she knew she ought to be hurrying to check whether he was hurt, Sora's dazed brain could only observe that, in this light, he looked rather like a black splat against the grey stone.

She drew a slow breath into her lungs, gauging the scene once more and assessing everything in careful detail. It took her a few more moments to register the fact that someone was missing, but her world snapped into full clarity as she remembered the expression on her Captain's face in the moments before he had disappeared from Eighth.

Not long afterwards, a surging, paralysing vision had swept through the Eighth Division grounds, and then...

Sora sheathed the sealed Hotarue, shoving the protesting weapon into its scabbard with little care and pulling her aching body to her feet. She ran clumsy fingers through her dusty hair, pulling it back from her face and re-tying the length of white ribbon to keep the messy curls once more out of her face. Now she knew what she had been doing, and what had been at stake. Had Shunsui had something to do with the hallucination? It was hard to tell, but Sora's gut told her that it was highly possible. Whatever he had been planning, whatever he had come back from Thirteenth in such a temper and why he had looked so serious and clinical that morning had something to do with whatever he had left the Eighth to do — and, possibly, was still doing.

His choice was probably reckless and stupid, but though she glanced in the direction of the gate, Sora did not attempt to follow her superior officer. Shunsui was the Captain, and, foolish and lackadaisical as he often liked to behave, she knew that, deep down, he understood the gravity of situations better than anyone in Seireitei. She trusted him, and so she would not follow him. He had trusted her, too — leaving her behind to ensure that nobody at Eighth lost their lives. Sora's wits were returning to her with speed now, and she turned to glance at her brother, fingers curled around Hotarue's hilt in preparation of a renewed assault. Whatever Shunsui was up to, he could only do it if she was doing her job and backing him up — even if that meant fighting her brother and taking him forcibly into Eighth's custody.

But fighting seemed to be the last thing on Hakubei's mind. As she approached her brother warily, Sora realised that, far from grabbing his sword and swinging back into the action to take her off guard, Hakubei looked far more like he wanted to be sick. He was still visibly shaking, whether from shock, exertion or some other factor she could not tell, and she paused about a foot away from his body, lifting the sheathed Hotarue from her waist and using the rounded, ebony-wood tip to prod him gently on the shoulder.

It was a light poke, but Hakubei reacted as if stung, falling back on his heels with an ungainly thud. It was an unenviable position for a Captain and an elder brother to find himself in, Sora reflected. In other circumstances it would have prompted a round of lively, mutual banter, but this time she found nothing humorous in the situation, and as he raised stricken eyes to hers, Sora knew her brother felt the same. As their gazes met, however, Sora felt relief flood through every valve and vessel of her heart, for the eyes were Hakubei's eyes, not the stone gaze of the advancing enemy, and she knew that Keitarou's spell had somehow been broken.

A moment of silence passed between them, then Hakubei moistened his lips.

"Sora?" he murmured uncertainly, followed by, "Are you all right?"

"I think I ought to be asking you that question, don't you?" Sora's words were light, but she kept her distance nonetheless, believing her companion returned to her, yet not quite wanting to trust her impressions in case it was a trap. "You look ready to hurl all over me."

"Don't joke about it," Hakubei's brow creased in anger, but it was frustrated, disorientated anger, not the killing intent he had had moments before, and Sora sighed, pushing Hotarue once more through her belt as she realised the fight was well and truly over. She squatted down before her companion, resting her hand reassuringly on his shoulder as though she were the one wearing the *haori* and taking command.

"I'm not joking," she said gravely. "It's how you look, and almost certainly, how you feel. You must be still hallucinating, if you think you could do anything to physically harm me with that toy sword of yours. You've gotten soft — you're only lucky that the fight got broken up when it did, else you might've found yourself trussed up like Kanshi, Haku-nii."

Hakubei's gaze slid across to where his Vice Captain was slowly beginning to come out of his own stupor, letting out exclamations as

he registered his bound state, and a weak smile touched his lips. It did not reach his eyes, though, and Sora was startled by the depth of fear and confusion that she saw there. Hakubei had always been the joker of the family, laid back, easy company and as children, her frequent partner in crime. She had never seen him so discomposed, and though she tried to tell herself it was her imagination, she knew deep down that it was not. She frowned, pursing her lips.

“What happened, Haku-nii?” she asked softly, and Hakubei’s gaze returned to hers, a helplessness in his expression.

“I wish I knew how to answer, or even if there was one to give,” he admitted. “My head is hazy. Bits are really clear, and other bits, not there at all. I remember talking to Anabomi by the Division gate. We were discussing patrols, I think, or something equally mundane. He’s been unusually conversational lately, and so I lingered for a while to compare notes on how Ninth were handling Sixth’s obligations and Tenth, Fifth’s. We were in the same boat, so it seemed sensible to me that we at least communicate about it, and for once, Anabomi agreed.”

Anabomi? “Sora’s lips thinned, then,” Anyone else with you, do you remember?”

“Kanshi was there, but I don’t remember anyone else. Anabomi was alone,” Hakubei’s brow creased, as though the effort of trying to remember caused him pain. “I remember joking about him having Mikihara’s nose firmly to the grindstone, so he definitely wasn’t with us. After that, it goes blurry. I remember I was going back inside Tenth. Then it goes black. Next clear thought I have, I’m at Eighth, and suddenly I can’t move, can’t talk, can’t do anything at all. I’m inside my body, Sora, but it’s not mine any more. Someone else is running the controls. I can see, I can hear everything you, and Shunsui, and Shindou are saying, and I know everything I’m doing, but I can’t stop it. Every swing I feel, but it’s not me swinging. Every spell I fire, but it’s like someone else fired it. Trying to attack you. Trying to... kill you. You, and Shunsui, and Shindou. I came here to kill you... but I don’t know how, or why, or why, thank God, it’s finally stopped.”

He rubbed his eyes with his hands, then,

“I saw Minaichi, and Kusakawa,” he added. “They were arguing, fighting... Kusakawa was killed. I don’t have clear memories of what they said, just that Kusakawa was lying in a pool of blood and that, somehow, it was justice. Then I was here, and I could move again... and if it wasn’t that I’m scrambling to keep hold of the last scraps of

my sanity and my Captain's dignity, I'd probably break down and bawl like a baby with relief. I'm sorry, Sora. I can't explain it and I wish I could — but I am sorry."

"Idiot," Despite herself Sora offered him a grin, reaching up to cuff him lightly across his aching head. He winced, pushing her hand away, but Sora took no notice. "Shunsui said that Keitarou had you under his control. He was using you as a puppet — and probably not just you. You said you were with Anabomi and with Kanshi, right? Well, we didn't wrap Kanshi up in Kidou for the good of his health, I assure you, and as for Anabomi..."

She turned to glance at the cracked, chipped marble divide, then let out a gusty sigh.

"Something happened there," she said with a shrug. "Don't know what, but it did."

"Sora, are you planning to untie me, or are you just going to sit and sigh and gaze around your Division while I lie here like *norimaki* on the ground?" Kanshi's vocal complaint seemed to rouse Hakubei from his shock, and he turned, gazing at his Vice Captain with something more like his usual expression.

"If you're going to get yourself knotted up in my sister's Kidou, you deserve to wriggle," he said frankly, grabbing the hilt of his sword and getting to his feet. "I guess a Captain's duty is to look after their Vice Captain, though. How's your head, Kanshi? If it's anything like mine, it's starting up a thunderstorm."

"Complete with full blown blasts of lightning," Kanshi said ruefully, as Hakubei ran the edge of his sword blade through the spiritual rope, allowing his adjutant to work himself free of the spell. "Yeesh, what was that? What the hell were we doing, Taichou? My mind's a complete blur — I just remember that, for some inexplicable reason, I'd climbed the Ninth wall and was trying to cut off Shindou's head."

"Aizen Keitarou," Sora said succinctly, stepping over the bits of debris from the Division sign and approaching the prone body of her Third Seat, who was finally beginning to stir. "I think Shunsui anticipated it — he didn't seem as surprised as we did, when you showed up like this. He wasn't happy about it, but he wasn't surprised. He left a little while ago... then that hallucination knocked me for six, so I couldn't tell you how long ago it was. I don't even know what it was. I'm just trusting that my mad Captain knows what he's doing, and that this is all part of his plan."

"Whatever that thing was, I think it broke whatever was going on

inside of me,” Hakubei reflected, reaching down to haul Kanshi to his feet. “I couldn’t stop it on my own, but all of those images overloaded my senses completely. I felt something slipping out of me as I came to myself — Kanshi, what about you?”

“I don’t really know,” Kanshi said honestly, scratching his head. “I felt as though I was being shown some kind of bizarre play, only it was clearly not my imagination, if you saw it too. It was Minaichi... and someone else, wearing the Twelfth *haori*. It definitely wasn’t Sekime-taichou. It was a man, with fair hair. They were fighting. They released their swords... and Minaichi said something about justice and bringing the other to book. There was another man, too — a man who became a Hollow.”

“Sakanoue Heiji,” Hakubei looked grave, and Sora started, staring at her brother in alarm.

“Eleventh’s former Vice Captain?” she demanded, and Hakubei nodded.

“No mistake about it,” he confirmed. “I didn’t hear the words they spoke, Sora, but I remember faces. What we saw made it look as though Sakanoue wasn’t killed by Hollows in Rukongai. Instead he *became* a Hollow and Minaichi had to finish him, because once you cross the line, there’s no way back. Unless I’m misreading my body language, it looked *very* much as though Minaichi wasn’t amused. Most specifically, he wasn’t amused with Kusakawa.”

“Kusakawa?” Kanshi frowned, and Hakubei let out a gusty sigh.

“Before your time. Both of you, I guess,” he reflected, “but the first Captain of the Twelfth Division was Kusakawa Shougo. You must’ve heard the name, especially lately. It’s funny, you know. Anabomi and I spoke about the man just a short few days ago. He and Anabomi were friends, and Anabomi spoke about him and how he died in the Rukon. Now something like this happened.”

“But was any of what we saw real?” Shindou dragged his body into a sitting position, casting his companions a slightly dazed smile. “I guess the fighting’s over. Did I miss anything interesting?”

“No, not really,” Sora shook her head. “As for whether or not what we saw is real, I think the first thing we have to do is work out what we saw. No, before that, even. We need to know what caused it... and whether or not that thing is friend or foe. The fact it seems to have released Haku-nii and Kanshi from the spell makes me think it’s not hostile — but if the one pulling the puppet strings was Aizen Keitarou, like Shunsui said, he’s a trickster and it could be a trap. There might

be a hoarde of his zombies preparing to march on the Eighth as we speak.”

“I don’t think so,” Kanshi frowned, taking a few steps towards the wrecked gate and gazing pensively outside. “On the contrary, Sora... it’s really really quiet.”

“The calm before the storm?” Hakubei’s expression became troubled. “Or, maybe, in between the storms.”

He raised his gaze to the wrecked remains of the Eighth’s gate, then let out another gusty sigh.

“I guess I’ll be paying for that,” he observed, resignation in his tones. “Tell Shunsui, Sora, that I’ll settle with him over the gate when this is done.”

“Providing it gets done and we all survive to build a new gate,” Sora said grimly. “Wherever Shunsui’s gone, I am certain he didn’t want us to follow him. Still, Eighth is no longer under immediate attack. Kaoru has charge of the lower officers who are still here. Most of Eighth are on patrol already — including Shizuka, thank goodness, because Shunsui’d have kittens if she was here through all of this — and the orders are that everyone is to remain undercover until they’re given orders to the contrary. Kaoru is reliable. She won’t go anywhere or do anything without Tetsu or I telling her so.”

“I wonder what state Tenth are in,” Kanshi looked anxious. “Taichou, do you remember...”

“Not a thing,” Hakubei admitted. “And I’m concerned about what else has happened since we’ve been incapacitated. Kanshi, are you fit to shunpo?”

“Probably. My brain is rattling around my head some, but that’s nothing new for me and it hasn’t fallen out of my ears yet, so I’m probably safe to at least try,” Kanshi’s reply was far more nonchalant than any of them felt. “Why, do you want me to go back to Tenth? I can, if you like. I think I’m in one piece, and now I think about it, it won’t take long. There aren’t any officers at the barracks, if you remember. Tenth are on patrol in their entirety, thanks to Kyouki-sama’s requests — and some of Eighth are with them.”

“So they are,” Hakubei looked relieved. “In that case, then, save your strength. I don’t care if the infrastructure is trashed — it’s only buildings and they can be replaced more easily than lives and limbs. If this is a war situation — which it apparently is — we ought to be making ourselves useful. Sora, what did you mean when you said

something had happened at Ninth?”

“I think the most accurate term for it would be a massacre, Hakubei-dono.”

Before Sora could respond, Hajime materialised on the cobbles before them, making all four officers jump, and Sora and Hakubei reach instinctively for their swords. He held up his hands to indicate he was not holding his weapon and had not come to attack, and Sora sighed, releasing her grip.

“Kitabata,” she murmured. “You’ve come from Hirata — you want Shunsui, correct?”

“I did, but he’s not here,” Hajime glanced around him. “Taichou asked for anyone from Eighth who could be spared. There’s been an incident at Ninth. We need further officers to manage it appropriately. The immediate danger has been managed, but we believe the main enemy is still on the loose.”

“You said a massacre,” Kanshi murmured. “What do you mean, Kitabata?”

Hajime arched an eyebrow.

“With respect, Kanshi-dono, an Endou doesn’t use that word lightly,” he said archly, and Kanshi offered a sheepish expression in response. “A distress call came to us from a member of the Ninth. She didn’t come here, because it was believed you were fighting — but as things have calmed here, Taichou would appreciate the support of senior officers from Eighth — and Tenth, if it can be spared.”

“I think what Kanshi meant, Kitabata, is what extent the damage is at Ninth Division.” Hakubei spoke soberly. “I was with Anabomi, and so was Kanshi, before all this began. I’m concerned for him, and for his Division.”

“Your concern for Anabomi-taichou is too late,” As Hakubei’s eyes widened in stricken dismay at the implications in the man’s words, Kitabata turned on his heel, as though preparing to leave. Sora darted forward, putting a hand on his arm to prevent him.

“More details,” she said quietly. “As a Vice Captain and officer in current charge here at Eighth, I want to know more details. We’ll come, but only when we know what we’re facing. We won’t be of use to you otherwise.”

“It’s not something that really should be reported in detail in an open space where anyone might be listening,” Kitabata shrugged

himself neatly away from Sora's touch, but met her gaze with a grave one of his own. "I'm sorry, Sora-dono. I don't mean disrespect, but I carry my Captain's urgency in my words and his commands supersede yours. I was told simply to tell you that there'd been an incident at Ninth, and that it was of the severest degree. For the rest, if you come, you'll soon see that Ninth are, at present, in very grave danger of having no living officers above Sixth Seat remaining to them before this day is out."

"What?" Kanshi blanched, and Hakubei nodded grimly, his expression dark and clouded.

"It's all right, Kitabata," he said firmly. "I'll be coming with you, to answer Hirata-dono's request. Kanshi, you too. Sora?"

"I'll come," Sora's own expression was one of shock. "Tetsu, can I leave you to explain to Kaoru what's happened, and take charge of things here in my absence?"

"Understood," Shindou's cheeky features had become solemn, and he nodded. "I'll hold the fort till the Captain comes back, Sora-dono. You can count on me."

The world was still burning.

For a moment, nothing moved, then, as bolts of stabbing heat burned through every inch of his body, Kohaku felt his consciousness stir, rudely awoken from the silent darkness into a world of colour and pain.

He was alive.

He gasped air into his lungs, suddenly desperate for oxygen. With every spasm of his chest muscles, he felt his awareness of his surroundings grow clearer and more tangible, till he could feel the soft grass beneath his body. Clumsily he moved his left arm, running the delicate blades between his fingers as he struggled to pull himself into a more upright position. It took him several tries, as for some reason, he could not feel or remember that his right arm existed, but at length he managed it. Dragging in more gulps of spirit-enriched air, he fought to bring his surroundings into focus. Where was he? Where was this place, and how had he got here?

He gazed around blankly, searching for a landmark he knew, but there was nothing. Hazily he remembered the sensation of the gate's frame bending and warping around him, and the fragmented memories that had swirled around his head, lost and detached from

their usual moorings. The fight in the Rukon surfaced briefly, causing a brief moan to pass his lips, for although he did not understand why, the image of shinigami in battle made his chest ache and tighten once again.

He closed his eyes, trying to compose himself.

He had been at the Third Division. He had gone to destroy the *Senkaimon*, and to send out a signal across as much of Seireitei as he could manage. He had played his last card, gambled everything he knew on that one attempt. He had prevented the Captains of the Second, Third, Fifth and Sixth from returning to Seireitei and falling into Keitarou's trap, and he had released the manipulated Captains from the spell his father had put them under — but he knew that the battle was far from won. The scent of death and destruction on the air filled his nostrils, a cloying, acrid sensation, and he opened his eyes, but whatever had passed through his other senses was invisible to his eyes. Maybe it wasn't there at all, he mused absently. Maybe it was just the scent of death on the wind, causing him to plunge back into a delusionary state.

A prickle from his right side drew his attention, and he glanced down, seeing for the first time the limp, motionless shape of his right arm, hanging down against the side of his body. Tentatively he prodded it with the index finger of his left hand, noticing the scalding burns that covered his palm as he did so. The arm felt heavy and clumsy, as though something had seared through his nerves and rendered it numb, but as he brushed his other hand against it, the prickles intensified, and little by little he found he could move it. He twitched the fingers of his right hand, wincing as pain shot through the limb. He could see signs of blood and burning around the skin of his fingers, as though they had taken a huge burst of energy. Something was clutched in this wounded, bloody right hand, and Kohaku's brow furrowed in consternation as his gaze ran over the unmistakeable shape of a sword. Dimly he remembered receiving a blade from his father, what seemed like an eternity before, but it was not the same weapon that he now saw before him. Gone was the Sekkiseki hilt, and instead of a misshapen, ugly blade, he saw a gleaming silver curve of steel, glimmering and sparkling in the Seireitei sunlight. It was as though it was shimmering with pride, Kohaku thought absently, like a butterfly who had broken free from its cocoon and displayed its beauty to the world for the first time. Gingerly he shifted apart the painful fingers of his right hand, scanning the hilt for the carved characters that made up his name, but instead the polished ebony hilt was engraved with the unmistakeable pattern of flowers that he had seen decorating the mirror deep within

Kyouka's dream castle. His eyes widened at this realisation, and he gazed at the blade as if seeing it for the first time. Was it really just sunlight making it shine? For a moment he thought he saw his own reflection, the chains shattering into fragments of silver shrapnel, but the impression was gone as soon as it had come, and he was not sure whether, in his shell-shocked state, he had imagined it.

He moved his left hand to touch the blade's surface, feeling the soft hum of energy and life lurking deep within the metal surface.

"Kyouka," his lips parted, two hoarse words dropping from his lips. "Kyouka... Raigen."

The sword glittered again, and this time Kohaku felt sure that it had done so on purpose, acknowledging its name.

He glanced around himself once more, trying to get his bearings, but it was no good. Somehow he had left the Third Division, though he had no memory of walking here. Had he walked, or had he come some other way? He could not put the pieces together enough to tell, but from the way his heart was still racing, he felt certain it had had something to do with his surging spirit power. Had he somehow used shunpo? He had never learned the technique, but in the moment the gate had exploded, he had felt invincible, as though anything and everything was in his power.

And then he had been here, shattered and dazed on foreign ground.

A surge of spiritual energy from behind him made him tense, recognising the raw edge of Katen Kyoukotsu, rising up in confrontation. The next moment, he had sensed a more familiar surge of bitter energy, as his father unleashed Chudokuga's spirit into the ether. A chill ran down his spine as he realised how much time he must have lost whilst unconscious.

He struggled to pull himself to his feet, the sword feeling heavy and unwieldy in his weak arm, but although it was hard to regain his balance whilst he was holding it, he could not let it go. Whatever it was, and whatever it had become, it felt as though it was a part of him, and if he left it behind, he would have abandoned himself. The sword hummed and buzzed in his grip, sending pain signals through his burnt hand, but still he did not try to let go. Instead he gritted his teeth, focusing on one step in front of the other.

He had not expected to survive the flare of power at Third, and so he had engaged Shunsui's help, knowing the older man was capable of completing things which he himself could not do. The other shinigami had been delayed, but they would return, and time was running out.

Kohaku's gaze flitted back in the direction of the swirling spirit blades, his heart clenching in his throat. He did not need to see the battle to know what would occur, for he had seen it, many times, in his dreams and nightmares over the year. Still, even though he knew this, his soul was uneasy.

The shinigami will come back. There's another gate. I didn't realise, but there's... another gate. A gate... at Twelfth. I must...

He staggered forward, taking one step and almost tripping over his own feet.

I must get... to Ukitake-dono. I can't do anything... now. But if I told him... maybe...

He took another shaky step, then another, focusing his mind on the Thirteenth Division's Captain, but as he did so, another image flashed across his senses, that of a man in a white *haori*, broken and crumpled on the stone forecourt of his Division, surrounded by the bloody remains of his men. Despite himself, he let out a whimper of dismay, losing his footing and tumbling onto the hard cobbles of the thoroughfare. The images flooded through him once more, Juushirou's corpse replaced by another, more vivid one, and he screwed up his eyes in distress, unable to shut the pictures out.

There's no going back, Kohaku.

The voice was Kyouka's, but Kohaku had never heard it resonate so gently against his thoughts before.

This is the path you've chosen to take. Things that have begun cannot be reversed. You can see the future, but you can't turn back the past.

The sword still grasped tightly in his hand, Kohaku struggled to pull himself back up, but it was to no avail. A fresh bevy of images washed over him, making him dizzy and nauseous, and in the back of his mind, he heard a sigh.

The one you want to protect is safe. Rest now. You can change nothing else in this future, and I will not let you kill yourself by trying. Whoever else dies today, it will not be you, so surrender. Your work is done.

That was the last thing Kohaku heard, as darkness crashed in from all four corners of his consciousness, and he crumpled, falling forward onto the dusty ground.

"Oh God."

Sora stood in the entrance of the Ninth Division, her clever features pale as she took in the scale of the devastation.

The yard was damaged, with all but the marble wall succumbing to the fury of the Wind Hawk and Anabomi's lurching, demented attacks, and the entire front of the building had been blown to smithereens, exposing the normally neat corridors and chambers of Ninth as a cluttered mass of debris, splinters and dust. It was not the physical destruction of the site that had made her stomach lurch, however, but the other cost her neighbouring division had paid. Like Hakubei, Sora cared little for physical infrastructure, preferring to prioritise people's lives over their possessions, and as a consequence, it was the solemn procession of corpses that, one by one were being brought and laid out on the cobbles that had stifled her, leaving her lost for words.

Four corpses lay on the stone, carefully laid out by Hirata's subordinate officers. Though the three lesser officers' corpses had been wrapped with thick, expensive cloth that looked like it had been looted from Anabomi's private chamber, there was no hiding the carnage beneath, for the fabric was already staining from the blood seeping through the wounds. It had not escaped Sora's notice that one of the officers' heads was placed above his neck, but was not attached, and despite her stoic nature, Sora felt physically sick.

And then, she saw Anabomi, with his dislocated shoulders and a mangled left arm which slowly oozed a dark, bloody slime onto the stone. The slightly numb sensation of disbelief was ripped away, leaving a deep, throbbing sense of guilt.

We could've stopped this. If we'd left Eighth sooner... beaten Haku-nii and Kanshi quicker... our neighbours needed our help, and we were never in this kind of danger. Whatever happened here... we weren't available to help them. Hirata arrived too late... and now...

"Sora," Hakubei gave her a little nudge, and she raised her gaze to her brother, seeing the identical pain mirrored in his green eyes. He nodded, and she sighed, reaching up to rub her brow.

"We should've prevented this," she murmured. "I wonder if that's why Shunsui left... though I'm sure he must've realised what had happened here before I did."

"Well, he's not here, and it doesn't look like he's paid a visit, so wherever he is, we'll have to do without him," Hakubei spoke briskly, but Sora knew that he was as shaken as she was. "I'm not your Captain, and I know you resent it when I or Ryuusei-nii give you orders, but in this instance, it might be well to stick with Kanshi and I. Hirata-dono sent for us but he didn't want us to fight. That's over, for now... and our job is to figure out what happened, how, and why."

“Sora... Hakubei-dono,” Hirata himself crossed the cobbles at that moment, his own uniform dusty and his dark hair loosed from the tail that he normally wore behind his head. His expression was unreadable behind his glasses, and Sora was aware of threads of stray spirit power, understanding that the Wind Hawk had been coralled, but it had not yet settled from the thrill of battle.

“Hirata, about Anabomi...” she began, and Hirata turned, his gaze going to the corpse of the Captain. He nodded.

“I killed him,” he said frankly. “It wasn’t what I came here intending, but the situation forced my hand.”

“There’s a lot of chalk dust around his body,” Kanshi knelt a respectful distance from the Captain’s cooling corpse, brushing his fingers against the delicate white powder and running it between his fingers. “Hirata... I mean, Endou-taichou, is this..?”

“The remains of a Hollow mask,” Hirata confirmed, suddenly looking weary, and Sora bit her lip, understanding what it was about the atmosphere that had made her feel so uneasy. It was the residual presence of a damaged soul, rattling her nerves and skewing with her judgement.

“Anabomi was a Hollow?” Hakubei’s eyes narrowed to slits. “Hirata-dono, I think you need to explain that more clearly. We were under the impression Anabomi was controlled by Keitarou. Kanshi and I were also under his control — but as you can see, neither of us are spiritually damaged. Shaken up and humiliated, but alive and definitely not Hollow.”

“You were under Keitarou’s control too?” For a moment, Sora thought Hirata might draw his weapon from it’s sheath again, and she hurried to stand between her old friend and her brother, holding up her hands.

“Kanshi and Haku-nii are fine, Hirata. Whatever was inside of them, that mad hallucination broke it. We don’t know what it was, or where it came from — but whatever it was, it broke Keitarou’s hold over them and they came back to themselves. We fought at Eighth, but the battle is over there now as a result.”

“The hallucination?” It was impossible for Hirata’s expression to grow any more grim, then he turned back towards where his subordinates had just finished laying out the corpses. “Joumei?”

“Yes, sir?” A silver-haired, skinny youth of about the same age as Hirata’s lost son raised his head, rubbing the drying blood dust against

his *shihakushou*. Hirata twitched his fingers to indicate the young man should join them, and he did so, surprise and concern crossing his features. He picked his way across the cobbles, carefully avoiding the scattered debris, and Sora let out a gasp, registering the fact that, though the black uniform did not show it clearly, the man's *obi* was stained with patches of deep, brownish red.

"We were all here when the hallucination swept through here," Hirata spoke slowly. "I don't know what it was, and it took a couple of my officers off their feet. Fortunately, Kikyue and Hajime recovered quickly, and I kept my footing... but it took us all by surprise."

His eyes shifted to the silver-haired newcomer, and Sora saw her old friend's eyes cloud slightly.

"All of us except *you*, Joumei, who seemed barely affected by it," he corrected, "...and now Sora's telling me that Keitarou's control over Hakubei-dono and Souryou-kun was *broken* by this shattering of senses. You're the only one who might be able to explain that to me... so if you can... I suggest you do."

Joumei's gaze flitted to first Hakubei, then Kanshi, and Sora could sense the unease in his slender frame. At length he bowed his head.

"Keitarou tried to use me as a puppet, too, but the spell was broken," he explained pensively. "When that happened, Hirata-dono, my entire world was a flood of alien images, most of which were unpleasant memories I would sooner forget. The spirit power that shattered Keitarou's control over me was the same as that which caused, apparently, a group hallucination. I wouldn't say it didn't surprise me — I was certainly not expecting it. Just... perhaps... once you've been assailed by it once, your body develops some kind of reactive immunity to it reoccurring."

"So you *did* know how the spell was broken, yet you lied when Kikyue asked you about Ohara?" Hirata looked displeased, but Joumei shook his head.

"I didn't understand how it was done. As a scientist, understanding is vital before drawing clear conclusions," he spoke contritely. "What affected me then, affected me alone. It didn't have the power or strength to reach so many people — but if the hallucination reached beyond where we are, the chances are it reached a good many more than just ourselves. I can't explain that either, not at present. I don't know the answers to those questions, Hirata-sama. I'm sorry for my uselessness, but I don't know. I just know it worked. And, it seems, it's worked again. I can confirm that the aura that freed me and the one

that caused the hallucination were, broadly speaking, the same... but at present, that's all I can say. We should simply be grateful that it took effect when it did."

"It took effect too late for Anabomi," Hirata's expression became troubled. "Although even if the spell had been broken in time to save him, I doubt very much that he would have ever recovered from its effects."

He bent to retrieve Anabomi's discarded weapon, holding it out to Hakubei, who took it, turning it over gingerly in his hands.

"Blood..." he murmured, and Hirata nodded.

"The blood of the men who lie here now," he said wearily. "Anabomi killed his men under Keitarou's control. We are quite sure of those events, and Anabomi himself led me to believe that was the case. He asked me to kill him, Hakubei-dono. I would not have done so, if not for the Hollowfication, but even if Keitarou's control can be broken, there is no cure for what was happening to his body. The shell has broken and crumbled now, as Anabomi's reiatsu dispersed, but you can see the state of him for yourself. The blow through the heart was my sword's work, but the twisted bones and split skin are the lasting proof of the mutation taking place. I don't know, as yet, what caused this effect. Before the hallucination..."

He hesitated, his eyes narrowing slightly behind his glasses.

"My men reported seeing fragmented bits and pieces of the image, at times it wasn't clear, or they lost consciousness and couldn't see all parts of it," he said slowly, "but I saw all of it in clear, cohesive order. I don't know if it had any bearing on truth, but it made me reconsider my original assumptions. I had thought that Anabomi's mutation was the result of Keitarou's *reidoku*. However... now I wonder if it was something else, and what we saw in that hallucination was truth."

To Sora's surprise, he glanced at Joumei as if for confirmation of his words, and the young man nodded.

"I knew of nothing else which could bring on Hollowfication in such a way," he agreed. "Nor could I think of anyone who would want to elicit such a reaction, aside from the exile, Keitarou. However, the vision may change things. I don't know Kusakawa Shougo, and I don't have any idea what work he may or may not have been doing — it's all before I was born. Scientifically, it would seem logical for both attacks to be Keitarou's doing, but realistically... perhaps it's not so simple."

“So somehow, Anabomi-taichou was doubly poisoned?” Kanshi asked, and Hirata shrugged.

“We’re still working on that theory,” he admitted. “Sora, Souryoukun, Kikyue found some additional suspicious paraphernalia in Anabomi’s office, which also adds some doubt to the idea this was *reidoku* — some of this paraphernalia bears a District Three crest. Keitarou has posed as a Kyouraku clansman many times, but he’s never used his family’s crest in a crime before. But it might be Shougo-dono’s.”

“Anabomi and Kusakawa were friends,” Hakubei looked shocked. “Close friends — longterm friends from before the Gotei, like Shunsui and I! Shunsui had to fight against me, but I heard him, Hirata-dono, he said that he didn’t want or intend to kill Kanshi and I if he could help it, *because we were his friends*. I knew Kusakawa. He was a regular enough guy who worked alongside all of us and annoyed none of us. He and Anabomi were close, and he was probably the only man outside of the Kuchiki who Anabomi ever talked to in huge depth. Are you really suggesting that Kusakawa didn’t only break Seireitei law, he also broke the trust of his closest associate, and more, mutated him into some kind of monster?”

He pulled a face.

“Not only that, are you really suggesting that he managed to murder him, in league with Keitarou — a man he actively worked to find and stop — *twenty five years* after he died?” He added sceptically. “Maybe Kusakawa did some stuff he shouldn’t — and I didn’t get the audio on the vision, so I’m a little fuzzy about all the whys and wherefores right now, especially with no tangible proof anything happened at all. Maybe, *maybe* I can believe that Kusakawa was breaking Seireitei’s rules, doing something he shouldn’t have been to further his research... something that made Minaichi ticked at him and caused an unfortunate encounter. I don’t pretend to know if his research was legal. I worked with him, but didn’t know everything that went through his mind. Anabomi would have, though. Anabomi kept Kusakawa’s memory, even to recently. We didn’t talk often, not about private things, but recently he mentioned Kusakawa and it was clear that Anabomi thought very highly of him, even now. He also thought that Kusakawa was killed by Keitarou, because Kusakawa *hated* Keitarou. Besides, being dead is a pretty good alibi. Are we sure this isn’t another Keitarou smokescreen against the Urahara, and releasing Kanshi and I from the spell is just to lull everyone into a false sense of security?”

"I don't believe that's the case," Joumei said softly. "I believe the spell was broken in good faith, Hakubei-dono."

"Joumei, if I find out you know something you're not telling me..." Hirata sent his companion a suspicious look, and Joumei returned it with a grave one.

"Keitarou is still here," he reminded his companion. "We should be focused on that, in case he attacks again."

"Taichou has a point though," Kanshi observed thoughtfully. "I didn't know Kusakawa, so I can't comment on his friendship with Anabomi. And I got more of the audio than Taichou, so maybe I'm a little clearer on what we were made to see. But we don't know *why* we were made to see it... and it's pretty difficult to murder someone, friend or not, after you've died. Even for a shinigami."

"It's all speculation at the moment," Hirata said grimly. "I don't know what I'm suggesting, Hakubei-dono, and I won't make any firm claims before the Council, not without proof in either direction. It just needs to be looked at more closely, that's all. As a Council representative, I've viewed the scene and I will make a full report, but the physical evidence needs collecting, and I feel it ought to be collected by an officer of higher rank than my daughter. I don't have a Vice Captain, so since you are both here..."

"We'll help," Sora nodded her head. "Whatever we can do. Where is Kikyue-hime now? We'll go there and relieve her, hear what she's found, and do what we can to collect evidence."

"If we're both there, it can be done and witnessed according to proper procedure," Kanshi agreed. "But Endou-taichou, before we do... one other thing is bothering me just a bit."

He got to his feet, padding back towards them and brushing the chalk dust from his hands. "Anabomi-taichou turned Hollow, and three other members of the Ninth Division are dead. The evidence of that is right in front of us. I almost hate to ask this, but... Kitabata said that there was a good chance Ninth might be without any living officers above Sixth Seat come nightfall. You also just said that you want Sora and I to go, as Seventh lacks a Vice Captain. What of *Ninth's* Vice Captain? Where is Mikihara in all of this?"

"Mikihara-dono is inside," It was Joumei who answered, his striking features becoming grave. "A healer is with him."

"But he's alive?" Sora pressed, and Hirata shrugged.

"At present, but for how much longer is in Shikiki's hands, and she

isn't able to use her full *reiryoku* on him at once, because his heartbeat is so weak and his life signs so unsteady," he explained. "When we got here, we thought, on initial inspection, that he had died, but Joumei managed to find a pulse. We sent for Shikiki as soon as we were able, but..."

He shrugged.

"You'll need to pass him to get to the office, where Kikyue is," he added. "He's too unstable to be moved, apparently. I've broken the lock on Anabomi's quarters, and as soon as is possible, Shikiki wants to transfer him inside there, but for now... you'll need to take care not to get in the way. Ninth's entire structure relies on us keeping him alive. The Sixth Seat has rallied and taken charge of those lower members we located hiding on the property, but she's suffered minor injuries herself which nobody's had time to think of treating, and she's very shaken by the whole thing. She's our key witness to everything that happened... she saw the deaths of her comrades first hand, before Mikihara sent her to me for help."

He paused, then,

"The girl reported then that her Captain was being possessed, and he wanted someone to stop him. He repeated that request to me, and so I stopped him — but at a higher price than I would like. I almost wonder if..."

He trailed off, his gaze flitting back towards the body.

"If it had not been for the Hollowfication, I might well have ignored his wishes and fought to restrain him," he reflected again, and to Sora, this reaffirmation of his motives indicated that, deep down, Hirata was more shaken by the encounter than he appeared to be.. 'I know, now, that there were questions we needed to ask, relating to what we found in his office, and we might never be able to get a satisfactory answer simply from left behind artifacts. I didn't have that luxury, though. Hajime and the others will testify to it too, but that,' he gestured to the blown out front of the division, "was Anabomi's statement of intent when he first came to engage me in battle. Whatever happened, it was well underway by the time we arrived here, and he was already mutating. He'd crossed a line, and that line cannot normally be crossed back. The only solution was to kill him and end his misery as swiftly as possible."

"Like Sakanoue Heiji, in the hallucination," Hakubei murmured, and Hirata nodded.

"Eerily similar," he agreed wearily, "which is one reason why I

wonder about Kusakawa's involvement in this. I have no idea whether or not the hallucination we all saw was a real reflection of the past, but since the images used to break the spell over Joumei were founded in truth, it will have to be looked into, and thoroughly. Even if the truth turns out to be unpleasant — we need to know now what it is, and how it connects to what's happened here today. The Council will have much to do to settle all the pieces, providing they get an opportunity.”

He turned to Hakubei.

“To which end, Hakubei-dono, I believe Keitarou is still in Inner Seireitei, somewhere,” he added. “He may or may not be alone, but we ought to be prepared for further attacks. If Sora and Souryou-kun are here, with Kikyue and my own people, Ninth are in safe hands for the time being. I trust someone is in command at Eighth?” this last to Sora, who nodded.

“My squad are as secure as they can be, given the circumstances,” she agreed. “They’ve been given firm instructions to stay concealed and not to emerge without clear orders to do so. Nobody knows their way around Eighth well enough to find them and catch them unawares, and I have confidence in the two officers left in charge. For the time being, Hirata, they are in safe hands.”

“Tenth are entirely out on patrol,” Hakubei added. “There’s nobody to take charge of there, just empty buildings and nothing of value to an intruder.”

“Good,” Hirata looked satisfied. “You and Souryou-kun are recovered, and Keitarou’s puppet here is dead. There is nobody of his calibre on the premises to cause further harm, and, at present, no indication of any fresh assault on Ninth Division. Whilst Souryou-kun and Sora get down to work here, Hakubei-dono, I suggest that you and I go hunting for the perpetrator for this whole business — and, if possible, remove his head from his body in the same way as he had Anabomi treat his officer. If we look, we may find him — and he’s probably more interested in killing Captains than lower officers, so our doing so is more likely to keep him from harming the subordinate officers here, at Eighth, or anywhere else in Seireitei.”

Hakubei’s eyes narrowed, and Sora saw the resolution harden within their depths. He nodded.

“I’m right behind you,” he said grimly. “Let’s go.”

Author’s Note:

Sorry for the slight delay in update this week — I've been in Cambridge studying ancient Japanese things. Also, Happy Easter to anyone who celebrates it.

69. Turning Tide

Chapter Sixty Seven: Turning Tide

“You look uncomfortable, Edogawa.”

Mitsuki raised her head from the papers she had been poring over, casting the speaker a faint smile. He pushed open the door of the open study a little further, stepping into the chamber proper and sliding the divide shut behind him. In a few strides he was standing behind her, and Mitsuki pushed the papers aside, looking quizzical.

“Madeki-dono?”

“Retsu-sama wanted me to come find you,” Madeki explained before she could ask the question, leaning up against the edge of the desk and resting his hand on the polished wooden surface. “Since you came back here, you’ve been holed up in the research rooms and study areas, going through book after book as though your life depended on it. What’s so urgent that you need to shut yourself away in here, instead of mixing with your squad-mates? Aomori’d like to see you, now she’s doing so much better.”

“Things are wrong here,” Mitsuki pulled the books she had been using towards her, closing the uppermost one with a resigned snap. “They’re a surreal kind of wrong, but they’re still wrong. You can’t tell me you don’t feel it too, Madeki-dono. Retsu-sama’s original summons for me to return came out of the blue, and now we’re not allowed to leave and the whole place is covered in a mass of Kidou spells?”

Madeki’s clever features became grave, and he nodded.

“I suppose it must seem that way, especially since you haven’t been here since the incident in Rukongai,” he said frankly. “You’ve never had an opportunity to consider Fourth your home, and Retsu-sama’s indulged your desire to take care of Ukitake-taichou’s waif and stray — but right now, here is where you should be. With Seireitei lacking in protection and with Fourth Division depleted in numbers anyway, you ought to know that Retsu-sama’s orders are completely logical. This isn’t a place which breeds fighters.”

“That’s the thing,” Mitsuki got to her feet, moving towards the window of the chamber to gaze outside on the apparently tranquil lawns of the Fourth Division’s grounds. Normally this space would be filled with convalescent officers, recovering in the fresh air, but today

it was empty, and this too made her full of unease. “Why would we need fighters anyway, Madeki-dono? Why would we need so many layers of protective Kidou? The members of the Council who left here went to the Real World to hunt down Aizen Keitarou. If that’s where the danger is, why are we taking the precautions we are?”

“It is a sensible question, Madeki,” before the Third Seat could answer, Retsu herself pushed open the door, casting Mitsuki a pensive smile. “I’m sorry, Mitsuki-san. It must seem very high-handed of me, summoning you back here and closing off the Division in this way, but in the circumstances, I thought that it was best.”

“I’m not questioning your orders, Taichou,” Mitsuki said hurriedly. “What I don’t understand is why they were given in the first place. That’s all. If we’re not meant to be fighting here, why are we barricaded up like we’re preparing for a siege?”

Retsu was silent for a moment, then she nodded.

“You’re right,” she acknowledged. “It might appear an overreaction. Normally, it wouldn’t be the place of an unranked officer to question the orders of her Captain — but in your case, perhaps an exception can be made. You lack rank only because you were deployed straight to Rukongai, rather than working your way through positions here, and in this particular circumstance, you have some personal knowledge of the stakes involved. I am sure I am right when I say that once you were acquainted with Endou Eiraki?”

“Edogawa?” Madeki cast her a startled glance, and Mitsuki looked surprised, nodding her head.

“Yes, but it was a long time ago. The last time I saw her... we definitely weren’t any kind of friends.”

“No, perhaps not,” Retsu paused, pursing her lips as though considering how best to word her next statement. “Still, your personal knowledge of the enemy that threatens Seireitei — yes, that killed your fellows in Rukongai — makes your situation unique among the rest of my squad. Perhaps you understand the danger involved... and the risk that this decision may not be... the right one.”

“I beg your pardon, Taichou, but do you mean the decision to close up Fourth, or the decision to send people to the Real World after Keitarou?” Madeki was the one who voiced the question, and Retsu smiled, a sad look coming into her eyes.

“I am aware of the way in which the exile thinks,” she said lightly. “He rarely acts in the way we expect, and he has accomplices, two of

which we have already fallen foul of. Whatever is in the Real World, I believed from the moment the order was given that Seireitei was potentially in danger of attack from one or more of these individuals. I have no intention of letting Fourth Division be sacked by rogues, especially since our skills may well be needed when the dust settles.”

“So we’re here, waiting for people to be killed and hurt?” Mitsuki asked numbly, and Retsu came to rest a hand on her shoulder.

“I’m sure you are sensitive enough to know that it’s already begun,” she murmured. “Even with all the barriers of Kidou blocking us from the world outside, you sense that something is in the air. There is already fighting, here. We cannot change that, Mitsuki-san. It is our job to wait and to heal, to protect the precious skills we have in order to save what lives we can. Rukongai taught me that Fourth Division are not yet an institution which can take part in combat and come out unscathed. Maybe that time will come, but for now, as a Captain, I have to make decisions that are not, necessarily, always going to be popular.”

She frowned, then,

“A short time ago, an officer from Seventh Division came to the Fourth,” she admitted. “He demanded a healer, and I allowed Shikiki to leave the confines of the Division headquarters, because a man’s life was in danger. I have concerns about doing so, but saving lives must be our priority. Only for that end will I allow people here to risk their lives. That is my choice as Captain, and an instruction I expect you to obey.”

Mitsuki pressed her lips together, casting a glance back at the desk of haphazard books, and Retsu followed her gaze, bending to pick up the nearest volume. Her eyebrows twitched up as she read the title.

“Spiritual poisoning?”

“My patient at Thirteenth,” Mitsuki admitted, and Retsu looked surprised.

“I thought you were treating the boy at Thirteenth for sword wounds?” she murmured, and Mitsuki nodded her head.

“I have been, and those are healing well, but I’m concerned about his general health in other ways,” she confessed. “I don’t know how to explain it, because I’ve never seen anything quite like it before, but he’s not eating enough, and I’m sure that he’s getting sicker, even though his wounds show no infection and are certainly not life-threatening. He seems weak, dizzy, and unstable, and I’m not sure

how I can help him.”

“And so you worry about him while you are here with us?” Retsu asked gently. Mitsuki nodded.

“Koku is my patient,” she agreed. “I promised to help him and I want to, but I can’t do it from here. Retsu-sama, it’s hard to explain, but I think his life is in danger. I think that someone or something means him harm, and the healer inside of me wants to make sure he’s all right. He’s just a scared boy, really. He’s barely into adulthood, alone and far from any family he ever had. This place is dangerous for him, and he came here to try and help one of our Vice Captains. So far he’s been denied healing attention on any other level. All he has is me, and... and Taichou... I should be with him now.”

“If he is within Thirteenth, surely he’s safe enough till the risk passes?” Madeki questioned. “I understand you want to help the boy, Edogawa, but Taichou is right. I’ve sensed it too, and the report from Kitabata was clear enough. There’s been an attack on Seireitei and outside is dangerous. The chances are that we will need to be fully deployed when the hostilities end, and there’s no telling what might come back from the Real World. If there are no healers, then the wounded are as good as dead. Aomori is proof of that — without your efforts, she’d have died like the others — hell, so would I. There aren’t enough of us as it is to protect the lives of shinigami who may be hurt — you need to put it into perspective.”

Mitsuki’s brow creased and she shook her head.

“I can’t explain it, at least not right now,” she owned, looking at her Captain apologetically. “Probably, afterwards, it will all be clearer, but right now all I know is that the patient entrusted to me by Ukitake-taichou is in a lot of danger. I need to help him. Since I came back to Seireitei, helping Koku has been the thing which has helped me the most to recover myself and put what happened in the Spiritless Zone behind me. Protecting his life is important to me, because in a way, I owe him my ability to heal again. I will be careful, Retsu-sama, I promise. You let Shikiki go help, so please... let me go too. Let me go back to Thirteenth... I know Koku needs me.”

“Taichou?” Madeki’s expression was one of consternation, but Retsu sighed, a resigned smile touching her lips.

“You have become a determined healer since your days at the Academy, and I’m proud of that instinct within you,” she said softly. “You should return here safely, else I will not be able to convey upon you the rank that you obviously now have earned.”

“Retsu-sama?”

“Go to your patient like a healer should,” Retsu withdrew her hand from Mitsuki’s shoulder. “I will trust your instinct, Mitsuki-san... don’t let me down.”

“Yes, ma’am!” Mitsuki’s eyes lit up with hope and she made a hurried salute, bowing her head to Madeki before hurrying out of the room and along the hallway towards the chamber which she currently shared with two other Fourth Division officers. As she went, she could hear the fading voices of Madeki and Retsu discussing her decision, aware that Madeki did not approve, but she did not turn back. Instead she paused only to scoop up Yuuyugo, thrusting it through her *obi* before vaulting the window sill onto the lawns outside. Walking purposefully towards the layers of Kidou, she raised her hands, allowing her *reiryoku* to part the heavy defenses, and though the air sparked and hissed in protest, it did not prevent her from walking through.

Once out, the barriers sealed behind her, and Mitsuki faltered, hit by a sudden wave of clashing energies and fragmented *reiryoku*. She gasped, putting a hand to her chest as the sensation threatened to rob her of her breath, but then, as the bits and pieces of spirit power became more focused, she found that she recognised several of the people who had been involved. Then, overriding all of it, she sensed something else — raw and savage and yet unnervingly familiar. Her heart almost stilled in her chest, and she hurried forward, a single word dropping from her lips.

“Koku.”

As calm had descended over the Eighth Division barracks, a solitary figure had emerged from her hiding place between the ceiling beams of the old training gymnasium, pushing and pulling her dusty, dishevelled form up through the tiny gap in the loose floorboards and onto the narrow landing that separated the outer walkway from the rear of the Captain’s quarters. Inching around the outside of this hallowed chamber, into which she would never dare step without express permission, Shizuka eased herself as soundlessly as she could manage around the outskirts of the wooden structure, landing with a soft thud on the reassuring flat of the balcony that jutted out over the Eighth.

Glancing down at her body, she took in the sword that hung at her waist, her *obi* bulging with various powder supplies she had stolen from the division’s munition stores in case of an emergency. Against

her Captain's instructions, she had slipped the command of her patrol leader, searching instead for somewhere inconspicuous to hide.

Although her real home had always been with Shunsui's half-sister, Riri, in District Eight, to Shizuka, Eighth Division had become the place she belonged. As a child, she had followed all of Riri's lessons dutifully, but when, at the age of twelve, her spirit power had first begun to manifest itself, she had jumped at Shunsui's suggestion that she come and spent some time training in Inner Seireitei. Shunsui had anticipated homesickness, but from the moment she had stepped through the doors and sensed the aura that pervaded the shinigami barracks, Shizuka had known that this was the path she too wanted to follow. The feeling had only grown when, instead of being scolded for blowing up dinner plates or setting fire to bushes, she was encouraged and praised for using the gifts she had been given. It had only been a six month spell, just enough to make her power safe, but it had been enough to tell her that this was what she wanted to do with her life. More, it had taught her that, as dearly as she loved Riri and her brother, it was Shunsui who understood her best, and Shunsui who had come to hold first place in her affections.

She had discovered the hidey-hole in the roof during her six month juvenile placement, and had often used it to her advantage as a child when she had wanted to get out of a particularly unpleasant chore. Though she was bigger now than she had been then, she was still slim and agile enough to manoeuvre her body into the tight space, and so she had pushed herself as far back as she could manage, cloaking herself with the most powerful concealment kidou that she knew how to cast. She had expected to be quickly discovered, but as the flares of reiatsu and sound of hurried footsteps had alerted her to something major going on outside, she had wriggled and crawled into a pocket of space between the beams and the outer wall, squinting through a crack to watch with growing dismay the confrontation unfolding in her squad's front yard.

It had told her beyond a shadow of a doubt that today was no ordinary day, and, from the tension rippling through her Captain's body, this was no ordinary fight. She did not know what was wrong with the members of the Tenth, or why they were attacking the Eighth Division, but she was smart enough to realise that making an indignant, impassioned entrance onto the scene would likely do nothing more than get her killed.

And so she had watched, unnoticed by the harried combatants, as the Eighth had pushed the scale and turned the fight to their own advantage. It had been at that moment that Shunsui had spoken to

Sora, then disappeared into shunpo, and at his sudden disappearance, Shizuka's heart had clenched in her chest. Absorbed in the battle, she had almost forgotten her reasons for breaking rules and staying behind, but with Shunsui's disappearance, her feelings of unease all came flooding back.

Then had come the hallucination, the vivid, unescapeable images of shinigami fighting in the Rukon, Vice Captain to Hollow and Captain against Captain. The blood and rain and despair of the scene had made Shizuka dizzy and when she had returned to herself it had taken a moment to put her thoughts back in order, or remember who and where she was. By the time she had pulled herself together and fully regained her wits, the front courtyard of the Eighth Division was deserted, and everything was quiet.

Shunsui had not come back, and now her Vice Captain and her Third Seated Officer were also nowhere to be seen. This unnatural silence frightened her more than the fierce battle she had witnessed who knows how many minutes before, and as she padded cautiously across the balcony towards the railing, she reflected that she would rather face a scolding for her reckless behaviour than an empty courtyard and a silent barracks.

Was she alone? It was hard to know for sure, but something was badly, desperately wrong.

She leaned up against the railing, closing her eyes as she remembered the short, cryptic conversation she had had with her Captain the night before. It had been late, when he had returned, and he had secluded himself in his room — but Shizuka was a curious, forthright soul, and her curiosity had only been augmented on hearing that he had been to Thirteenth. Whilst this in itself wasn't an unusual state of affairs, Shunsui's demeanour on returning to his own rooms was, and it had concerned her enough to risk a scolding, skipping through the halls and knocking on the door of the Captain's office. What had transpired between them had in no way settled her heart, and her lips thinned as, little by little she replayed the encounter in her head.

At first there was no response to her knock, but she persisted three or four times more, and, reluctantly, he called her in. She pushed back the door softly, glancing behind her to make sure that nobody was watching, for Sora had already told her Shunsui had asked not to be disturbed. Shizuka pushed her luck quite often when it came to Shunsui's indulgence of her whims, but Sora was another matter, and the Vice Captain's strict, roving eye would soon suss out the younger girl's intentions, adding a fresh pile of chores to those already written in the weekly schedule.

Shizuka was a hard worker, but she didn't much like scrubbing floors or polishing swords, and especially not when Sora made her do the both at once. It had happened before, and so it was with the ultimate discretion that she had slipped into her Captain's chamber.

The room was fairly dark, lit only by one Kidou lamp, and Shunsui was lounging on cushions in the far corner, his pink haori spread out beneath him, and his white one hanging on its hook behind the door. To Shizuka's relief he had not yet changed for bed, nor did his pretence at relaxation fool her, and she frowned, shutting the door and coming to stand a few feet away from where he lay.

"Taichou?"

"Shizu-chan, I did tell Sora I didn't want to be disturbed. I'm sure she probably told you, and she won't be pleased if she knows you're ignoring her."

Shunsui's words were soft and even, not unwelcoming, but lacking his usual teasing warmth, and at the sound of them, Shizuka's eyes narrowed even further.

"She did," she admitted, "and I'm here in defiance of it. I'm sorry, sir, but I was worried about you."

"Worried?" Shunsui echoed the single word, and Shizuka nodded.

"I know you pretty well," she said earnestly, "and I know you never come back from Thirteenth looking like you did today, not even if Juushirou-dono has twisted your arm and got you to muck in with some plan of his that means lots of paperwork you don't want to do. You always breeze in and joke about palming it off on Sora-dono... but you don't come up here like this, shutting yourself away. It's not normal... you can't pretend that nothing's bothering you,"

"And if I was just tired?" Shunsui's question came languidly, and Shizuka snorted her derision, shaking her head. He was not even looking at her, she realised, the upper part of his face concealed by the straw kasa he sometimes wore about the division, and suddenly she had the impression that he did not want to look at her, as though seeing her would, somehow, cause him distress. This thought disturbed her, and her lips thinned, pressing together.

"I know you, Shunsui-nii," she repeated, using the old, affectionate nickname. "Right now you're not even meeting my gaze, and you never do that unless you're trying to lie. I know that you like to blow things off and pretend, but the more you do that, the more serious you think it is. What do you think is going on at Thirteenth Division? It's not just you who has a

friend there, you know — and I'd be really cross with you if something happened to Ketsui-kun and you could've prevented it."

"You know, I'm sure we had a conversation when you first recruited here, that you were going to at least remember to call me Shunsui-dono, if Taichou was too much effort," At length, Shunsui tipped back the old straw kasa that he had covered his face with to think, his dark eyes shifting across the room towards where his Tenth Seated officer stood. "We might be alone, but that still stands. For your sake and for mine, it's better that way."

"I could call you other things, but that would be a lot more complicated for both of us," Shizuka said frankly, moving across the room and plucking the kasa from her companion's head, setting it down on the windowsill. "And now you can't avoid looking at me, I'd like it if you'd answer my question. Ketsui-kun is important to me... just like Juushirou-dono is important to you, and if you think there's something dangerous in Thirteenth..."

"Clearly there is," Shunsui groaned, pulling himself up into a sitting position and running agitated fingers through the tousled brown hair that for once scattered loose across his shoulders. "But I'm not sure it's something I should be discussing with you. It's not that I think Thirteenth is in trouble, not specifically... nor Ketsui... but..."

"Then what?" Shizuka squatted down across from him, fixing him with an expectant look. "An off the record answer is as good as any. You know I won't go spilling it to anyone else."

"I know, but there are some things that it's best not to voice aloud," Shunsui admitted. "Truth is, Shizu-chan, I don't want to get anyone involved who doesn't have to be. It could mean someone's life... and..."

"Someone's life?" Shizuka looked startled, and Shunsui nodded.

"And so it's something I want you to keep out of," he concluded firmly, reaching over to ruffle his fingers through Shizuka's own dark waves. "Be a good girl, huh, and let this one alone? Think of it as the business of Captains... and not something Riri would want you involved in."

"If she wouldn't want me to be, she'd be cross with you, too," Shizuka pointed out, folding her arms across her chest, and Shunsui offered her a rueful grin which did not reach his eyes.

"True, but it's my job," he said simply. "Now, you run along and do your job, else Sora will be screaming in my ear about how she's people short and still has to do the squad rotas for tomorrow. You'll miss your assignment if you hang around here too long."

“You’re sending me out of Inner Seireitei?” Shizuka’s eyes became suspicious slits, and Shunsui sighed.

“If I could, I’d send you all, but unfortunately, I can’t.” he admitted. “Don’t look at me like that, Shizuka. I can’t answer the questions you want to ask, and if you’re far away, then...”

“I’m Tenth Seat of Eighth Division, not the little kid you used to play hide and seek with around Riri-nee’s hut,” Shizuka shook her head. “I’m a shinigami, just like you are. Don’t send me out on patrol, Shunsui-nii. I mean it. I want to stay here. I want to be useful.”

“I want you to call me Taichou, but we don’t always get what we want.”

“Fine. Taichou, then,” Shizuka pouted, but obediently changed her mode of address, bowing down before him in an exaggerated expression of respect. “Please, let me stay here and be useful.”

“Shizu, everyone who can be sent away from Eighth has been and will be,” There was something dark in Shunsui’s gaze, and Shizuka frowned, her heart clenching at the sight of it. “Not just you. I’m keeping Sora, Tetsuya, Kaoru — maybe one or two others, but nobody below top rank and certainly nobody whose rank is in double figures. You go and you take your assignment like an adult, else we’ll have words when you come back. Your duty is to obey your Captain... and this time, I’m not going to be worked on to relent. You go and you kill Hollows. That’s your duty. Protect the people you trained to protect and leave me to deal with those I swore to. Understand?”

Shizuka sighed, but knew she was defeated, and nodded, getting to her feet.

“Yes, sir,” she said resignedly. “I’m going. I’ll go see Fukutaichou now.”

Shizuka opened her eyes, echoing that sigh with another one of her own.

Shunsui-nii is always soft on me, but not this time. This time it was something big... which means his life is in danger, and probably everyone else’s, too. Whatever happened here today... it’s something Seireitei’s not going to shrug off, and it’s probably bigger than just Eighth Division and Tenth. He didn’t say it, but it was in his eyes last night... it was a matter of life and death, and maybe... his life. His death.

She shivered as though a sudden cold wind had whipped around her body, but she knew in reality it was dread encircling her heart. Maybe I was breaking rules, but what else do you expect when you talk to me like that? If I’d left Seireitei on patrol, I might be safe from whatever it is that’s turning through the atmosphere... but I might also never see you

again. And if it's something like that... then this is an order I just... can't obey. Riri-nee wouldn't forgive you if you went off and died somewhere, Shunsui-nii... and I... I won't forgive it either.

Carefully she mounted the balcony, clambering down the side with the same nimbleness that had served her well as a child, and dropping down onto the dusty cobbles. Here she could see in irrefutable detail the marks of the fierce battle but, with some relief, she noted there was little sign of bloodspill, making serious injuries unlikely. Shunsui had certainly been in one piece when she had seen him leave, she reminded herself, skipping over the broken pieces of fence and gate towards the main thoroughfare and gripping the splintered remains of the pole in her hands, peering cautiously around it for any sign of trouble. Her Captain had released his *zanpakutou*, but already the traces of its presence were fading, and Shizuka was sharp enough to realise that he had sealed the swords into their sleeping forms as he had sped away from Eighth. There was no sense of Sora's *zanpakutou*, either, nor Tetsuya's, and already the spiritual morass of energy was beginning to dissipate.

She could hear faint voices at Ninth Division — Sora's strident tones cutting through the rest, and this further confirmation that her Vice Captain was safe helped to bolster her heart.
Whatever it is, maybe it's over. Perhaps it's done, and Shunsui-nii will come back soon. Perhaps...

She was just considering returning to the barracks and preparing herself to face punishment, when an all-too familiar sensation struck through her heart, turning her blood to ice.

It was something she had seen and sensed many times during her adolescence and her training, something which, even now, filled her with both awe and and a respectful amount of fear. Yet in all the times she had felt that particular swirl of reiatsu, she had never felt such true, raw intent. A second passed, then there was another swirl of something, dark, intangible and unfriendly, rearing its head in obvious confrontation.

She gulped, swallowing hard as she interpreted what it meant.
Katen Kyoukotsu.

Her mind raced.
Katen Kyoukotsu's release. Again. He sealed it, when he left here, but Shunsui-nii is fighting again. Shunsui-nii is...
Before she knew what she was doing, she had run out into the central thoroughfare, no thought on her mind except the need to trace that surge of power and ensure that her Captain was safe. Although she

knew there was little she could do as a Tenth Seat that Shunsui as a Captain could not, still she could not prevent her headlong flight, her fears from the night before now put into stark, unescapable reality. *You knew. You went looking for this fight. Whatever it is, you knew last night and you didn't tell me. You tried to send me away, tried to leave Sora-dono behind, and now...*

Tears blurred her vision, and she dashed them away, but more fell — tears of fear, of frustration, of desperation. She tried to shunpo, but the hallucination had sent her senses into such overload that she could not draw enough focus together to manage a single flash-step, and so she just kept running, running in the direction of the Third Division, towards a target that seemed to never come.

And then, all of a sudden, she was falling headlong.

Startled, it was all she could do to put her arms out to stop herself hitting the stone with a heavy thud, instead rolling over and grazing her arms and hands against the rough surface. She winced, cursing her clumsiness under her breath, but even as she drew her winded body into a sitting position, bending her elbow to examine the large friction burn that now adorned her delicate skin, she realised what it was she had tripped over, and her eyes widened, injury forgotten as she scrambled to her knees.

It had not been her own feet, nor a piece of random debris from the battle around Eighth. It had been a leg. A long, skinny, spindly leg, half-covered in a dusty white robe.

Not quite able to believe what she was seeing, Shizuka's gaze followed the line of the leg, realising numbly that it was attached to a body, and this body, in turn, was attached to a head, framed by a dark, muzzy halo of messy brown hair.

She shuffled closer, half afraid it was another strange hallucination, but, as she reached a tentative finger to poke the individual's cheek, the head moved slightly, and a soft, incoherent murmur dropped from his lips. He was hot and dry to the touch, Shizuka realised in alarm, quite unconscious and robed in what she could only describe as nightwear but, as she turned him over, she was aware of the heavy bandaging that adorned his skinny torso. She did not know who he was, or how he had come to be there, but she could tell that he was in serious trouble, for his breath was coming in thin, shallow gasps, and even when she attempted to lift him up, his body fell limply against her, his limbs little more than skin and bone. His fingers were red and blistered, as though something had scalded them from fingertip to palm. The right hand had been loosely wrapped around something,

something haphazardly covered with a dusty piece of cloth, and as she attempted to stir him from his stupor, the cloth fell away, revealing the glittering edge of what was unmistakably some kind of sword. Shizuka reached out a hand to pick it up, but something in its aura made her pause, and she drew her hand back, turning her back on the weapon and focusing instead on the unconscious young man.

Despite her fear for Shunsui's safety, Shizuka knew she could not just leave the stranger there, unconscious on the street, when an attack might come at any time. Little by little her rationality had begun to return to her, her own foolishness running out into unknown danger magnified by the plight of the nameless, uniformless invalid she had, quite literally, fallen over. Her cheeks red at how foolish she must have appeared, she found herself glad that her companion was out cold, for at least he could not bear witness to her tears or her momentary panic. Wiping her eyes dry with the edge of her sleeve, she cast a glance at the half-covered sword.

A weapon like that suggests a shinigami. And I think... I'm somewhere near the Fourth.

She turned to verify her position, realising that she was, indeed, somewhere between the barracks of the Fifth Division and the Fourth, with its heavy, cloaking cover of Kidou. There was nobody around, the eerie, deserted nature of the streets sending fresh chills into Shizuka's young heart, but then she reminded herself that Fifth were in the Real World and Fourth rarely conducted open street patrols. If it were not for the presence of Katen Kyoukotsu, raw and angry and dead ahead of her current position, Shizuka knew she would be more convinced that everything was well. She forced her attention to return to the unconscious youth.

Maybe he escaped from the Fourth — he certainly looks like he ought to be there. I ought to do something... get someone to help him. I wonder if I can carry him — he seems light, but I don't know.

Perhaps sensing her thoughts, or disturbed by her presence, the young man let out another incoherent murmur, and, for the briefest split-second, his eyes opened, just long enough for Shizuka to see that they were as brown as her own. Unsure of what else she could do, she fumbled at her belt, pushing aside the various powders and potions she had accumulated and pulling out her water gourd, giving it a little shake. To her relief, there was still some of the liquid inside it, and gently she put it to the boy's lips, hoping that he was conscious enough to be able to drink. At first, she thought he would choke, but as the cool liquid ran into his mouth, he seemed to register its presence, drinking thirstily until the vessel was drained dry. Dropping the gourd on the ground, Shizuka unpacked the various objects stuffed

into her *obi*, setting them down beside her as she unknotted the length of white fabric. Tearing it in half, she wound what was left back around her waist, folding the rest into a makeshift pillow and laying the unknown boy down once more on the ground.

I don't think I should leave you, in case something attacks, but if I don't go get help... and that sword... what was that sword?

“Koku!”

Before Shizuka could work out a solution to her dilemma, a fresh voice assailed them, and she turned, seeing a woman with dark hair and fair complexion staring down at them in some dismay. Before Shizuka could ask her who she was and where she had come from, the newcomer had dropped down at the young man's side, putting a hand to his brow, then glancing at her urgently.

“What happened? What happened to him? Why...?”

“Do you know who he is?” Shizuka was startled, and the woman nodded.

“He's from Thirteenth, and he ought to be taken back there, as soon as humanly possible,” she said frankly. “I don't know who you are, or how you found him, but I don't think he can stay here. He needs to be taken back.”

“He's wounded... I thought he'd come from the Fourth,” Shizuka bit her lip, glancing at the boy anew, and the newcomer shook her head.

“I've just come from there. I begged leave from my Captain to return to Thirteenth — I'm treating this boy for his injury, and I felt it important that I go back to him.” she said, her tones harried and anxious. “My name is Edogawa Mitsuki, and I'm a healer from the Fourth. This boy is my patient... and in the care of Thirteenth.”

Shizuka's eyes widened slightly as she put the pieces together, staring at Mitsuki as if seeing her for the first time.

“You're... Edogawa-san?”

“Yes, that's what I said,” the woman was clearly getting impatient, but Shizuka sighed, lowering her head.

“I'm sorry. We hadn't met, so I didn't know,” she said honestly. “I know you've been at Thirteenth, though, and that Ketsui-kun has spoken of you... also, that there was a young man there who you were caring for. This is that person, isn't it? I didn't know, but it must be.”

She offered a faint smile, though it did not fully reach her eyes.

“My name is Magaki Shizuka. I’m the Tenth Seat of the Eighth Division and my Captain has no idea I’m here,” she said honestly. “I’m probably going to be in a lot of trouble when he finds out that I disobeyed orders and came out here looking for him. I found this guy by accident, and I don’t know how he got here... I tripped over him, literally, and that’s all I know. I gave him water, because it’s all I had... I didn’t know what else I could do for him, and I was just trying to work out how to get help, so I’m glad you’re here. I’ll help you take him back to Thirteenth, if you like. I shouldn’t be here, and Shunsui-n... Shunsui-dono will be even more angry with me if he senses I’m so close, especially now he’s released his sword. I know that you were a schoolfriend of my Captain and my Vice Captain, so maybe if I help you take this boy back to Thirteenth, I won’t get into quite as much trouble for breaking bounds.”

Mitsuki offered the young woman a wry smile, shuffling herself around so that she could more easily lift the limp, unconscious young man, who Shizuka now knew was called ‘Koku’.

“All right,” she agreed. “The sooner we move, the better. It’s exposed, here, and I don’t know... there’s something in the atmosphere. Sensing Katen Kyoukotsu in release is usually a sign something major is going on, and I was concerned...”

“Mitsuki!”

The yell stopped the healer mid-sentence, and as they both raised their gazes, Shizuka’s cheeks flushed an uncomfortable red, for hurrying towards them was the Captain of the Thirteenth Division, two of his own officers in tow. She was well and truly caught in the act now, she realised, for Juushirou would surely scold her the moment he saw her, but to her surprise, he paid her little or no attention at all, instead dropping down beside the unconscious young man and putting an anxious hand to his throat.

“He’s all right, Juushirou. Just tired,” Mitsuki offered him a faint smile. “I don’t know, precisely, what he did to end up here or like this, but whatever it was, his heart is beating strongly enough that I’m not worried about moving him. Magaki-san and I were going to bring him back to you, but you pre-empted us.”

“Magaki..?” Juushirou glanced up, apparently seeing Shizuka for the first time, and the Tenth Seated officer glanced at her hands, trying to make herself as invisible as possible. “Shizuka, you’re here too? I thought...”

“Shunsui-nii doesn’t know, but I was worried about him, so I

stayed,” the young woman twisted her fingers together. “I’m sorry, Juushirou-dono. I’ve probably made a nuisance of myself. I came out because I felt Shunsui-nii was fighting, and I tripped over Koku instead. I thought I should help him, then Edogawa-san came, and so...”

“Shunsui...” Juushirou’s eyes narrowed, and he turned in the direction of the Third Division, an unreadable expression in his hazel eyes. For a moment there was silence, then Juushirou let out a heavy sigh.

“Our responsibility is to get Koku back somewhere safe, and within our secure custody,” he said at length. “Kirio, Makoto, come give me a hand. Makoto, you’re stronger, so you carry the lad. Shizuka, you’d better come back with us. Mitsuki, I think Koku will need your ministrings, if you can be spared from Fourth?”

“I didn’t want to leave Thirteenth in the first place, but I couldn’t ignore my Captain’s summons,” Mitsuki said gravely, as Makoto gave his Captain a salute, hurrying to bundle the limp youngster up in his arms. “I can come back with you, though. I persuaded Retsu-sama that Koku needed me and that leaving him alone in the midst of whatever was going on outside was dangerous. It seems I was right... but aside from the burns, I can’t see any major damage done. He’s worn out, though... and I haven’t seen *that* before.”

She pointed to the sword, and Juushirou’s eyebrows shot up.

“But that’s...”

“It certainly looks like it,” Mitsuki agreed cryptically, her meaning foxing Shizuka completely. “Magaki-san, will you wrap it in something to keep it safe, and bring it back with us? I think it wants to stay with Koku, and I don’t imagine it would be a good idea to leave it here, where it’s in the open.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Shizuka was non-plussed, but she nodded her head, scooping up the scraps of stray cloth and beginning to do as she was bidden.

“Taichou, what is going on? Why is Koku this far out, what was that thing we all saw, and why is there so much fighting all around us?” Kirio asked softly, and Juushirou’s expression became grave.

“I’m very much afraid that Seireitei’s under assault by one of its deadliest enemies,” he said soberly. “Thirteenth may well prove to be the last force standing, if all else fails. I’ve kept you all from the fight so far, Kirio, and I’m sorry, but I’ve been waiting for word from the

Onmitsukidou. It hasn't come yet, so all we can do is return to base with this boy and hope that it's enough. *If* we need it to be enough... and we have to actively enter the fight ourselves — we've no way of summoning help back from the Real World, so it's in our hands. Given how things are, I'm hoping it won't be needed, but in a war... things happen and it's better to be prepared for every eventuality, however unthinkable that may be. If we turn out to be the only Division left unscathed, then if we have to fight to a man — or woman — then that's what we need to be ready to do, with every potential advantage we can gather together."

He glanced at Mitsuki, then,

"He's definitely not hurt badly?"

"He's weak, and shaken up, but I'm confident he'll live," Mitsuki assured him. "I think the Thirteenth is the best place for him to be, too. Especially if..."

She paused, her eyes narrowing as though she was picking up on the waves of spirit power in the air, then she nodded.

"Especially if things go wrong and we need to negotiate," she murmured. "People have already died, Juushirou. Having custody of Koku might make or break the battle, so lets make sure he doesn't slip away from Thirteenth's protection again!"

The atmosphere in the Spiritless Zone was peaceful as Kai and his companions made their way through ferns and fields, scouring the landscape for any sign of their target. After the meeting with his two former school friends, Kai had spent some time strategising his secret mission, borrowing several secure maps from the Archive using his special status as Onmitsukidou leader to gain access to the most restricted sections. He had cross-referenced these with the maps he and his followers had compiled when making their report on the murders in Junrin'an and Hokutan, and, as a result, he had mapped out a likely path of investigation which would take them through the most populated areas of the three sectioned Districts. Following their conversation, he had also dug out the Second Division's own copies of official reports about Rukongai from twenty-five years earlier, breaking into his sister's office to obtain the papers he needed. Though Second Division depositions were included in the formal compilation, Kai's hunch had paid off, and he had managed to locate the original statements given and noted down by Second Division's deployed officers. Though their title of Onmitsukidou had only been provisional in the time before Kai had graduated and taken control of

his position, they had covered more or less the same duties as the men he now led, and as he had gone through the papers, he had noticed that each statement had been signed off by the officer Kounou.

Kai was not the kind of shinigami who assumed guilt where he had no proof, and even on careful inspection, all the reports appeared to be complete and untampered with. Kounou had presented himself as a trustworthy officer until the Suzuki Naoto incident, acting as provisional head of the Onmitsukidou before Kai's inauguration and in times when Shihouin Clan duty had called him back to the main house. There was no reason to believe the man had turned to criminal endeavours before that point, nor that he had falsified any of the evidence from this trip. Kai could not connect Kounou with Keitarou, but although the reports seemed authentic, his sharp eyes had quickly picked out areas of the map listed in the deployment schedule for which no report had been received. It had taken little cross-referencing to realise that these areas had been policed by Kounou himself.

Kai had become convinced that Suzuki Naoto had been framed because of something he had discovered, but he had never really known all of the details of what that was. He had not had a chance to question the man himself, thanks to Kounou's decision to have him chased down and killed rather than brought back to face his commander in person. Till that point, it had appeared that Kounou's sins had related just to illegal trade and black market activities, but as the night had worn on, he had begun to wonder if it had not been more sinister. Re-investigating Suzuki's case had uncovered the apparently unsolved murder of the unfortunate man's mother in the time before Suzuki's own arrest. Coupled with the assassinations of other significant witnesses in Suzuki's favour, Kai had begun to be convinced that his former deputy had been involved in far more sinister dealings than had first appeared — and for a longer period of time. Kounou had never formally confessed, despite his conviction, and had never attempted to bargain with the Shihouin authorities, keeping closed-lipped about the full extent of his activities and maintaining that he believed Suzuki to be the overall mastermind. Whether Kounou had had anything to do with Keitarou's appropriation of Suzuki's injured body, or whether the man had simply been paid to look the other way by someone in Rukongai, Kai could not know, and now Kounou was dead, he probably never would. Suzuki had been a scapegoat and a victim who had ultimately turned killer and refugee, but Kai was now sure that he had probably been innocent of the original charges Kounou had put over his head. Moreover, he no longer believed that there was any coincidence in

Suzuki's involvement with Keitarou's scheme. Whether Kounou had sold Suzuki to the exiled scientist for his schemes, Kai felt sure Keitarou had known, and had planned it all — from Kounou right down to the final act. And now, he had planned this just as meticulously, making himself disappear into plain sight.

Only this time they — or, to be accurate, Juushirou and Shunsui — had seen through the smokescreen to the reality beneath. Kai had left Seireitei certain that Eiraki was hidden somewhere in the shinigami's safe zone, and as they had left the *Senkaimon*, he had told his men that they would not return to Seireitei until they had found what they were looking for. Any grumbles had been quickly silenced by a touch of the black hilt that hung at his waist, and as a consequence, the forces had ploughed forth in relative silence.

Neither Juushirou nor Shunsui had been able to give him any guidance on which region Eiraki and her refugee son might be hiding in, but Kai's instinct had told him that it would most like be a busy area, where she and those with her would stand out least. The settlements established when the Spiritless Zone had first been inaugurated were largely intact despite the Hollow incursions faced by the Fourth Division in the weeks and months leading up to the attacks, and so he had chosen to begin with these, speaking to any stray souls they happened to meet on the way. Whilst his officers were robed all in black, Kai had chosen to wear the black robe and white sash of a regular Vice Captain, hoping that the familiar uniform would win the confidence of those residents which had known the Fourth Division officers, and so far it had paid off. Most of the residents spoke to them quite freely, unafraid of the *shihakushou*, and whilst a few emitted faint traces of reiatsu, the majority had no spiritual presence to speak of at all. Occasionally, however, they would come across a fearful individual, hiding behind a tree or scurrying into the safety of a nearby shelter, and this behaviour made Kai think they were not native residents.

No reason for them not to trust shinigami if they're meant to be here. Fourth's officers helped and protected them, and whilst my lot may be a lot less sympathetic and more raw around the edges, we didn't commit any atrocities during our investigations into the murders of those officers. People should not be afraid of us, so it's suspicious that some are.

He pursed his lips now, pausing at the edge of the stream to cup his hands in the glittering flow and take a sip. The sun was rising and it was a warm day, the shrinking shadows telling him that time was passing a lot faster than he would like. He did not know if Keitarou had left for Seireitei, or whether the man was hiding somewhere hereabouts, but whatever the fact of the matter, a quick wrap-up was

for the best for everyone. As they had drawn deeper into Junrin'an's lush territory, the number of willing witnesses had dwindled, till large areas of apparently populated space appeared suspiciously quiet and empty. This was an immediate red flag for Kai, and as they reached the borders of a likely looking settlement, he raised his hand above his head, spreading his fingers to indicate that his subordinates should fan out and surround the location as quietly and swiftly as possible, just in case. Although this was the third settlement they had approached in this way thus far, his officers obeyed without question, melting silently into the surroundings ready to pounce should he call on them, and, drawing his weapon from its scabbard, Kai headed purposefully into the heart of the town, his quick golden gaze hunting for signs of life.

The town square was deserted, the only sound the bubbling water from fountain that marked its centre. This was a clean, well kept settlement, with cheap and simple dwellings constructed in a neat arc around what was clearly the nucleus of town life. A crumpled hat and scraps of straw indicated that people had been here until recently, and Kai narrowed his eyes, extending his senses to canvass the area for suspiciously high levels of *reiryoku*. At first he felt nothing, but he persevered, his efforts paying off as he centred in on a huddle of spirit masses to the north of his position. Meimei Anshi clasped tightly in his grip, he made his way cautiously forward, fairly confident that he was approaching Rukon citizens and not a hidden ambush but not trusting his instincts all the same. If Keitarou was still here, watching him, he was at risk every moment of being put under Chudokuga's control, and one of the reasons he had sent his followers so far and wide had been to limit the potential damage the sword could do. Saku had been given strict and unequivocal instructions that, should he become possessed, she was to take him out, but Kai would rather not be the second Vice Captain killed as a result of hostile action in the Rukon, and so he remained on his guard.

The target of his interest turned out to be a couple of young girls, one in her teens and the other a mere child who clung to her elder in fear as Kai approached. Both were bare-footed and dressed in ragged clothing which did not conceal how skinny they both were, nor the pallor of their skin. They shrank back in fear at his approach, and Kai paused a few feet away from them, lowering his sword cautiously so that he would appear less threatening. For a moment he second-guessed himself, for the children appeared too young to have come from the abandoned areas of the Rukon, but from the terror in their eyes, he felt certain his original hunch was right. Whether Keitarou had continued to recruit spiritually tainted youngsters for some kind

of experiment he knew nothing about, or whether they had fled from safer territories when their spirit power had erupted was hard to tell, but they were so different from the content Pluses he had encountered thus far that he was sure they were part of Keitarou's illicit brood. Perhaps they had even been *born* in the forbidden lands — children like Keitarou's own offspring whose parents' spirit power had allowed them to do the unthinkable and reproduce behind the Sekkiseki wall.

"I'm not here to hurt you," he said softly now. "We're not here for that purpose. We're looking for someone, and if you can help me, then I'll be on my way."

The girls exchanged frightened looks, but neither one of them spoke, and Kai frowned, assessing this reaction with all of his usual care.

"Your silence tells me as much as your words," he added levelly. "You both have *reiryoku*, and you shouldn't be here. Should you?"

At this, the younger girl scuttled behind the elder, who attempted to stand firm, despite the terror surfacing in her eyes.

"Well?" Kai prompted, and the older girl took a gulp of air into her lungs.

"Will you send us back?" she whispered, and despite himself, Keitarou felt sorry for the wretched youngster. She was younger than him, barely fifteen or sixteen, yet her appearance indicated she had experienced hardship in her short life, and Kai realised how right his friends had been. Keitarou had found people who needed him, and therefore had used them in whatever way he had needed to keep his family safe. He shook his head.

"We're not here to do that," he said matter-of-factly. "We came because we learned that people here were in some kind of trouble, and that some needed help. You're in no danger from us, providing you don't try to get in our way."

The younger girl poked her head out at this, eyeing the Onmitsukidou uncertainly, and Kai offered a rueful smile.

"You don't believe me," he observed, "but I don't mind. I suppose my running in here with a sword probably doesn't give you confidence. I'm looking for the people who brought you here, but you're not going to tell me where to find them, are you?"

The older girl hesitated, and Kai felt certain she was going to keep her silence, but, to his surprise, the younger girl emerged hesitantly from her hiding place, moving a few paces away from the older girl

until she stood directly before Kai's position. Though clearly afraid, she met his gaze bravely.

"We are supposed to be here," she said firmly. "We belong here. All of us belong here. You can't do anything about it, even if you do have a sword."

"I already told you that I don't intend to do anything to you," Kai knelt down so that he was on the young girl's level, sliding the sword into his scabbard and reaching out a hand towards her. She flinched back, and out of the corner of his eye, Kai saw the older girl back away, preparing to flee the moment his attention was off her. He pretended to ignore her, instead focusing his attention on the younger child.

"Friends of mine were murdered here," he added. "We're looking for the people who killed them. So long as they're here, other people might get hurt. We're not here to interfere in the Rukon."

"You have a sword," the younger girl protested. "Why should I believe you?"

"Have you ever seen a shinigami hurt anyone with a sword, here?" Kai asked gently, and the young girl faltered, then shrugged.

"No," she admitted, "but I've heard. Keitarou-sama..."

She faltered, putting a hand to her mouth as though she had realised too late that she had made a mistake, but Kai grinned, patting her lightly on the shoulders.

"I know about Keitarou-sama," he said ironically. "I don't suppose he's here? I'd like to speak to him about this. I think he might be a witness in the crime I'm talking about."

The young girl looked momentarily confused, then she shook her head, apparently relaxing at Kai's cryptic response.

"He's gone," she admitted. "He went away somewhere. I can't tell you where he is. I don't know."

"I see," Kai's eyes narrowed, a quick glance across the square telling him that the older girl had taken her chance to escape, and he nodded, getting to his feet. "In that case, I won't bother you any more. You want to go get water, don't you? Go ahead."

The girl bit her lip, then,

"I'm hungry," she admitted. "The other souls, they think it's silly, and there isn't a lot of food now we're here, though it's better than

before. Do you know a place where we can get more food? I thought Keitarou-sama went to get food, but he hasn't come back yet."

"I promise that, when I go back to my friends, I'll try and find a way to bring you food," Kai assured her, fumbling at his *obi* for his own pack and carefully unwrapping the knotted cloth. He pulled out an onigiri, and the girl's eyes became huge at the sight of the fresh, clean rice.

"Here," Kai held it out to her with a grin. 'For now, you can take this. I can eat when I go back, but you've been helpful and I want to do something helpful in return. Take it,' as the girl hesitated. "It's yours. I don't want you to do anything else for me. Just run along home. You're not in any kind of trouble."

To his surprise, the girl's face broke into a huge beam, and she took the onigiri carefully in her tiny, fragile fingers.

"Thank you, Shinigami-san," she said sincerely. "I didn't mean to be rude to you. I didn't know you were a nice shinigami. People here said there were nice shinigami, but I didn't believe them. Now I do."

With that she skipped off towards the direction of the fountain, and Kai watched her go, a pensive smile on his lips.

A little kindness goes a long way. Edogawa, I'm grateful for the rapport Fourth built up here in these places. Winning over the neglected interlopers might not be as hard as it first appeared. In the meantime, though, the older girl has probably gone to warn whoever is here. And, now I know her reiatsu, and she clearly doesn't know how to suppress it, I can follow her. Hopefully she'll lead me to where I need to be, and it won't be too dangerous.

Pulling Meimei Anshi from its sheath once more, he disappeared into shunpo, tracking the traces of the older girl's potent, raw reiatsu across the settlement towards the outskirts. As he drew closer, he became aware of a second presence, muted and faint, but unmistakably familiar to his senses, and he slipped out of the flash-step behind the reassuring wall of a nearby house, peering around the wooden slats as he sought out the source of the sensation.

At the edge of a plot of freshly dug soil, a woman was kneeling. Her clothing was simple, her dark hair tied back in a tail with a length of ragged ribbon, and she was apparently oblivious to his presence. Suppressing his *reiryoku* to its lowest level, Kai took in the appearance of this figure, observing how she had aged since the last time they had met. Time had not been cruel to her, he reflected, especially considering she had been in hiding for most of her adult life. Had she

birthed her children here in Rukongai, without medical care and attention? It seemed likely, but though he recognised her, there was little of the fragile, delicate *hime* left in Eiraki's resolute aura. She had chosen her path, and, as she put her hands together in apparent prayer, Kai realised that there was no sense of regret in her bearing. His gaze strayed to the recently turned earth, and he frowned, recognising it as a simple burial place. As he continued to observe, he saw the girl he had trailed slip cautiously out of the shadows, flitting across the ground to where Eiraki knelt. The older woman raised her head at the girl's approach, and though words passed between them, Kai was too far away to make out what they were. Eiraki got to her feet, saying something back to the girl, who nodded fervently before disappearing back into the safety of the village. Brushing the dirt from her robes, Eiraki cast a glance around her, clearly looking for any sign of danger, and Kai paused for a moment to check where his companions were. As he had hoped, they were closing in on his location, trailing his movements from a safe distance in case of need, and so he stepped out from his hiding place.

"Eiraki-hime," he said softly, and Eiraki swung around to face him, her expression unreadable as she took in his unsheathed sword and the black and white of his shinigami uniform. There was a moment of silence between them, then,

"Shihouin Kai-dono," her words sounded almost resigned, rather than surprised, and Kai paused a few feet from the fresh grave, his gaze running over it once more.

"Someone you knew lies there?" he asked lightly, and Eiraki's eyes narrowed, a flash of pain and anger entering her expression. It was gone the next moment, the calm mask back in place, but Kai had seen it and had understood. Though she had not the spirit power of her kinsfolk, Eiraki was still an Endou, and he should not expect her to behave like the scared child he had met almost thirty years ago at Shunsui's brother's wedding. Most likely she had sent the girl to the village to fetch reinforcements, maybe even the son who had attacked Seventh Division so ruthlessly, and Kai's eyes darted briefly to the perimeter, assessing how close Saku and the other Onmitsukidou hovered.

"That's no business of a shinigami," Eiraki's response came eventually, and she turned her back on the earth, dusting her hands once more against her clothing. They were trembling, ever so slightly, Kai noted, but she made no attempt to run away. "This is a long way from home for a Shihouin, isn't it? I thought the Fourth Division patrolled here."

“Unfortunately for you, things have changed,” Kai said evenly. “I’d like it if you’d come with me of your own accord, Eiraki, but I get the feeling that won’t happen, will it?”

Eiraki’s lips twitched into a strange, cold smile, and she shrugged.

“This is my land, not yours,” she said cryptically. “You might have come here looking for me, but sometimes shinigami die in the Rukon, Kai-dono.”

“Yes,” Kai’s expression became grave. “Yes, they do. Young men like your nephew, struck down in his prime.”

Eiraki’s eyes flickered again, and Kai saw her cast a brief glance back at the freshly turned earth.

“This is a war,” she said softly. “We all make sacrifices when we choose sides. My brother chose his. I chose mine. He lost his son. I lost my daughter. Don’t expect me to cry for a nephew I never met, not when my youngest’s body rots beneath the earth here.”

So the grave belonged to Keitarou’s homicidal daughter. Kai added this to his mental database, nodding his head.

“I don’t expect you to do anything of the sort,” he said frankly. “I’m sure it’s a long time since you cared what Hirata did or what he’s been through since you decided to leave the family home. You’re right that you made your choices, but those choices come as a cost. There is never a time limit on arrests for murder, Eiraki. Even if I can’t place a weapon in your hand for the death of Souja or any of my other comrades, the charges relating to Kuchiki Ribari still remain.”

“Kuchiki Ribari,” Eiraki’s features twitched into a mask of bitter amusement. “A rich, pampered brat who probably had nothing to give this world except more hate and discrimination. The Clans let people starve and suffer while they compete for top positions. I saw that with my own eyes in District Seven, and so I chose to leave. I chose to kill Ribari-dono and I don’t care who knows that I did. If you think you can negotiate with me or plead to my better nature, you’ll be here a long time.”

“I don’t expect an Endou to have a better nature,” Kai replied honestly. “Not an Endou who kills a child and feels nothing for their death.”

“I’m sure my brother is no different, not now,” Eiraki seemed unconcerned, but from the fleeting glances she made towards the edge of the grassy area, Kai knew she was stalling, waiting for some kind of reinforcement. “He’s an Endou too, and I’ve seen it, in his eyes. The

hawk inside him is a killer. He'd kill my son just as quick as my daughter killed his. It's who we are. Even a Shihouin can't begin to understand."

"No, but we can go in search of justice for those killed," Kai raised his free hand, and silently, Saku, Karaki and the other Onmitsukidou officers began to melt out of the shadows, edging the perimeter of the field one by one. "I didn't come alone, and I didn't come intending to negotiate with you. My orders are to bring you back — dead or alive, but alive is probably preferred. Guren-sama would like to have justice for his son, and we would like to make sure no more Clan sons are murdered by unknown poisons."

"Like I said, this is my land," Eiraki smiled, and there was a rustle from the bushes behind her. Expecting the missing son, Katsura, or the Onmitsukidou, Suzuki, Kai was taken aback to realise that those who had come to Eiraki's defence were men and women of the local area, individuals with recognisable *reiryoku* and the same skinny physique as the two young girls he had encountered earlier. Each one of them held a crude weapon of some sort — knives, swords, even farming implements and planks of splintered wood. Out of the corner of his eye, Kai saw Karaki tense, preparing to fight, and he spread his arms out to prevent a full on charge.

"We're not here to fight with or hurt the people in Rukongai," he said firmly. "We're here to arrest those whose names have been indicted for murder, not commit our own."

"I thought so," Eiraki's expression was triumphant. "You won't kill the ordinary folk, will you? But they won't stand down unless I tell them. They are my people — like family to me. Just as I would never betray them, they won't betray me."

An ugly smile touched her lips.

"My children were birthed in the Rukon," she added coldly. "The women of the Rukon were the first people those children met. Women bond in ways you can't understand, Kai-dono, when faced with the ultimate challenge. My husband and I did what your people failed to do. We fed and clothed them, and kept them alive. You might think them worthless, but I disagree."

"On the contrary, we want to help them," Kai pressed his lips together in frustration, noting how the Rukon citizens had closed in around their leader, preventing a direct assault. "The reason we didn't know they were here is because your husband — as you call him — paid a shinigami to look the other way. If we had found them, we

would've helped them then. You kept them in poverty by concealing them and making them accessories to your crimes."

"Do you really think I'm foolish enough to fall for that rhetoric?" Eiraki snorted, and Kai let out a heavy sigh.

"Where is your son?" he asked softly, and Eiraki's eyes became slits.

"Which son?" she prevaricated. "I h

ave more than one, Kai-dono. Or didn't you know that?"

"I know," Kai said dismissively. "I meant your older son. Katsura, or whatever his name is. The one who manipulates Hollows and assaults Gotei Divisions in his free time. I don't need to know the whereabouts of the other one. He's already in Gotei custody."

"You're lying!" For the first time Eiraki looked rattled, and Kai smiled, shaking his head.

"Kohaku is in the protective custody of the Gotei," he repeated. "Currently, he lives, but the Council have a Kill on Sight order and his life is by no means secure."

"It's a ruse," Eiraki's expression was one of suspicion. "You couldn't catch Koku... you couldn't hold him, even if you thought you had! You don't understand..."

"I understand," Kai broke across her. "Your son has interesting talents, Eiraki-hime, but so do my friends. Kohaku sees the future, doesn't he? He sees pictures of things to come, and sometimes, he makes other people see them, too. I haven't had the fortune to meet the lad myself, but I've heard all about him. A young man barely into adulthood, skin and bone, with brown hair and brown eyes. Not an Endou, nor an Urahara, but something between the two — a genetic match so indistinct you might think that he wasn't your child at all — except that I know that Aizen is a Kyouraku name, and I know the Kyouraku often display those features. Well, does that still sound like a ruse to you? Tell me I haven't just described your second son— the man in my comrade's custody, awaiting final Gotei judgement."

Despite herself, Eiraki blanched, and Kai pushed his advantage home, gesturing to his subordinates to move closer until the area's escape routes were completely blocked off.

"So, here are the terms I've come to put before you," he said conversationally, sheathing Meimei Anshi and folding his arms across his chest. "I'm a Shihouin, and so I never enter a negotiation without a dirty trick or two to make sure things go my way. Your Clan has its

traits, mine has other dark shadows of its own. Kohaku's life is not safe, not at the moment. Right now, he's not guilty of any crime we know about, but that doesn't mean he won't be indicted if you refuse to comply with my instructions now. I don't want to hurt your Rukon satellites. I know they are pawns and not the real villains, and harming them goes against my intentions. Kohaku, on the other hand, is tainted blood. You can stay here and you can resist me all you like, but time is ticking away."

"My husband will get to Koku before you can do anything to him, and then Seireitei will be sorry," the calm mask broken, Eiraki's feral nature was beginning to surface, and Kai shrugged.

"I imagine Keitarou will have enough to be going on with, judging by the fact some pretty powerful opposition is primed and waiting for him in Seireitei," he said, keeping his tones as nonchalant as he could manage. "Your son is injured, though. Weak. Ill. He won't stand a chance without someone protecting him. I can provide that protection. I have the influence to do it. I can ensure your son lives through this... but in return, I want to take you back with me. I want you to surrender yourself to me, Eiraki-hime, and come back without a fight. Your life for Kohaku's. A guilty life for an innocent. As a mother, will you let your son die to preserve your own life?"

"Do you think you can really stop my husband?"

"I know we can," Kai knew he was outright lying now, but he kept going all the same. "The spy that you have in the Gotei is a double-agent and has been secretly feeding the Onmitsukidou information since your children first killed officers in the Spiritless Zone."

"You're lying!"

"Am I?" Kai offered her a benign smile. "Well, if so, answer me this. If your spy wasn't also my spy, how did I know to come here to find you today, when Keitarou set such a nice paper trail to the Real World in order to convince us that you were all hiding out there?"

He fumbled at his belt for a pair of spirit cuffs, holding his left hand out to his companion.

"If you surrender to me, I promise you that I will do what I can to repeal the Kill on Sight order and ensure your son lives," he said softly. "Even Shihouin have honour of a sort, Eiraki-hime. I can't promise you your life. I suspect that it's forfeit, and I know, so do you. But Kohaku, I can speak for. Kohaku has killed nobody. Kohaku I can save. *If* you cooperate with me now."

Eiraki's eyes narrowed to slits, as though considering his words, and for a while Kai was not sure that his ruse had succeeded. After a while, however, she let out a heavy sigh, raising her hands and spreading them to disperse the gathered Rukongai citizens.

"Eiraki-sama?" One of the nearest men looked anxious, and Eiraki shook her head.

"Go back to your homes," she said softly. "Go back there and wait. It will be all right. You'll see."

Slowly, and not without hesitation, the men and women drew back, lowering their weapons and dispersing in the direction of the local settlement, until Eiraki was left alone in the middle of the green area. She bent for a moment, resting a hand on the disturbed earth, and Kai saw her lips move silently, as though conveying a message to the grave's occupant. Then she stood, and, with very bad grace, held out her hands. Kai tossed the spirit cuffs to Karaki, who took them, moving to confine the prisoner, and though there was mutiny and murder in the girl's pale blue eyes, she did not resist his touch against her skin.

Kai let out his breath in a rush.

"Saku, I want you to take charge of Eiraki-hime when we return to the Real World. Whatever her crimes, she remains a *hime* of blood and ought to be attended by a female officer," he said wearily. "Karaki, I want you to help make sure that she doesn't slip our hold on the way back to the Gate. Don't be too rough with her. She has surrendered to us and we will treat her as a surrendered prisoner ought to be treated. She has not yet faced trial for her crimes, and we aren't the ones passing judgement on her today."

Karaki clicked his tongue against his teeth in obvious disappointment, but he nodded, and, flanked by the two officers, Eiraki was led away towards the main town thoroughfare.

Kai lingered behind for a moment, glancing up at the sky.
Well, Ukitake. Well, Kyouraku. This is one for you, as your hunch was right on the money. I only hope I'm in time. The sun's moved again, and I've no idea what might have happened in Seireitei in my absence. I bluffed a lot about Keitarou and the spy, but I don't know for sure what will happen when he descends on our home. The fact he's not here means he's almost certainly arrived there. Let's just hope that having Eiraki-hime in custody will turn the scale if it comes down to a matter of hostage negotiation. There's still a son whose whereabouts is unaccounted for, and even if I'm willing to give up the chase for Suzuki, the older Aizen boy is

still a concern. Still, I can't risk waiting around for him to try and rescue his mother. All I can do is go back — and just hope that its enough.

70. Nemesis

Chapter Sixty Eight: Nemesis

It was no illusion.

The slim figure pulled himself cautiously up into the branches of a nearby tree, tucking himself up against the trunk and leaning his head back against the wood, closing his eyes. The fragments of reiatsu were distant and faint, probably nonexistent to one who didn't know what they were sensing, but to him they were a beacon, sending out a signal loud and clear.

Kohaku had decided to use his power.

Katsura let out a heavy sigh, opening his eyes in resignation. Absently his hand went to his chest, touching the ribs that Mitsuki had healed using Yuuyugo's release so many days before. They were still tender to the touch, but his body had mended and quicker than he had expected it to. The shinigami would probably keep searching for him, but he had not sensed any of them on his trail in the last forty eight hours and, at last, he had begun to think he could relax.

Then, that day, he had sensed his brother's spirit rise, and he knew that the game was on.

His lips thinned, his gaze drifting across the skyline towards where he could just make out the tallest roofs of the buildings within Inner Seireitei. Nostalgia made him long to try and reach his brother, make contact that one last time, but he knew that it was too dangerous. One hint could give Kohaku the clues to put together Katsura's location and direction of travel, and that would be bad for both of them. Kohaku would not betray him, Katsura knew that, but the knowledge would put his younger brother in danger again, and that was something he did not want. Mitsuki had not given him back his life to chase after the past. She had given it to him in the hope he would craft a new future, and that future would be far away from anyone and anything he had known before, even, perhaps, living under a different name.

Aizen Katsura would have to disappear, and that meant maintaining the severance of ties with Kohaku, even though it hurt.

He sighed again, lowering his hand from his chest. Though he was far from the action, he knew only too well what was taking place. He

had seen it, many times before, in his younger brother's thoughts and dreams. Slowly he turned his mind back to the first few weeks and months of their acquaintance. He had gone almost daily to the little hut that had been his brother's home, reaching out to him through the bars. Keitarou had told him that Kohaku had not spoken a single word until he had met Katsura, and that had always given the older boy a sense of warmth and pride. Kohaku's first word had been, "Oniichan", and it had been the cementing of a bond which had gone both ways and on many different levels. Kohaku had seen the world outside through Katsura's memories, but Katsura had seen something else... things he had never discussed with anyone, not even Kohaku himself.

And now, with the fragments of his brother's reiatsu dispersing on the wind, Katsura knew that the time had come.

He smiled, a sad, bittersweet smile.

Like I said to Mitsuki, my colours and yours are nailed to different masts. I don't hold it against you, Koku-kun. Perhaps I should. Perhaps I never should have let us become close in the first place — or maybe I should have told you the things I saw in my nightmares, the days before we met. I didn't know about you, then. It wasn't till later that I knew those were pieces of the puzzle, and as time passed, I'd see more of them. Still, at least it means I don't have to wonder about how it ends. I don't have to ask how it happened... because I've always known.

He reached up to the branch over his head, pulling himself up yet higher and disturbing some nesting birds as he found himself a better viewpoint, seeing the faint tendrils of smoke hazing over Inner Seireitei.

This was the reason you were born. I don't know if Father realised, and just didn't talk about it, or if he didn't, but I did. As I got older, I knew only too well. I didn't lie when I said I wanted you to have a life in Seireitei, little brother. I didn't lie, because I believed you were destined to have it. Bit by bit, I've understood everything. Floating between life and death, before Mitsuki healed me, a lot of old images came back to the forefront of my mind, potent answers to questions I'd forgotten and conversations from long, long ago. Well, Father wanted you to use your power to change this world, and I suppose you will. Or, probably, you already are. In this way, and this way alone, you are like Father. You've found the tools you need to help you complete your goals, just like he does whenever he releases Chudokuga.

He let out his breath in a rush, tears glittering on his lashes.

Stay safe, little brother. For your sake, I pray we never meet again. They'll look after you, Mitsuki and her friends — you belong with them, more than you ever did anywhere else. I'll miss you, and I hope you'll miss me, but it

will be all right. So long as we're both still alive... that's what counts.

"I'm surprised at you,"

In the debris-scattered rear courtyard of the Third Division, Shunsui spread the scimitar blades of his *zanpakutou*, casting his opponent a pensive glance. Keitarou stood only a matter of feet away, the grey cloak flapping against the rough black fabric of his *hakama* and an unreadable expression on his clever features. Clashed in his hand was Chudokuga's hilt, the sword's blade glittering with an eerie light, and though he had never faced the weapon in any kind of release before, Shunsui knew that his companion had consciously put the sword into shikai. Not a single word had passed Keitarou's lips, an indication of the level of attack of which his sword was capable, but there was no mistaking the intent in the older man's aura.

"I had thought you didn't engage in face to face combat, not on the normal level," Shunsui continued now, flexing his fingers around the hilts of first Amaki, then Seibara's blades and feeling the prickles of energy that resonated from them. "I should consider this an honour, I suppose."

"I am not a soldier. I never trained that way," Keitarou glanced at Chudokuga's glittering surface with a sigh. "Perhaps you think that makes me unable to defend my life or my cause — but you'll soon realise that's a misnoma. I do have offensive abilities with this sword, Kyouraku Shunsui. And if pushed, I can use them."

"Everything about your sword is offensive to me, so that's no surprise at all," Shunsui's expression twitched into a humourless smile. "I saw Suzuno-chan's body, twenty six years ago, when you decided to use that to impale her through the throat and the heart. I've wanted to ask you for a long time... did you do that to spite me, because I wounded you, or out of some sick fetish of your own for shedding a young woman's blood?"

"A sick fetish?" Keitarou stared, then let out a chuckle, shaking his head in clear amusement. "Perhaps you're confusing me with someone else. Yourself, maybe. I know you have quite a reputation with the ladies of District Eight... which was quite informative for me when I was looking for the illegitimate offspring of your father. Seems some things ran in the Kyouraku family... so I can see why you'd take that opinion."

His lips thinned, his eyes becoming cold.

"But you're wrong on both counts," he said softly. "You weren't

important enough then for me to care about spiting you by killing your friend, nor was she important enough for me to let her live. She served her purpose, and when she had done so, I disposed of her. Witnesses are bad things when you have bigger plans. The fault was hers... nobody asked her to intervene.”

“She was a good person who chose to help the wrong man,” somehow Shunsui kept a hold on his temper at this callous observation, knowing that Keitarou was deliberately baiting him in order to make him act rashly. “She didn’t deserve to die for that mistake, nor did Naoko-chan deserve to suffer under your control.”

“Naoko-chan, too?” Keitarou arched an eyebrow. “Suzuno-chan, then Naoko-chan? It seems your fondness for a pretty young girl hasn’t faded any with age... maybe I should’ve been searching District Eight for *your* illegitimate offspring, not your father’s. I’d wager, judging by your reputation in the sleaziest parts of the local towns, that there must be quite an army of little Kyouraku bastards running around.”

“Perhaps there are,” Again, Shunsui kept a hold on his temper, though it was a fight. “Perhaps I’ve been secretly training them into an army to destroy you and yours. You can bait me all you like, Keitarou, but I’m not going to rise to your barbs. I didn’t come here to discuss my past with you. I came here to kill you — which I think you know full well.”

“I do,” Keitarou’s sword glittered, the blade separating into threads of steel which wavered and twisted above the hilt as though drawn there by invisible strings. They shimmered with light, like threads of a spider’s web, and Shunsui knew at once that it was these fine threads which had taken Suzuno’s life all those years before.

“Yes, you see, my sword isn’t just a puppeteer,” Keitarou followed Shunsui’s glance, nodding his head. “This is just a shikai attack, but its the shikai attack of a sword which has Bankai. A Bankai that once controlled your dear friend, Juushirou, and which has made countless people kill and die. You shouldn’t underestimate a man who prefers to fight in the shadows... I know you control the shadows, if you want to, so this time, I’ll fight in plain sight.”

He swung his arm down, and the threads disappeared completely from Shunsui’s vision. A whistle of air past his cheek, however, followed by the sensation of pain and the cold trickle across his skin told him that they had done nothing of the sort. He raised his sleeve, wiping his cheek on the clean white fabric and coming away with a smear of blood. Keitarou chuckled.

“That was just a test run, to show you that I’m not the neutered force you believe,” he said quietly. “My threads aren’t easy to see, not when they release like that. My spirit power benefitted quite unexpectedly in a lot of ways from ingesting *reidoku* twenty five years ago. My legs may not be as strong as they once were, but my ability to fight is much improved. The threads of my sword are now more or less invisible, even to the keenest eyes. There are hundreds of them, and they are sharper than needles. They can run you through before you even have time to react. Maybe even penetrate the fine blades of your *zanpakutou*. Katen Kyoukotsu, I believe it was called?”

He twitched the hilt of his weapon, sending the threads skimming through the air once more, and Shunsui hopped back, swinging his left blade up to meet the main thrust of the attack just in time to prevent it searing through his *haori* to the heart and lungs beneath. At first he thought he had cut through the offending threads, but as he tried to lower Seibara’s weapon, he felt a little tug of resistance. He cast Keitarou a sharp glance, seeing the smile that had now crossed the scientist’s face. With another tug, Seibara was yanked free from his grip, careening through the air and landing with a deep thud in between Nagesu’s cobbles.

“I told you not to underestimate me,” Keitarou observed lightly, giving the hilt of his sword a little shake, and Shunsui saw a faint slither of light slide across Seibara’s blade, as his enemy withdrew the puppet threads that had separated them. “One sword down. Now it’s a fairer fight, don’t you think?”

“I don’t think you understand the meaning of the words, fair fight,” Shunsui gathered his wits, gauging the distance that separated him from his missing sword. “I don’t need two swords to fight a man with no proper training. Also, you won’t use that skill again. I know it, now. I can act against it.”

“Can you?” Keitarou arched his eyebrows. “Can you fight against a technique you can’t see? At this rate, I’ll not even need to try my Bankai on you. You disappoint me so far, Shunsui-dono. Or is it that you can’t fight me without the shadows to walk around in?”

He gestured with his left hand.

“Here is in full sun,” he observed. “There’s very little gloom for you to work with. Maybe your choice of battlefield neutered *your* ability to attack. That would be an irony, wouldn’t it? If I defeated you because you decided to fight me here.”

“It’s more ironic to hear a scientist predicting results without

accurate evidence to support his hypothesis,” Shunsui said blackly. “Enough talking. I know you’re stalling for time. This Gate is broken, and you can’t do anything until Nagesu-sama and the others return. You don’t want to fight me, so you’re toying with me, trying to play out as much time as you can so you can effect some kind of escape and turn tables back in your favour. I’m not stupid — I know what you have planned. Unfortunately I’m not in the mood to sit back and take things slowly, not today.”

“Then you’d better improve your game, because I can continue my plans over your dead body if need be,” Keitarou returned calmly. “There isn’t a single *Senkaimon* in Inner Seireitei whose location I don’t know and whose technology I can’t appropriate. Nagesu was foolish, basing so much on my work. It gave me a key to whatever door I choose to open. This one might be broken, but it’s far from the only pathway. If you really want to stop me, you need to up your game.”

“Game, huh?” Shunsui pursed his lips, and he nodded his head. “All right. But you might regret it. You should be careful what you wish for... it’s dangerous to attack an opponent you don’t fully understand.”

“That goes both ways,” Keitarou flicked his arm in Shunsui’s direction once more, sending the needle-sharp threads flying across the air between them once more. Though he could not see them, this time Shunsui knew that they were aimed for his right blade, in order to fully disarm him, and he snorted, shaking his head.

“I told you, twice won’t work on me,” he said categorically, passing his sword from his right to his left hand and giving it a little tap with his right thumb. It began to spin around in a circle, faster and faster, and Shunsui pressed his right palm to the back of the blade, muttering the words to the incantation.

“*Hadou no Gojuu Hachi, Tenran!*” he exclaimed, and a whirl of air burst out from Amaki’s spinning blade, swirling outwards in a perfectly controlled miniature tornado. Broken pieces of charred wood and mangled metal were sent clattering across the yard, and Keitarou cursed, pulling back his sword’s attack before the barbs could fly out of control and get caught and tangled together. Taking advantage of his opponent’s momentary distraction, Shunsui slipped into shunpo, re-materialising alongside Seibara’s sword and scooping it up in his right hand. Deftly he swapped the weapons over, casting the annoyed Keitarou a benign grin.

“Sometimes having one sword gives options that having two

doesn't," he said lightly. "I told you, I learn fast. Once, you might take me off guard, but twice, it's not going to happen. You'll have to find another way to tackle me... or didn't you know that I was trained in *all* the arts of a shinigami, not just to fight with a sword?"

"I know you're a nuisance and you've always been one," Keitarou's expression darkened, his fingers running absently through the separated threads as though protecting them, though Shunsui wondered whether he was in fact untangling them. "I should have killed you a long time ago."

"You're assuming that you would have been able to," Shunsui said evenly. "You tried, unless I miss my guess. Turned my best friend on me. Sacrificed the life of a perfectly innocent shinigami officer the second time. Today you turned another friend against me, but still you failed. Perhaps you just *can't* kill me, Keitarou. Perhaps that's just how it goes."

"I hope you don't think I'm fool enough to fall for that," Keitarou whipped his arm down suddenly, acting at speed in order to take Shunsui off guard, but the Eighth Captain's reflexes were primed and ready now, and he leapt back, swinging first his left then his right blade across in front of him to stir up the morass of *reiryoku* and broken *reishi*.

"*Bushougoma!*" he exclaimed, and both swords cut neat arcs through the air, creating curves of energy that spun out like the blades of a propellor. The sudden thrusts of energy knocked Keitarou backwards, the man only just managing to keep his footing on his damaged leg. For the first time Shunsui could see clearly the threads that led back to the sword, the thicker blasts of air having made them easier for him to see. Darting forward, he sliced Seibara's blade through the ones he could reach, and the fibres fell like locks of cut hair onto the cobbles below. He swung Amaki's sword forth to repeat the exercise with the right hand threads, but Keitarou had seen the danger and he pulled back again, disappearing into *shunpo* and rematerialising on the other side of the damaged *Senkaimon*. In the process of doing so, he had re-sealed his blade into one sword and, though a good section of the left side was cut away, Shunsui realised that a substantial amount of its spiritual form still remained.

"Clever," Keitarou gave Chudokuga a little shake, casting his opponent a rueful look. "I see you've learned to play with wind as well as shadow since last we met. Maybe I shouldn't be surprised, since the Clans are always so full of hot air."

"With that level of flattery, I'm amazed you never thought to enter

Court society,” Shunsui returned lazily. “I told you already that I’m not interested in a fight that simply kills time. If you’re done prancing around with spider webs, I’d like to start a real fight now, please.”

“And give you the advantage? You must think I’m simple.”

“Deluded, actually, but there’s probably a fine line,” Shunsui tapped his swords pensively against each other, then, “all right, then I have another suggestion. I realise that, if we carry on like this, time will tick by. You’ll keep trying to stall me, and that doesn’t suit me at all. But I know you’re smart. Too smart to be lured into a battle of blades without any proper training.”

“True,” Keitarou’s eyes were wary, “but your praise obviously comes with a catch. If you think you can sweet-talk me and take me by surprise...”

“No, I don’t think that,” Shunsui shook his head. “I don’t underestimate you as an opponent, Keitarou. The people you’ve killed, all of them have underestimated you. Even Juushirou did, at first, and it almost cost him dear. I’m not that naive. I know that, even if you’re stalling for time, the first chance you get to kill me, you’ll take. But you haven’t released your Bankai on me, which makes me think you know it won’t work. Perhaps that’s something your spy told you — or maybe it was your prophet, seeing pictures that hadn’t yet come to be. I don’t know... I don’t have those sources at my disposal, so I’m only guessing. What I do know is that, if you really thought you could make a puppet of me, you’d have done it by now. Your stalling for time indicates that you’re not sure what will happen if you use it... your use of your shikai tells me you don’t want to take that risk. Maybe, too, you’re hoping someone will come to find out what’s going on here, and you can use *them* to fight me instead of facing me yourself.”

“Say you’re right,” Keitarou said slowly. “Say there’s even a grain of truth in what you’re telling me — so?”

“So for me, the hardest kind of opponent to fight is one who avoids engaging directly,” Shunsui admitted. “And, as I’ve learned from your sword attack, so you’ve probably learned from mine. I doubt that I could use my shadow technique to hurt you now, because I’ve done it once before. You’ve taken precautions against it. Even *Bushougoma*... now you’ve seen it, almost certainly you’d be ready for it the next time. I can keep throwing my attacks at you, but you will just learn how to evade them until Nagesu-sama returns. This is a stalemate that suits neither one of us.”

“If time passes and my cousin returns, it suits me fine,” Keitarou pointed out, and Shunsui shook his head.

“You forget, I have your son,” he warned, and Keitarou sighed, looking irritated.

“If you even think you can kill Koku...” he began, but Shunsui held up his hand to cut his opponent off.

“I’m not going to debate with you, since we both know I can,” he said softly. “I’m offering you fair terms, which you ought to pay attention to. I’m inviting you to play a game with me. Winner takes all.”

“A game?” Keitarou’s fingers were already glittering with Kidou light, as though preparing to put a barrier around his body, but Shunsui nodded, offering him a nonchalant smile.

“My sword isn’t all about shadows and light. It’s a part of it, but not all of it,” he replied. “I think you realise that, though — I’d be surprised if you hadn’t. Katen Kyoukotsu’s true nature is to make a game out of life and death. The games my sword initiates are won and lost on strategic thinking, as much as spiritual skill. My sword is unforgiving, Keitarou, and it doesn’t show me any bias. If a game begins, it only ends when someone is dead. That person can be me, if you can figure out the rules of the game and utilise them more quickly than I can.”

“You might be lying to me,” Keitarou pointed out, and Shunsui nodded.

“I might,” he agreed matter-of-factly. “But you have to remember that now, I know your shikai, and I can defend against it. I know your Bankai, and am, probably, not susceptible to it. You’re running out of options and your son’s life is at stake. You wanted a fair fight... this is the only way you’re likely to get it. It’s a gamble, trusting me. It’s a gamble, agreeing to my terms. But can you afford to take any other chances? This is probably the only opportunity you have to kill me — if you think your intelligence is up to it.”

“You’re baiting me, now,” Keitarou looked weary, but he nodded his head. “I see your logic, however. You’re right... I don’t want to use my Bankai here, not on you, not when I might have to use it somewhere else. I don’t know what would happen, but Chudokuga has made it very clear to me that trying it would be a big mistake. I don’t usually gamble on other people’s terms, but this entire battle is a gamble on my part. My son’s life is also not disposable. I’ll play your game, Kyouraku Shunsui. You are smart, but you are not smarter than

me.”

“Probably not,” Shunsui acknowledged, lifting Amaki’s blade and bringing it down between them in a smooth curve. “But once the game begins, the only way out is when somebody dies. You’re bound by the rules of the game, and so am I. There’s no cheating. No ducking and diving. We’re on equal terms, Keitarou. From this point until one of us is defeated. *Irooni*.”

As he spoke the last word, Amaki and Seibara’s blades glimmered faintly with an ominous light, and Shunsui knew that his swords had accepted the challenge. A lump surfaced in his throat, and he swallowed hard, hoping that Keitarou could not see the apprehension that coursed through his veins.

He had never used this technique before in battle. He had trained with it, long and hard, and he understood it in theory, but in practice, it had never been practicable. This was a gamble for Keitarou, but it was also a gamble for him... trying to outsmart a genius with his own life firmly on the line.

I promised Koku.

He frowned, hardening his resolve.

I promised Koku I’d put an end to it. I promised him I’d make sure of everything he asked. He’s followed through on his side. Now I need to follow through on mine, otherwise... it doesn’t bear thinking about. Whatever the costs of this fight, I can’t let Keitarou leave here alive.

“*Irooni*?” Keitarou echoed the game’s name, looking derisive. “Colour demon? Is that the game?”

“It is,” Shunsui rallied himself, offering his companion a sweet smile. “I’m generous, and I’ll let you go first. You swing at me, and name a colour. That’s all it is. Simple, don’t you think?”

“Name a colour?” Keitarou’s brows knitted together. “And you won’t take a pot shot at me while I do?”

“It’s a chance you take,” Shunsui shrugged, “but it all depends on the game. I could try to cut off your head, but if it’s not the right colour, you wouldn’t even be scratched. I told you. We’re bound by the rules of the game, now. There’s no cheating Katen Kyoukotsu. Your turn. Play.”

Keitarou’s eyes had widened at this explanation, and then he pursed his lips, a look of comprehension flooding his features.

“I see,” he murmured. “The colour is the weapon, not the blade. Whatever sword I hold, or however many you have, the colour is what

does the damage. That's why you say it's strategy... very well. In which case, I choose the colour, white."

He slashed his blade down towards his opponent, who hopped back, tut-tutting.

"Wrong answer," he murmured, spreading his weapons to reveal his unharmed body, the edge of his *haori* nicked by the edge of Keitarou's blade, but not enough to draw any blood. "White is a good colour, sometimes, but it isn't the right colour for you to defeat me. My turn now, Keitarou. Grey,"

He darted forward, swinging Seibara's point aggressively up towards Keitarou's body, and despite himself, the scientist flinched, attempting to pull out of the way. His attempt was too slow, for Shunsui pushed into shunpo, his blade raking across the entirety of Keitarou's upper body. The scientist let out a gasp, then his expression became one of shock and disbelief, for although the weapon should have penetrated deep into the bone, shattering his shoulderblades and piercing into his lungs, there was not the slightest sign of a wound. Instead, the sharp weapon sliced away the fabric of Keitarou's old grey cloak, causing it to flap and hang helplessly against his body. Shunsui was still in range, and Keitarou drove his own weapon up, hoping to catch his companion on the break, but Chudokuga's malformed blade glanced harmlessly off Shunsui's *haori*-covered shoulder, leaving not even the slightest of impressions. The next moment the opportunity was gone, for Shunsui retreated back into shunpo, re-materialising atop a broken section of *Senkaimon*.

"You see, it's not such an easy game to play," he observed lightly. "I can cut you in half at close range, but if Katen Kyoukotsu doesn't like it, it won't win me the game. Your play, Keitarou. It's your colour. You call."

Keitarou's eyes narrowed, and he reached up with his free left hand, pulling away the remains of his damaged cloak and tossing it onto the ground. Shunsui's eyes darted to it briefly, his heart leaping in his chest, but he said nothing, merely waiting for his opponent to reason out his next move. Everything now depended on Keitarou's judgement. He had taken a risk, but it had been a risk he needed to take. Still, his pulse echoed in his ears, for he knew that, in a matter of moments, he could kill or be killed.

"If you have time to rearrange your clothing, let me have a moment to put my *haori* back together," he called, injecting false levity into his tone. "Like this it'll catch against my sword arm when I try to move — and now you've seen that the game doesn't allow me any special

favours, it's not as though I can take a shot at you while your guard is down."

"Clansfolk," Keitarou snorted, but he acknowledged the request with a flick of his hand. "Do what you like. You're the one who said you were in a hurry. The longer this game goes on, the better for me." *Except that, if we're still playing this game by the time they return, there's a good chance you can't break it and go after them with your Bankai, because that'll be breaking the rules.*

Shunsui's eyes narrowed to slits at this, sliding Amaki's blade beneath his left arm and using his right to pull the flaps of his *haori* closed over the uniform beneath. It was a calculated risk, for he felt certain that the next round would be decisive, and he would have only one chance to play his wildcard. Smoothing down the jagged edge of the fabric, he glanced briefly at his body, noticing how much of the black *shihakushou* now showed through. With relief, he realised that it was almost completely covered by the fall of the white cloth, and he thanked his lucky stars that Tokutarou had selected a *haori* design with long sleeves, not with short, when he had been preparing for the opening of Eighth Division.

That decision may just save my life, Oniisama. And more, maybe the whole of Seireitei. I'll have to buy you some special sake... if I live to see the end of this fight.

"All right, I'm done," he said now, taking Amaki back in his right hand and folding his arms across his chest so that the *haori* remained closed. "Your move. Go."

"You said that this was about strategy, not about physical attack, didn't you?" Keitarou glanced at his weapon, then thoughtfully back at Shunsui. "I called white, but it failed. You called grey, but it failed. All we did was damage each other's clothing. So those aren't the right answer... and I think I know why. Only, if I'm right about this, there's a considerable amount of risk on both sides. There's only one colour that we're both wearing in quantity, Shunsui-dono... which makes me think that that's the colour which wins the game."

"Maybe you're right," Shunsui's heart skipped another beat, but somehow he kept his voice level. "Talking about it won't test the theory, though. Acting on it will."

"Fine," Keitarou clicked his tongue against his teeth. "That's what I'll do, if you're so keen to die. Black."

He launched forward, driving his sword towards Shunsui's upper body, and instinctively Shunsui tensed, raising his weapons although

he knew that he could not defend against the swing that way. Hunching his arms together, he said a silent prayer that his gamble had paid off, and that he had not miscalculated the true nature of his sword's game.

There was a sharp sensation, as Chudokuga buried itself in his body, and Shunsui closed his eyes, but there was no immediate burning pain, and he heard a curse, as Keitarou drew back, clearly discomfited. He opened one eye, seeing the scientist glancing at the clean blade of the sword in obvious bewilderment, and he drew a breath into his lungs, trying to settle himself. The time had come, and he could not falter. He had played the game by the right rules and he could win... but only if he was able to make the final, decisive move.

"My turn," he said softly, raising Seibara and flinging it across the courtyard, in the opposite direction of his companion's body. Keitarou started, staring at the discarded blade, then back at Shunsui with a rising sense of disbelief.

"Why would you lose a sword at this point in the game?" he demanded. "Why didn't my sword cut you, when you said that there were fixed rules? Black is the only colour we're both wearing. I'm sure I'm not wrong... so why didn't I cut you? You said this was a fair game... if you lied to me..."

"I didn't lie," Shunsui slid his left arm through the sleeve of his *haori*, tossing Amaki's blade into his left hand before repeating the exercise on the right. The *haori* fluttered harmlessly to the ground behind him, revealing him in his full shinigami *shihakushou*, and at the sight of it, Keitarou's eyes widened in sudden dismay. His fingers glittered, as though to release a spell of rejection, but it was too late, for Shunsui was already upon him, Amaki's sword raised with its point upwards, ready to kill.

"Black is the right colour," he said softly, "Your guess was right, only your strategy was wrong."

Amaki's blade made contact with Keitarou's torso at this point, slicing through the flesh and bone. The force of the swing sent the scientist flying across the cobbles, landing with a sickening crack on his back against the base of the old *Senkaimon*, and Shunsui shook the excess blood free from his weapon, advancing on his victim with a sense of resignation.

"You understood my game quickly," he said quietly. "You read it right, and you understood what to do. Only the one thing you didn't realise is that the game changes depending on what you wear. If you

had still worn your cloak, I would not have wounded you as deeply as I know I have. That's why I called grey. I knew it couldn't hurt you, but it could damage your cloak and make you discard it, making your dominant colour, black. And, if I had not been wearing my *haori*, you would've killed me outright with your last swing. I covered my body with it so that, as far as the game was concerned, I was white. Your attack failed, because it couldn't cut through to the black and my body beneath. When I removed my *haori*, I became black, too. The greatest damage is inflicted on a colour which puts you at the greatest risk. You were right, you just didn't see all of the parameters of managing that risk. Like I said, *Irooni* is a game of strategy, not of strength, but the strategy begins from the very first round. You lost the game, Keitarou... and so, your life."

"I should... have known... that a man... with your... licentious... reputation... would have... a skill... that relies... on striptease," Keitarou's words were gasped out, and Shunsui knew that he had perforated a lung. He nodded.

"They say our swords reflect our nature," he agreed evenly. "I'm sorry for it, though. I take no pleasure from doing this, no matter how much I hate you. Unlike you, I'm not happy about taking life."

"That... makes you... the fool," Keitarou coughed, blood dribbling from the corner of his mouth, and Shunsui's grip on his blade tightened as he debated whether or not to put the man out of his misery once and for all. "I knew... one day... if I didn't kill you... you would kill me. I knew... but still... when the prize... is big... the gambles... are all... worthwhile."

"Even if you lose everything on one game?" Shunsui asked, and Keitarou snorted.

"I haven't," he whispered hoarsely. "I've seen the future... Shunsui-dono. Even if I don't... see it with... my eyes... I have... seen it... all. Even if I die... it doesn't... stop with... me."

"And if I kill Koku, then it stops?" Shunsui demanded. Keitarou coughed again, shaking his head.

"You can't... stop it," he taunted. "It's... already too late. The... seeds are... sown. If not... this battle... then... a later... war. Maybe... if I'm lucky... I'll see it then... when I come... to be reborn. The future... is in... my blood... and... its also... in yours."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Shunsui was unnerved now, but Keitarou merely offered him a smile. Lifting a shaking right hand, he grasped hold of Amaki's blade, then, with a quick, decisive thrust,

he pulled the sharp edge of the weapon down, slicing through his throat. Blood spurted from the wound, and, as the scientist's eyes glazed over, Shunsui shook his weapon free from the pale grasp, gazing down at the corpse with mixed emotions.

The future is in your blood and in mine. What does that mean? What has he seen? Something in that young lad of Juushirou's? Is he our enemy, after all? Have I killed the father only to make room for the son to come and take his place?

He set Amaki down on the ground, kneeling at Keitarou's side to close the man's eyes with the edge of his hand. Now the pressure of the confrontation was off, he felt nauseated, spots dancing before his eyes at the true graphic nature of his opponent's injuries, but he held the feeling in check. Instead he moved to loosen Chudokuga from Keitarou's failing grip, noting how the surface had dulled as Keitarou's *reiryoku* had slipped out of it. The edge of the blade had already taken on a brittle appearance, and he laid it gently across his victim's bloody chest.

A dead man's sword should die with him, and even an evil man and an evil sword deserve that.

He let out a heavy sigh, retrieving his right blade and getting reluctantly to his feet, walking across to where Seibara was lodged between two round cobblestones. Going to pick it up, he hesitated, then raised Amaki's blade instead, thrusting it into the ground alongside its sister. Ignoring the protests of his *zanpakutou* at this rough treatment, he turned his back on the weapon that had helped sever Keitarou's life, instead crossing the ground to where his discarded *haori* still lay in the dust. Picking it up from the ground, he cast it a pensive glance, fingering the sliced fabric where Chudokuga's blade had cut through. He did not attempt to put it back on, instead draping it over the remains of the *Senkaimon* as he reconsidered the conversation he had had with Kohaku.

"My father wants to kill everyone in Seireitei, and he has a strategy that will succeed in doing it," the young boy had said, his voice shaking and his eyes intense and full of emotion. "He knew the Gotei would never send all its troops to one location and leave Seireitei vulnerable, so he took advantage of that fact. He split your forces so that he could launch his attack in waves. He'll create confusion by attacking Inner Seireitei, then, when the other Captains return, he'll use Chudokuga to turn them into his weapons. Ukitake-dono won't be killed in the first attack, but the second wave... that's when it will all become worse. Father has no grudge against District shinigami, but he can't control Ukitake-dono, so he'll want to kill him and I know that the people in Thirteenth wouldn't just deliver their Captain and stand

by and watch that happen. Because of that, in the second wave of attack, Thirteenth will be decimated to a man by one of Father's puppet Captains. The other puppets will rip apart the other Divisions, including your own, and everyone they find will be slain. I can't promise allies of yours won't be killed, Kyouraku-dono, even if you work with me to prevent that kind of massacre. I know there will be lives lost and there's nothing I can do to prevent it. But if you don't want everyone you care about to be dead, then you have to kill my father before he can release Chudokuga a second time."

"And you're all right with me killing your father?" Shunsui had demanded, and Kohaku had drawn a shaky breath into his lungs, meeting his companion's gaze with a look of genuine anguish.

"I love my father very much," he had whispered. "I love him, and every word I speak now is treason against him — something a son should never do to a father. I'm a terrible person, Kyouraku-dono, and I don't expect you to believe me or to trust a man who can betray his own father — but I don't want to see innocent people die. It doesn't just end with those here in Inner Seireitei. Death is never an isolated event, it always has a knock on effect on something or someone. If the shinigami here are killed, then there's nobody to protect the Districts. Nobody to kill Hollows. Nobody to govern. There'll be chaos. Famine. Huge swathes of suffering that can be prevented. Children starving, mothers dying of disease, fathers fighting over every scrap of food to feed their family. Nobody will ever go and rescue the souls in Rukongai. The balance of the world will fall apart, and it will be the end. My Father believes he can change the world, but he doesn't realise that he will destroy it first. I can't let anyone else die, not if their lives can be protected. And I don't want to see Ukitake-dono killed because he's believed in me all this time. The new world Father believes in creating... is a world only people like Ukitake-dono can create."

"And I'm the only one who can kill Keitarou? Nobody else?"

"Only you," Kohaku had confirmed sadly. "Nobody else. If you're killed, Kyouraku-dono, then it's all over. I'm not just going to sit back and let things happen. I know Father will go to the Gate at Third Division to wait for the returning Gotei members, and if I can, I'll destroy the Gate. I'll break his hold over as many people as I'm able, but I don't know how much strength I will have, or if Gotei shinigami will stop me. I can't do anything until Father brings me my sword, but I'm not fully recovered from my injury and even with that, I might not be able to make a huge difference. It might be you will have to kill friends who can't be saved, and I'm sorry for that. Just... what I made

you see..is a fragment of the reality. I wish I could make you see more, but I can't. What I've given you will have to do."

"If Keitarou dies, that reality goes away?"

"If Father is stopped, then yes, there will be peace," Kohaku's expression had been troubled, but he had nodded. "If I live through it, perhaps, there will be peace for longer. I'm not sure about it, Kyouraku-dono. Kyouka won't let me see all the things I want to see, and I don't even know if I should see them, anyway. But I think... so long as Father is stopped... then this time, the war will be over."

Shunsui gazed up now at the damaged *Senkaimon*, perching on the edge of a piece of damaged rubble as he watched his dusty, blood-specked *haori* flutter in the breeze, and inside him, a sense of conviction began to take form..

I'm going to trust your word, kid. I hope that you did live through this, so that I can ask you the things your Father didn't want to tell me. Maybe from you, I'll get the full truth...

He glanced at the corpse again, a heavy feeling in his heart.
Although maybe, on balance, it's better not to know what the future holds.

"Otousama!"

Across the other side of Soul Society, in the small, makeshift sickroom, Kohaku's eyes suddenly snapped open, the word passing his lips almost before he had known he was going to speak. Though he was back at Thirteenth Division, all that filled his vision was the final image of his father, lying broken and bloody on the cobbles of the Third, and his heart spasmed in his chest, stifling his lungs and making it hard for him to breathe. The thrusts and flows of *reiryoku* in the atmosphere made the air thick and cloying, and he struggled to pull himself into a sitting position, fighting against some invisible force that seemed to weigh heavily on his upper body.

"Koku-kun?"

The voice came from the shadows, startling him out of his dream-state, and he jerked his head up, his eyes wild and frightened as for a moment he could not place the speaker. The next minute, a figure emerged from the shadows of the chamber, and Kohaku's heart steadied briefly as he recognised the Thirteenth Division Captain, his lank white hair loose for once over his shoulders. At the sight of the white *haori*, though, Kohaku's breathing choked in his throat once more. An image of Shunsui's *haori*, fluttering to the ground like a flag

of surrender overwhelmed him, and he gripped at the blankets as the gleaming weapon of Amaki's blade headed straight towards him.

"Koku, it's all right."

Juushirou was beside him now, a reassuring arm on his shoulder, and a soft, soothing voice resonating through the levels of fear and delusion to the raw self beneath. He wasn't at Third Division, he realised dully. He wasn't Keitarou, facing the point of Shunsui's sword, but instead, he was Kohaku, and, somehow, he had made it back from the broken *Senkaimon*, though for the life of him he did not know how. As rationality began to return to him in fits and starts, a great swell of emotion surged up from deep within his body, and he closed his eyes, turning his head away so that Juushirou could not see his face. Tears glittered against his lashes, but he fought fiercely against letting them fall. A son who betrayed his father had no right to cry at his passing, he told himself bitterly, but despite his best attempts, he could not push the feelings aside.

He had not been there to see it, but he had known it all the same. Every flicker of *reiryoku* in the air was like a beacon announcing Keitarou's death, and, as Juushirou gently turned him around so that he could not hide, he opened his eyes, seeing the same understanding in the grave hazel eyes of his companion.

"I'm sorry, Koku-kun," he said softly, and there was no need for him to say what he was apologising for. As he had felt his father's *reiryoku* dispersing in defeat, Juushirou had recognised the spike of Katen Kyoukotsu and had understood what it had meant.

He swallowed hard, his breathing hampered and uneven.

"It's my fault," he whispered. "I'm an evil person, Ukitake-dono. You shouldn't have helped me. You should've left me to die. You shouldn't have brought me back here. I don't belong here."

"Of course it's not..." Juushirou began, but Kohaku shook his head.

"It is," he cut across his companion. "Father's dead, and it's my fault. I made it happen. I killed my father. You should kill me. I can't be forgiven. Father is dead... I can't be forgiven."

His voice rose slightly, as his emotions threatened to wash him away on a wave of hysteria, but Juushirou had seen the danger, and he gave the young man a gentle shake.

"You did nothing," he said firmly. "You have been here, with us. I know you felt what happened, and it's upset you — but Koku, it's not your fault. Magaki Shizuka from the Eighth found you passed out in

the street, and we brought you back here. That's what happened. I swear."

"You don't understand," Kohaku raised plaintive eyes to his protector. "I told Kyouraku-dono... I asked him. I asked him to... to stop... to stop Father. I told him... I saw what happened, and I told him... so that he... could make it true."

Shock and dismay filled Juushirou's expression, and Kohaku lowered his gaze, ashamed.

"I told you, I shouldn't be forgiven," he murmured. "It's not Kyouraku-dono's fault. I made him do it. I told him that if he didn't, you would be killed. I knew he'd act, then. But I didn't want... anyone else to die."

"You're not making any sense," Juushirou settled himself more comfortably at Kohaku's side, and the stray let out a shuddering sigh.

"I saw it, a long time ago," he murmured. "It was why I was born... to stop this from happening. I'd run away, so many times. I could've... but I didn't. I loved my father. I didn't want to betray him, but the longer I didn't, the more people he killed. People I killed, because I didn't stop him. Kyouka said so. He said... that it was my fault."

"Kyouka?" Juushirou asked gently, and Kohaku nodded, his gaze suddenly drawn to the pulsing, glittering weapon that lay on the shelf near the bed.

"Kyouka Raigen," he whispered, and Juushirou's lips thinned.

"That's the name of the sword?" he pressed, and Kohaku nodded again.

"At the *Senkaimon*, he told me," he said vaguely. "There's a castle and he's a mirror, and it was covered in dust... and he said that if I didn't act, and take control of the things I could control, I'd never be able to protect anything. He said that I had to make a decision, so I did. I wanted to prevent more people dying, so I did... what I had to do. I didn't want you to die either, Ukitake-dono. Kyouraku-dono promised that he'd help. He listened to me, and he believed me. Now it's... its over. Just like I asked him to do it, it happened just as I saw. Even though I didn't tell him how... it still happened in the way I knew it would. But now I've killed my father. Like Father made puppets, Ukitake-dono, I made Kyouraku-dono want to kill Father. I made him afraid. I showed him you were dead, and so he did it..."

"But I'm not dead," Juushirou was nonplussed. "I'm not dead, and Koku, I'm sure Shunsui knows that."

“Yes, but if he hadn’t...” Kohaku drew another shaking breath into his lungs, knowing he wasn’t making sense but unable to put the pieces together in a way that would make himself properly understood. “If your friends had come back, everyone would have died. I had to break the Gate, but then... I couldn’t stop Father. And so...”

“Let me get this straight,” Juushirou frowned. “You asked Shunsui to kill Keitarou, because if he didn’t, Keitarou would do something that would’ve resulted in the deaths of a lot more people? People here at Thirteenth, and elsewhere?”

Kohaku sniffled, nodding his head dolefully, and Juushirou bit his lip.

“You chose us over Keitarou’s life?” he asked, clear distress in his tones, and again, Kohaku nodded.

“I wanted to stop people dying,” he murmured. “I didn’t want my father to die, Ukitake-dono, but I knew... there was no way back. Not this time. It was either him. Or. Everything. And... I... couldn’t let him kill *you*. I knew... when he came for me... that he would kill you, if I didn’t act. I thought it, but then, I knew it. I wasn’t going to *let* him kill you, Ukitake-dono, only now I made your friend a murderer and I betrayed my own father and I’m a terrible person who deserves to die!”

With that the tears overwhelmed him, and he buried his head in Juushirou’s shoulder, shaking with the force of his sobs. Momentarily taken aback, Juushirou hugged him tightly, and something in the Captain’s soothing grip reassured the stricken youth. Though he had said terrible things, and done terrible things, there was no judgement or censure in Juushirou’s aura, and Kohaku clung to this fact, afraid to let go of this one anchor in his sea of fear and guilt.

“It will be all right,” At length Juushirou spoke, and Kohaku felt someone pat him on the head. “I’m sorry it happened this way, but Koku, the one to blame isn’t you. You might have seen the future, but you can’t control the actions of people. Your father chose to come here. He chose to hurt my comrades, and take their lives. Shunsui chose to stop him. It wasn’t your fault.”

“But I told him to...” Kohaku’s voice was muffled by the fabric of the *haori*, and Juushirou sighed.

“Maybe you did,” he agreed cautiously, “but you have to know that, a long time ago, someone else told Shunsui that, one day, he might have to take your father’s life. Long, long before you were born,

a man who was Sensei to both of us told Shunsui that he had the kind of sword that might be able to stop Keitarou from causing more pain. Today, he lived up to that expectation. It was his choice, and it was your father's. It wasn't yours. Whatever you saw, whatever you said, this wasn't your fault. Really. It wasn't your fault."

"Why are you still so nice to me, when I made your friend do something so horrible?" Kohaku raised confused brown eyes to his companion, Juushirou's face fuzzy and blurred through the tears. "I don't understand. I don't understand."

"Because I believe in you," Juushirou said simply. "And I gave my word. You're safe here. That's a promise. Mitsuki's gone to get some herbs so she can make you something to help you recover your strength, and when you've had a chance to rest, we'll talk about it all properly. I promise, we will. Right now, though, you've had a shock... and you need to rest."

"I can't... I need to... the Gate at Twelfth..." Kohaku struggled feebly against Juushirou's hold, as shreds of memory resurfaced, but Juushirou shook his head.

"Koku, today you raised your *zanpakutou*," he said gently. "Whether you meant to or not, you did. The toll that takes on a person's body varies, but you need to recover from it, and rest. Whatever happened to the *Senkaimon*, I'm sure we'll work it out, but later. Not right now."

"Juushirou, I handed Magaki-san over to Hikifune-san, and she's helping with... Koku? You're awake?"

The door of the chamber slid back to reveal Mitsuki, a bundle of different medical supplies in her arms, and at the sight of her, Kohaku flinched, burying his head once more in Juushirou's *haori*.

"It's all right, Mitsuki. Come in," he heard Juushirou's voice, then the sound of footsteps. "He's upset, poor kid. I'm sure you realise what's happened, and he knows it too. I think, perhaps, he saw it — and he's rattled as well as exhausted. If you've something he can take, just to help him rest..."

"I have to get to the Gate!" Kohaku struggled again at this, but as he met the kind concern in Juushirou's eyes, he faltered, fresh tears filling his eyes.

"I'm sorry," he murmured, and Juushirou shook his head.

"Making sure you're all right is part of my job, and it's all of Mitsuki's right now," he said gently. "You trust us, don't you? We wouldn't do anything to hurt you, and you're safe here. Let Mitsuki

help you sleep. She'll take the nightmares away, and you'll be able to rest. Then, later, we'll talk. Later... but not now. All right?"

Something in Juushirou's tone killed the last of Kohaku's fight, and he nodded meekly, allowing his companion to set him back against his pillows as Mitsuki carefully mixed the right herbs together to create a sleeping draught. Carefully she put it to his lips, and, at Juushirou's reassuring nod, Kohaku drank, allowing the bitter mixture to run over his tongue and down the back of his throat. Though the medicine could not erase the reality of what had happened, little by little he felt his senses dulling, and, as Mitsuki set the cup aside, he closed his eyes, feeling her pull the blankets up to cover his chest.

"He's had a hard day," faintly he heard her words, genuine concern in her tones. "I'm glad we got him back here, Juushirou. I don't like to think what would've happened if we hadn't."

"Me either, but we've a lot to consider when he wakes," That was Juushirou's response, but it was the last thing Kohaku heard as he sank into comforting, oblivious black.

71. Reflection

Chapter Sixty Nine : Reflection

“That reiatsu was definitely Katen Kyoukotsu.”

As Hirata and Hakubei reached the corner of the junction between Fifth and Fourth Division, Hirata reached out a sudden hand to grab his companion, pulling him back against the wall that separated the two divisions, an anxious look on his face. “Something’s happening up ahead. Third Division, unless I miss my guess. Something involving Shunsui... and a release like that.”

“You think he’s found what we’re looking for?” Hakubei cast his companion a quizzical glance, and Hirata nodded his head. “In that case, why aren’t we heading to his aid? If Keitarou’s at Third Division, and we’re the closest back up... why did you pull me aside like that? You almost yanked me clean over — I had no idea you had so much strength in those skinny arms of yours.”

“I am a Clan leader, Hakubei-dono, even if I’m your sister’s schoolmate and effectively a *kouhai* in terms of Captaincy,” Hirata removed his glasses, rubbing them on the sleeve of his *haori* absently as he closed his eyes, allowing the currents of air rippling around them to translate themselves into a clearer picture of the situation. “As for why we’re stopping here, even Endou have common sense and a modicum of survival instinct.”

“Are you *afraid* of Keitarou?” Hakubei was startled, and Hirata’s eyes snapped open, the glitter of indignation that momentarily crossed the pale gaze the only hint to the hunter that still lurked beneath. He shook his head, returning the spectacles to their place atop his nose.

“I hate him,” he said softly. “More than you can probably understand, Hakubei-dono. You’re a Shiba, and Shiba aren’t capable of hating on that level. You’re lucky it’s that way. Keitarou murdered my grandfather, abducted my sister and ruined her, and through that union was born the assassin who killed my son. No, I’m not afraid of him. As I am now, if I had the chance, I’d blast him cell from cell and limb from limb.”

“Woah there,” Hakubei put his hands up hastily, as the air currents surrounding them suddenly began to whip up speed. “I don’t need to see the Wind Hawk, so take it as my ignorant mistake. *I’m damn*

scared of the man, considering what he did to Kanshi and I without us even meeting him, so don't take it as a slight. I have no clue how he got us, or when he did... and that's pretty darn scary, even when you're a grown man with a *haori* and a sword. So being scared, I understand. What I don't understand is why you don't want to advance any further. We were looking for Keitarou, and we both think Shunsui found him. We should go offer back up — three heads are better than one, and this isn't a villain for whom fair fight holds any meaning."

"No, not yet," Hirata shook his head, grasping hold of Hakubei's arm a little tighter this time, his nails digging into the man's arm through the fabric of his uniform. "I said we wait, so we wait. I might be younger than you, but if I have to call Clan and Council rank on this I will, Hakubei-dono. We're not getting involved in this fight."

"Ow! Ow, ow, let go!" Hakubei wrenched his arm free, rubbing it ruefully. "All right, I get the message. We can hold back if you want, but at least explain why we are. If this is the man you hate all that much, why don't you want to go in there and kill him? If that's not why we left Ninth — and after seeing Anabomi, I think killing Keitarou the logical thing we should be doing — then what?"

"It's not Keitarou that bothers me," Hirata shook his head, his gaze flitting back in the direction of Third. "It's Shunsui. Hakubei-dono, have you ever seen Katen Kyoukotsu in release?"

"No, not in combat," Hakubei shook his head. "I think he showed it off once, because of the novelty of his paired blades, but I've never seen Shunsui actually fight. Well, sealed, maybe — but there's never really been a time when..."

He faltered, as a sudden flare of energy ripped through the surroundings, and Hirata's lips set into a grim line. He nodded.

"There are two reasons I won't cross into this fight," he murmured. "Number one is that, if I did, and I killed Keitarou, there'd be nothing left of him. I'm too angry at him to hold back and deal with it rationally like I did with Anabomi, and I wouldn't trust myself not to disperse his body into fragments on the wind. Seireitei need a corpse, though, to prove he's dead. They need that evidence."

"And the second?" The breeze had calmed, but Hakubei was still eying his companion warily, and Hirata offered him a rueful glance.

"I'm not a match for Katen Kyoukotsu," he admitted. "I don't want to put myself in a position where I might be in danger of fallout from it."

“Shunsui wouldn’t hurt you,” Hakubei objected, and Hirata shrugged.

“No, not on purpose,” he agreed cautiously, “but Katen Kyoukotsu is a tricky sword. I mean that literally. If you get caught up in one of its games, it’s difficult to know where it might end.”

He sighed, dropping back against the wall in resignation.

“It ought to have been me,” he said regretfully. “I have the motive, the hatred, and I’m an Endou. Killing Keitarou might calm something in me, and it certainly wouldn’t upset me. I’ve spent more than twenty years regretting my hesitation, the one moment I had that chance... but that was my chance, and I wasted it.”

“Are you sure?” Hakubei’s brows knitted together, glancing in the direction of the Third. “I’ve known Shunsui a long time, longer than you, in fact. He’s not one to let people past the facade and the smile if he can help it, but he’s also never struck me as someone primed for killing. *Can* he kill Keitarou? Even if he dislikes him, even understanding what Keitarou is... do you think he can?”

“It doesn’t matter if he can or not,” Hirata said matter-of-factly. “Katen Kyoukotsu can. That’s all that matters.”

“I don’t understand,” Hakubei looked flummoxed, and Hirata offered him a hollow smile.

“Pray you don’t need to,” was all he vouchsafed, however, and at that moment there was a sudden flicker of spiritual energy, followed by a sinking, deathly lull. Even the breeze seemed to stop still, and Hirata’s lips thinned as he interpreted what it meant.

“It’s over,” he said softly. “Come on. We ought to go, now.”

“Now?” Hakubei began, but Hirata wasn’t listening, already slipping into shunpo as he hurried through the streams of light towards the Third Division and his friend’s unmistakable location. As he exited the flash-step, he drew breath sharply at the scene that greeted him.

The cobbles were littered with debris; charred wood, twisted metal and the folorn remains of a grey cloak, flapping gently against the stone. Not far away, two familiar swords were embedded deep into the earth. They had not been sealed, and the tassels that adorned the hilts of both hung limply down against the silver blades. One of the weapons was smeared with blood, and Hirata almost thought the way the tassel fell was attempting to cover the stain, trying to conceal the shame of what it had done.

Something black and bloody lay not too far away, and Hirata's gaze followed the seeping stains across the limp form, his gaze moving from legs, to torso, and ultimately, to the head. Without hesitation he strode over towards it, standing over the body of his self-proclaimed brother in law and gazing down at him impassively. He had had his chest clawed open by the sharp edge of Shunsui's blade, he realised, assessing the wounds in clinical, distant fashion. The weapon had punctured the left lung and grazed the heart, but it was the congealing mass of red that covered the scientist's throat that had struck the final death blow. Keitarou's eyes were closed, but, despite the gore and the blood that stained his lips, his expression was more one of smug contentment than of horror or anger. This fact twisted up inside the Endou leader like a corkscrew.

In death you are mocking me, telling me that I never did get you, and that, even if I had, it wouldn't change all the things that have happened since last we met. It wouldn't mean Eiraki wasn't a murderer, and it wouldn't bring Souja back. You stole my sister and my son from me, and now I can't make you answer to me for either one. No wonder you're smug now, Keitarou — taking to your grave the last laugh over my Clan. I would've made you suffer for it — but yet again, you've escaped me.

In the middle of the courtyard was the remains of the *Senkaimon*'s frame and constructed gateway, the severely blackened stumps of wood and metal telling Hirata that something of considerable force had ripped the device apart with little consideration for its delicate functions. Beyond, the atmospheric access point allowing travel in and out of the Dangai was no more than a flickering blip of energy, the waves of spiritual energy upsetting the connection so badly that even had Nagesu himself been present, Hirata felt certain that it would have been impossible to open. A dusty, torn, blood-stained *haori* was draped over part of the damaged construction and, on a heap of rubble alongside it, Hirata made out the *shihakushou*-clad figure of his own close friend.

Shunsui had noticed his arrival, of that he was sure, but the older man had not made any attempt to acknowledge it. His eyes were distant, his brow creased and his lips pressed together, as though contemplating something that Hirata knew he would probably never put into words. His skin was pale, whiter than Hirata had ever seen it before, but there was blood and ash staining his fingers and, though the impression was very slight indeed, Hirata was sure that Shunsui's hands were trembling.

Hirata's gaze flitted to Keitarou's body once more, fresh hatred brewing in his heart.

Yes, and you made this man kill you, instead of me. You knew that, if I

killed you, I'd walk away without a single emotional scar. Shunsui's different from me, though. He'll never be able to forget about you because of this... which is probably what you wanted. Scar the heart of the man forced to bring you down... I wouldn't put it past you to do that, as a final, spiteful blow.

Out loud he said,

“Shunsui?”

“Hirata,” Now Shunsui acknowledged him, raising his head to meet his friend’s questioning gaze, and a faint, odd smile touched his lips. “Well, I suppose it’s a good thing it’s you, and not Nagesu-sama. The mess here will be hard to explain.”

“It’s done, though,” Hirata moved towards the *Senkaimon*, stepping carefully over broken pieces of the structure. “It had to be — we both know that. Regardless of the structural damage — this needed to be done.”

“Are you cross with me?” Shunsui asked quizzically, and Hirata frowned.

“Cross?” he asked, and Shunsui nodded.

“For taking away your prey,” he explained, and Hirata sighed, shrugging his shoulders.

“It would’ve been better for both you and I if I had, but I probably wouldn’t have left such an identifiable corpse,” he admitted. “It’s all right, I’m not cross. Not with you. With him — probably always — but not enough to take after my mad uncle and start carving up his body. He’s dead and its done... you don’t need to stay here like this. We’ll move the body inside and find someone to keep watch over it, but your Division are worried about you, and there’s a lot of other things to be done.”

“Like putting back together the pieces of Anabomi?” Shunsui sent Hirata an opaque glance, and Hirata pulled a face.

“You felt that too, huh?”

“Hard to miss, living next door. I didn’t leave Eighth till after your skirmish was about done. I know you killed him, Hirata. I’m going to trust that your reason was more than just anger.”

“He was turned Hollow, more or less,” Hirata said frankly, and Shunsui’s eyes narrowed to slits as he digested this. “I don’t know why or how, not exactly, but I have your Vice Captain and Hakubei-dono’s investigating the scene.”

“Haku... Kanshi’s at Ninth?” Shunsui’s eyes widened. “Hirata, is that... I mean... what... about Hakubei?”

“It’s all right, Shunsui. I’m fine. The spell was broken,” Hakubei himself materialised in the courtyard at that moment, stopping dead at the scene of destruction and carnage, and letting out a low whistle. “Or wait, maybe I shouldn’t be telling you I’m fine. Maybe I should ask you if you are. Shunsui, what did you do?”

“Killed Aizen Keitarou.” Though Shunsui’s words were calm enough, Hirata knew his friend well enough to hear the faint tremor in his voice. “I’m sure you remember that the Council initiated a Kill on Sight order. I saw. I killed. As Hirata says, we’re done here, and there’s other things to do.”

“Hang on, you’re not going anywhere,” as he made to get to his feet, Hakubei was beside him, pushing him back down onto the heap of rubble with a hefty sigh. ‘Nagesu-sama’s going to come back and implode — both literally and figuratively — if he sees all this and there’s no official report of what happened here. Hirata-dono,’ he glanced across at his fellow Captain, “you’re a Council member, as you reminded me on our way over. You ought to take charge of all of this. It’s not pretty, but like Ninth, it can’t just be walked away from.”

“Perhaps, and I don’t mind, but...” Hirata’s gaze slid back towards Shunsui, who caught it, holding up his hands and offering a feeble smile.

“I’m okay, Hirata. At least, I will be,” he assured his friend, and Hirata arched an eyebrow.

“You just killed a man,” he said softly. “For me, that might not mean much, but I’ve always envied the way you, and Juushirou, and people like you feel about life and death. You can value things on a different level — ways in which I’ve gradually lost since I fully awakened Tsumi no Fuuhi. You don’t need to pretend this doesn’t bother you. It ought to bother you, like it obviously bothers Hakubei-dono. It doesn’t make it any less right, but you can’t push it away as though it doesn’t matter. You’re not me. Be glad of it.”

“Mm,” Shunsui carefully pushed Hakubei aside, getting to his feet and moving slowly across the yard, stopping a foot or two from the body and retrieving his swords from where he had discarded them. Glancing at them, he sighed, giving them a little shake and returning them to their sealed form. The longer katana blade was still smeared with blood, and though he sheathed the *wakizashi*, he kept the other out, examining its tarnished surface.

“With Juushirou, it was Seibara, but I guess it takes a demon to kill a demon,” he murmured, more to himself than to his companions, but Hirata’s keen hearing heard every word.

“Shunsui...”

“I’ll be all right, really I will,” Shunsui turned to face him, and Hirata was relieved to see a faint flicker of something familiar in his friend’s gaze. “However much blood is on my hands, Hirata, doing this means the people I care about are still alive, and that’s enough for me.”

“The people you...” Hirata shot him a sharp look, then, “Juushirou? This had something to do with... was Juushirou here too? I didn’t sense Sougyo no Kotowari... in fact, I didn’t sense it at all through this fight. Are you saying... something happened to...”

“Juu is fine, at least, I assume so. I haven’t seen him, but I’m sure he wouldn’t go down without a fight,” Shunsui shook his head. “I came here alone to kill Keitarou, and there was nobody else here when I came. No officers of any kind, actually — unconscious, dead, or otherwise. That’s something that’ll need to be looked into — among everything else.”

He wiped the katana against the leg of his *hakama*, sliding it reluctantly into its sheath.

“It will take some time to clean,” he reflected, “as will *that*.”

He pointed to the dishevelled *haori*, his brow creasing as he caught sight of the red stains covering his hands.

“I don’t even know if *these* ever clean, metaphorically,” he added absently, and Hakubei frowned, reaching out his own right hand impulsively and grabbing Shunsui’s bloodstained fist in his, giving it a firm shake.

“Hakubei?” Shunsui stared at the other Captain, nonplussed, and Hakubei offered him a sheepish grin.

“This may sound really cheesy,” he warned, “but I’ll still shake your hand, no matter how bloody it is. The man you killed was a traitor, he killed Hirata-dono’s son and he made me fight my younger sister. He made us try to kill each other, but now he can’t do that to anyone else and I’m glad. It’s somewhere you don’t ever want to be, trust me. What you did was the right thing, and it probably saved a lot of other lives. So I don’t mind shaking your hand. I don’t care if I get bloody, because if I’d found him, I’d have tried to kill him too. Only I probably wouldn’t have succeeded, because I don’t have the same kind power

as you.”

Shunsui glanced at the Shiba Captain for a moment, then he returned the grin with the first half-genuine smile Hirata had seen since they entered the courtyard. He nodded, claspig his left fist over the top of Hakubei’s right in confirmation of the gesture.

“Welcome back, Hakubei. I’m glad Sora didn’t skewer you before Keitarou’s control was broken,” he said sincerely. “It’s nice to have your faith in me. I only hope Juu will be as understanding.”

“I can’t imagine Ukitake will have any compunction about the need to remove this man from existence,” Hakubei assured him, and Shunsui shrugged.

“We’ll see, I suppose,” he mused. ‘We did, a long time ago, promise to take down Keitarou together. I left him out and I did it on purpose. He’s going to have issues with me over that... and maybe other things, too, when he knows the full story. Still, at least I’m alive to be able to explain it to him.’ He shrugged. “Nothing worse than being a corpse without a good alibi... better to do the job properly and have time to think up your excuses later.”

“For now, the first thing is to report that Keitarou has been killed,” Hirata reflected. “I’ll do it, since as Hakubei-dono says, I’m representative of the Council of Elders.”

“If I thought anyone would believe it, I’d give you credit for the killing, too, but it will only take ten seconds of Unohana-taichou’s time to expose the truth,” Shunsui admitted. “My reiatsu’s all over him — my sword went right up inside of him. He lost Katen’s game... there’s no pretending this was a Wind Hawk kill, much as I wish it were otherwise.”

“Better to be honest about it,” Hakubei advised. “Come on. Let Hirata-dono make the report he needs to make. We should search Third for any sign that there were shinigami on duty here. Someone should have been here... and if they weren’t, we need to discover why not.”

There had been fighting in Seireitei.

Kai stepped out of the Second Division’s restricted *Senkaimon*, pausing to sniff the air with a grim expression on his face. Though the surrounds were quiet, the air was thick with fragmented *reiryoku* and the scent of burning, and as he registered this, Kai’s stomach twisted

itself into an uneasy knot. Had they come back too late? It was difficult to know how much time the Onmitsukidou had exhausted, searching the Spiritless Zone for their prey, but though he had tried to be as swift as possible, it was clear that the hostilities had already begun.

And maybe, the battle was already won and lost.

His lips thinned at this thought, but he did not speak his concerns aloud, aware that the slightest slip in his composed mask would make the captive Endou *hime* suspicious. Though she had submitted herself reluctantly to his men, and had not attempted to escape during the return, Kai knew that he was bargaining a chip he did not hold to maintain her docility, and, more to the point, this was not the frightened young teenager he had first encountered in District Eight several decades earlier.

Eiraki had lived on the run with Keitarou for all of her adult life, had birthed three children and raised them in hiding, and had severed all ties with her noble background in order to protect the man she loved. She had spent more time with Keitarou than she had her own kin, and, undoubtedly, it had shaped the woman she had become. Glancing back at her now, shackled between Karaki and Saku as she stepped out of the Gate, Kai was struck by the calm expression on her features, her lashes showing not even the slightest sign of tears. She was not afraid, he realised with a jolt. It was the face of a person secure in her convictions... a person who had no doubts about the path she had chosen to walk.

Even if that path led to death.

“Kai-dono, where do you want us to take the prisoner?” Karaki’s question broke through his thoughts, and he frowned, scanning the surrounding area briefly for any sign of his sister’s reiatsu. Finding no evidence of Midori’s return, he nodded, making up his mind.

“We’ll take her to the lower cells,” he decided. “Saku, you will be responsible for ensuring our captive *hime* is searched for anything that might be considered an offensive weapon.”

“Yes, sir,” Saku nodded her head soberly, and Eiraki snorted, looking amused.

“Are you afraid of searching me yourself, Kai-dono?” she asked mockingly. “You make me wonder if, even at your age, you’ve yet to set eyes on the body of a woman.”

“Your views weren’t asked for,” Karaki interjected darkly, raising

his hand as though to slap her, but Kai moved quickly, grasping Karaki's wrist and shaking his head.

"You are a *hime* and the sister of a friend of mine," he said softly, releasing his hold and addressing Eiraki directly. "I will treat you with respect for his sake, rather than for yours."

"I imagine he doesn't care too much either way," Eiraki shrugged her shoulders. "He's an Endou, Kai-dono. Endou don't care too much about things like that."

"But *you* care for the life of your son, just as he cared for the life of his," Kai said evenly. "No more talking. Now we're back in Seireitei, Endou Eiraki-hime, you will be arraigned for the murder of Kuchiki Ribari, and the additional charges of colluding with and aiding and abetting the escape of a wanted traitor to Seireitei. These are serious crimes, and you will therefore be confined in a secure cell until such a time as the Council of Elders choose to hear and judge your case. You should not expect to be treated with mercy, but you will be given the chance to give your story before judgement is passed. The sentence for the crimes you are charged with is death, and if you are guilty, sentence will be carried out swiftly and in a manner of the Council's devising. Do you have any questions?"

"Not a question. Rather, two requests," Eiraki's eyes glittered with a hint of the feral defiance she had shown in the Spiritless Zone, and Kai knew that nothing of the young girl's innocence was left in the woman who stood before him. "Firstly, that you honour your word as regards my son. If you want me to continue cooperating with you, I would like to see him, to see for myself that he is safe and alive. And secondly, that you amend your address of me. I am a wife and a mother, Kai-dono. I left the Endou a long time ago. My name is *Aizen* Eiraki, now."

Her lips twitched into a humourless smile.

"And don't be sorry if my husband comes to collect what's his," she murmured. "You're not a match for someone like him."

"I haven't much interest in seeing your husband," Kai said frankly. "Saku, take her into the ante-chamber and search her. If she resists, you may use restraining Kidou, but do not harm her unless she poses you a threat. Ensure she is comfortable, then take her below and secure her in cell deep-six. I will remember your requests," this last to Eiraki. "If it is within my power, I will grant them... providing my doing so doesn't bring the boy's life in harm's way. Taking him from his secure holding place might make him a target... but I keep my word, and I will honour it as best I can."

“Then I suppose I will go with your underling,” Eiraki sniffed. “You needn’t worry. So long as you keep your word, I won’t fight. You can put me in the most depressing place possible, Kai-dono, but you can’t break me. You won’t find out anything about Kei-sama from me, nor will I sacrifice him to save my life. You might as well prepare for my execution — I’m not afraid.”

Kai’s gaze flitted to Saku, who nodded, slipping her fingers around Eiraki’s wrists and giving her a little tug in the direction of the barracks reserved particularly for members of the Onmitsukidou and the briefing and searching of their incoming prisoners. Eiraki did not put up any kind of resistance and, as they disappeared, Kai sank back against the wall, letting out his breath in a rush.

“Karaki?”

“Sir?” Immediately the officer was alert, and Kai cast him a rueful smile.

“Go to Thirteenth. Tell Ukitake-taichou that we’ve caught ourselves a sparrow,” he instructed. “Tell him that she’s secure in the cell and he’s to act on it as he sees fit. Also, tell him to make sure his own prisoner remains alive, at least for the time being.”

“Yes, sir,” Karaki did not ask any questions, raising his hand in a salute. Before he could move, however, the atmosphere was split and split again by jagged threads of Kidou energy, and, loud and clear, Kai was aware of Hirata’s voice breaking through the ether.

“This is Endou Hirata, Seventh Division Captain, transmitting to all available officers within Inner Seireitei.”

Tenteikuura.

Hurriedly gathering his wits, Kai realised that his friend had activated the powerful communications spell, and his heart constricted again as he contemplated the reasons for such a broadcast. From Karaki’s expression, he knew that Hirata had not bothered to limit the transmission to Captains and Vice Captains alone, and that suggested either urgency or desperation. Hastily he tried to decipher the threads of broken *reiryoku* that littered his surroundings, but it was in vain, for though he could identify who had released their spirit power, he could not discern the roles they had played in the battle. Everything was overlaid with a heavy, unfamiliar spiritual presence that seemed to penetrate every orifice, and Kai found himself wondering how Hirata had managed to transmit such a clear kidou connection through the morass of swirling energy.

Hirata’s next words drove all other thoughts from his mind.

“The exile, Aizen Keitarou has been apprehended and killed at Third Division. Repeat, the exile, Aizen Keitarou has been apprehended and killed at Third Division. All unhurt officers should report to their Division Barracks and await further instructions from their Captain or Vice Captain. The exile, Aizen Keitarou has been apprehended and killed at Third Division. All unhurt officers report to Division barracks and await further instructions.”

The message crackled to a stop, and for a moment, Kai could not speak, half-doubting what he had just heard as a dream or wishful thinking. He met Karaki's gaze, seeing the normally impassive officer's eyes huge with shock at what had just been transmitted, and Kai felt certain the man had forgotten in its entirety the instruction he had been given only moments before.

And then, breaking through the silence, was the sound of an ear-splitting, heart-wrenching scream.

It took Kai a split-second to realise that it had come from the Division ante-chamber, and he jerked into life, gesturing for Karaki to follow him as he drew his sword, charging towards the structure where Saku and the prisoner now were. Aware that he could be barging in on Eiraki in a state of undress, he steeled himself, for the sound had been so unearthly and alien that he had not been able to tell whether it was his officer or the *hime* herself who had let out the terrible cry. Had Eiraki turned on Saku in a moment of distraction? Knowing that the girl had carried poison before, Kai knew there was no guarantee Eiraki's lack of spirit power would prevent her from causing serious harm, but as he flung back the door, he found Saku hunched on the floor, crouched over something limp and dark that lay, motionless, on the ground.

“Eiraki-hime!” He darted forward, anxiety in his gaze. “Saku, what happened? We heard the scream — are you hurt?”

“No, sir. Not me,” Saku shook her head, and Kai could see the sombre expression in the woman's eyes. “There was a message, sir. From Endou-taichou. I trust you heard it too?”

“Karaki and I both did,” Kai confirmed, glancing at the officer in his slipstream, who nodded his head. “It was *Tenteikuura*, Saku. Kidou.”

“Yes...” Saku bent to brush hair out of Eiraki's face, and Kai saw for the first time how pale his prisoner looked, and the lashes which had been so dry at her arrest were now wet with tears. “Well, she heard it to, sir. I don't know as she was meant to, but she did. And when she did...”

She held up her arms, turning them over, and Kai saw red scratch marks across the skin. He frowned.

“You said you weren’t hurt.”

“Something like this doesn’t constitute ‘hurt’ when you wear an Onmitsukidou uniform,” Saku said grimly. “I was going to use a spell to hold her back, because I thought she was going to try and escape, but she was going into panic. I tried to stop her, but when I grabbed at her, she screamed. Next thing I knew...”

She gestured to the limp form, and Kai let out a heavy sigh, removing his black gloves and putting an index finger to Eiraki’s throat.

“She’s alive. She’s just fainted,” he said softly. “Take her downstairs, Saku, and secure her. I’m sure that we could’ve found another way to break it to her, than for her to hear her brother announce her husband’s death. We need to know what happened, but for now, securing this captive is of prime importance. Even if Hirata’s message is true and not a ruse of some kind, Eiraki has a son whose whereabouts are unknown and whose behaviour is known to be unpredictable. Until we can be certain he isn’t in the vicinity, we can’t take chances. Not even with an unconscious girl.”

He grasped Saku’s arm, gazing at the wounds, then.

“Go clean up,” he instructed, releasing his hold. “Karaki, you take Eiraki down below. Cell deep-six.”

“Yes, sir,” Karaki’s brows furrowed, “but what about Ukitake-taichou? Should I go there once Eiraki-hime is locked away?”

“No...” Kai pursed his lips, then shook his head. “No, I’m going to keep you here. Ukitake will have received the same transmission we did. He wanted Eiraki as a pawn for negotiation, but if Keitarou is dead, then such a tactic is no longer necessary and a direct report superfluous. I’d rather we stayed in this vicinity, just in case we’re still in danger. We haven’t been here and we don’t know what’s gone on in our absence — until someone comes for us, or Midori-nee returns, we’ll keep close and defend our patch.”

“Yes, sir,” Karaki saluted, bending to scoop the unconscious *hime* up in his arms. He was gone the next second, and Kai cast Saku a grin.

“Go,” he said firmly. “I’ll see to the rest of the men. I can debrief without your help, and I’d rather you cleaned those scratches, then took a trip to the Fourth, just in case Eiraki brought something back with her and thought to share it with you.”

“Like poison?” Saku glanced at her arms thoughtfully, then shrugged. “All right, sir, but I’m not afraid. I feel fine — but I’ll do as you say.”

“I’d rather be safe than lose my right hand woman,” Kai told her. “I just hope that Hirata’s message marks the end of the conflict. Not the beginning.”

“He’s asleep.”

Mitsuki laid Kohaku’s arm gently down against the blankets, moving to brush the messy hair out of the young man’s face. His eyes were closed, his breathing steadying as he sank deeper into a dreamless stupor.

From the other side of the bed, Juushirou sat back, letting out a heavy sigh. The chamber was dimly lit, the Kidou lamps turned down low in an attempt to create a soothing atmosphere, but it was not dark enough to conceal the tears still drying on the stray’s lashes, nor the evidence of the emotional storm of grief that had overtaken him the moment he had known his father was dead. The formal confirmation of it had come moments before, in Hirata’s crackly *Tenteikuura* transmission, and Juushirou knew that, this time, there had been no miraculous, last minute escape. It ought to have made him happy, but Kohaku’s clear distress had tempered the triumph considerably.

“What have we done, Mitsuki?” he asked plaintively, and Mitsuki cast him a glance across the bed, pausing, and then moving to sit beside him. She reached out a hand, taking Juushirou’s pale fingers in hers and giving them a little squeeze of reassurance.

“What shinigami are meant to do,” she said softly. “Protect the people we most need to protect.”

“Yes, but at what cost?” Juushirou slid his fingers away from her touch, using them to press against his brow as he tried to smooth out the creases of tension. “I’ve wanted to stop Keitarou for the longest time, Mitsuki, and now we know that finally, he’s been stopped. I should be relieved, but instead I feel guilty. To us he was an enemy, but to Koku...”

He trailed off, his gaze flitting to the boy’s face.

“I remember my own father’s death,” he admitted quietly. “I found out about it whilst still in the throes of the worst childhood fever I had ever had. I overheard my mother, talking to the doctor about it. I was trapped, helpless to do anything, even to cry. I didn’t even get a

chance to say goodbye. More than anything I knew that he had died protecting me... and for a long time, I blamed myself. Maybe on some levels, I still do. Perhaps that's why I've always worked so hard to make this life worth his dying for. I trained, overcame my fear of Hollows, and I took Thirteenth's *haori* along the way. Doing so meant, ultimately, that enemies like Keitarou would have to be eliminated. I never thought about it from this perspective. I never thought of *Keitarou's* children, and how they might feel if that day came to pass. It's such a complicated sensation... and I don't know what I ought to do for the best."

Mitsuki's lips pressed together thoughtfully and to begin with, she did not speak. Then, eventually, she broke the silence.

"You can only do as much as he lets you do, Juushirou," she said simply. "Kohaku is Keitarou's son. That won't stay hidden now — it's not possible to conceal him any longer. I didn't see the hallucination you and Houjou-kun and Naoko-chan mentioned, because of the Kidou barrier at the Fourth, but I could sense Koku's presence in the air the moment I stepped out into the centre thoroughfare. People will want to know what happened, and ultimately, the truth will come out. It will have to. Your job now is to ensure that it comes out in a way that keeps both the promises we made — yours to Souja-dono and mine to Katsura — to keep Koku safe."

"He's already not safe," Juushirou's response was a sobering one. "Physically, perhaps, but his emotions are raw and unsettled. Those tears weren't crocodile tears, nor were they tears of fright. They were tears that only a son can cry when a father is taken from him."

"Or a daughter, when a mother's soul drifts away into the mist," Mitsuki reflected.

"Perhaps that's true," Juushirou offered her a faint smile. "I'm sorry. You have those kinds of memories, too."

"Mm," Mitsuki's expression became thoughtful. "What exactly did he say to you, Juushirou? About what happened... about Keitarou?"

"He told me he'd asked Shunsui to kill his father, and Shunsui had," Juushirou bit his lip. "Even if he hadn't told me, I would have known, though. I know Shunsui better than anyone else does — or at least, I'd like to think that I do. I've known him fight seriously, but there was a raw, dark edge to his release this time. I knew he was fighting with intent, and I think, somewhere, I knew who he was fighting. I didn't know Koku had sent him to do it... and Shunsui isn't someone you think of as exuding natural killer instinct. But in times like this, I think

we both know he can muster it. Years ago, he released Katen Kyoukotsu's blade into the shadows and used it to wound Keitarou's shoulder. Then, he seemed darker than I'd ever known him to be before. Perhaps then I knew that, one day, he would kill Keitarou for real. Sensei told him that Katen Kyoukotsu probably would be capable of wielding that power. Today was that day, and he completed that task. I didn't need Hirata's notification. I already knew what Shunsui was doing."

He sighed.

"And I sat back and let him."

"It's a good thing you did," Mitsuki observed, and Juushirou stared at her in surprise.

"Mitsuki? You're a healer — I thought you didn't believe in killing?"

"I don't," Mitsuki shook her head. "I was thinking in other terms... about your safety in all of this. Keitarou would've probably tried to kill you."

"I wouldn't have let him succeed. I'm not a child now, nor fresh out of training."

"No, perhaps not, but it would've distracted Kyouraku-kun, and both of you might have ended up hurt," Mitsuki offered him a faint smile. "Juushirou, you know that Kyouraku-kun's weakness isn't in his sword power or his kidou skills. It's when something he wants to protect is part of the equation. He probably didn't tell you about this because he knows it as well as I do. Having you there would've compromised both of you. Your job was to find and protect Koku, which you did, and maintain security over the Thirteenth, which you did. Your subordinates helped to secure Twelfth and Eleventh and no deaths in this sector have been reported."

"No deaths here, but elsewhere..." Juushirou's brow creased again, then he sighed, shrugging his shoulders.

"You're right, and it does nothing to dwell on it," he acknowledged. "My duty is still to manage the Koku situation, else more blood might be shed and this time it might be the blood of an innocent party."

"But you are decided to protect him?" Mitsuki asked, and Juushirou nodded.

"Like you said, I promised Souja," he agreed. "I'm sorry you never had a real opportunity to meet him — he was a smart boy with

intelligent judgement. This was the last and only thing I could do for the son of a good friend, and so I'll make sure I do it right. How much Souja knew about the boy who brought him back here, I don't know. Whether he suspected Koku was his cousin or whether he just wanted to protect a Rukongai boy who had taken a risk to help him, I don't know. Either way, I gave my word and I will keep it, to the best of my ability."

"Then you'll also have to address the question of *that*," Mitsuki's gaze slid across the chamber, and Juushirou followed her glance to where the glistening silver-bladed *zanpakutou* lay on the shelf beside the window.

"Kyouka Raigen," he murmured, and Mitsuki arched an eyebrow.

"You know its name?"

"Koku told me," Juushirou admitted. "Whatever he did to disseminate that vision seems to have cemented his bond with the voice inside his head. I don't know what kind of *zanpakutou* is born from one of Keitarou's creations, but there it is. Koku wasn't too coherent about it, but he did say they'd talked lately in a different way from how it had been in the past. They finally made an accord... but the fact he now has it means that, even if he wanted to be let loose into Outer Seireitei, it can't happen. A *zanpakutou* isn't a toy, and it's not something that can be discarded easily. Koku's spirit power was unstable before, but now it's fundamentally unsafe. Even if it seems more settled than it did, he's been given a weapon and no understanding of how to use it or even if it should be used."

"This sounds like something Sensei might have said," Mitsuki nudged him, amused, and Juushirou looked sheepish.

"I think it was Kyouki-sama who gave me the lecture on how dangerous my sword was and how I didn't realise how easily I could kill someone if I used it without proper care and training," he ruminated, "but probably Sensei covered it in one or other Sakusen or Zanjutsu lecture along the way. Who it came from doesn't make it any less the truth. Like it or not, one of our shinigami brought Koku here, and we, through our involvement with him, have made him raise his sword. We are aware of him, and we have a responsibility to deal with what comes next. My first step, though, is to get the Council to repeal the Kill on Sight order, and to overcome the little matter of Koku's having come from Rukongai illegally. The latter might be explained by his aid to Souja, but the former is much tougher. I won't have an innocent boy murdered for no reason, especially now the core of the problem has been handled... so until that has been done, Koku can't

leave the safety of these barracks. Maybe not even this room... though at present, with all he has to come to terms with, that might be best.”

“Perhaps,” Mitsuki looked troubled. “Juushirou, he’s still not strong. He’s settled his spirit power, but I can’t be sure if its quieted because he used such a lot of it to project that hallucination. I had no inkling that he had so much *reiryoku* at his disposal, to be honest. Given his physical state, using half such an amount ought to have killed him on the spot, but it didn’t. He may be more resilient than he looks — or his power thresholds have been misleading on account of him having some of it stored inside this wonder-sword of Keitarou’s, but more than ever now, he needs to eat. I gave him sugar water to drink with the sleeping draught, because it will help his blood sugar levels on a short-term basis, but more than before, he needs nourishment. His body must rebuild — or you might find the Council’s order becomes academic.”

“Is he really so much at risk?” Juushirou became aghast. “With the sword being summoned, I had hoped...”

“He’s not like you,” Mitsuki interrupted gently, resting a hand on his arm, and this time Juushirou did not pull away. “You had a genetic weakness which was aggravated by your *reiryoku*. It’s still there, but your control over Sougyo has helped you manage it so that it no longer threatens your life in the way it once did. Irrespective of his power levels, Koku has no genetic defect like yours. His weakness is simply a lack of reserve — maybe a lack of nutrition dating back to the day he was born. He is underweight, and when he uses his energy, his body isn’t refuelling. He says he isn’t hungry, but probably he’s so hungry he’s stopped feeling it. It might be insensitive, but, grief or not, if he’s going to come through this, he needs to eat.”

“I don’t really want to resort to force-feeding, not when he’s so vulnerable emotionally,” Juushirou owned. “When he wakes, if he’s calmer, I’ll try discussing it with him again.”

He glanced at his hands, turning them over pensively.

“You know, the thing that makes me feel worst about all of this is the way he reacted, when he knew Keitarou had died,” he murmured. “I don’t mean his tears, but... but the way in which he reacted to me. He reached out to me, he didn’t push me away. A shinigami had just killed his father, and he knows that I’m the close friend of that shinigami. Yet he didn’t want me to leave him. I felt... somehow like I was betraying him, by comforting him at such a vulnerable point. But what else could I do? He was hurting, and Mitsuki, I understood that pain too well not to try and help.”

Mitsuki snorted, shaking her head in disbelief.

“You don’t get it, even after all these years,” she said mock-wearily. “Ukitake Juushirou, I don’t know if I’m relieved or exasperated to find that twenty five years have passed but you’re still as dense to your own charisma as ever you were before. You have that knack with people and you always have. Koku trusts you — no, I’d go further than that, I’d say he’s come to look up to you in a way that was outside of Keitarou’s plans. You’ve treated the boy fairly and honestly from the start, and even when you’ve found out things about him, you’ve kept faith. Even when he went with Keitarou, you didn’t give up on him. You went out, you found him, you brought him back and made sure he was safe. You are Kohaku’s anchor, now, in a foreign world where he no longer has any family to fall back on. And, when he needed you most, you were there. You’ve never seen him as a monster or an outlaw’s son, or a stray from Rukongai. You’ve seen him as someone you can help, and listen to. If he’s going to get well, and get over this, it will be with your help. You’re all he has, now. You might not be his family, but didn’t you tell me that Thirteenth Division was a family in itself? Koku’s one chance now is to belong to that family — and, perhaps on a subconscious, instinctive level, that’s something he knows too. He’s been abandoned once already. I don’t think he could cope if he was abandoned by you, too.”

“Your judgement of me is always favourably biased,” Juushirou sent his companion a crooked smile, despite himself, and Mitsuki grinned.

“I’m perfectly capable of calling you an idiot and I always have been,” she assured him, “but deep down, nothing has changed. You have a *haori* and it threw me for six a little when I came back here. I’d been through something I’d rather never repeat, and I didn’t expect all the changes I’d have to adjust to. You have a family of people dependant on you, and maybe I felt a little bit intimidated by that fact. But you’ve protected me over the business with Katsura, and you’ve allowed me to stay here and rebuild my confidence and my healing skills, even though I made a reckless decision and allowed a felon to fly free. I guess I know you wouldn’t let any harm come to me if you could prevent it... though I am sorry that I acted in a way that might’ve put you in that position.”

“The fact you let Katsura go is tempered by what he told you about Koku,” Juushirou’s cheeks reddened slightly, and he turned his gaze hastily away. “Probably it’s also my bias, not wanting to report you, but I think you’ve been through enough. Besides, I want to believe in the Katsura you and Koku both know, not the man I saw in Seventh

that day. I want to believe that he can change. I'm sure there are plenty who'd say it was just another idealistic whim of mine... but... if I wasn't idealistic, I couldn't do this job. Working as a Captain isn't easy. I'm not friends with all my comrades, and I have significantly less political influence than all of them. I have had to learn more subtle and sometimes sneaky ways to get around roadblocks, and bit by bit I've learned them. I constantly have to remind myself that if I really want to make a difference to Seireitei and prove how District Shinigami can do their bit, I need to stand up for the things I believe in and not let the Clans batter me down."

He shrugged, looking awkward.

"You're also something I believe in," he said pensively. "You're a Clan *hime* who gave up a life with every material pleasure and possibility in order to live in rough camps in Rukongai, tending to people most of Seireitei never even think of. Your doing that often inspired me to keep going. And, since we've been in Seireitei, life has been less chaotic. Working in Seventh District probably taught me everything I didn't need to know about the dark side of the Clans... but it ultimately hardened my belief in what really matters."

"And now Seventh have a Division of their own with a good Captain at the helm," Mitsuki observed, "so you clearly did a good job."

"Maybe," Juushirou's lips thinned. "The Hirata I work with now isn't the same boy we went to school with, not in a lot of ways. In Seventh District, little by little, I came to realise that was the case. The more Tsumi no Fuuhi developed, the more he had to fight against its instincts. Ultimately I learned that what keeps Hirata from becoming a ruthless, indiscriminate killer isn't necessarily his nature, or even the fact that he has certain emotional standards that other Endou just didn't have. The different factor is that Hirata came to the Academy and met all of us. He learned different viewpoints before his spirit power was allowed to dominate, and so he wants to be like us, not like his kin. He works so very hard to maintain it — and to keep the shreds of compassion and humanity he learned from five years at school. But, on one occasion in Seventh District, I came to realise that the only person there who was able to manage his excesses was me. Even now, Shunsui and I, we're the ones who keep the Wind Hawk in check, and, having seen what it can do, sometimes that knowledge frightens me."

"Why this all of a sudden?" Mitsuki looked surprised, and Juushirou sighed.

“Based on the reports that have trickled through since the cessation of hostilities, Hirata was forced to fight and kill Anabomi Seizuku, at Ninth,” he responded. “Anabomi was half Hollow, and there really doesn’t seem to have been anything else that could’ve been done, but even so, I don’t think Hirata’s taken a person’s life with that sword of his since the days when he was my Third Seated Officer and I caught him playing death vigilante on those who plotted my assassination. I hope his having to take a life today isn’t going to set back that resolve. Hirata’s spirit wants to kill — its in his nature and his sword, even if he himself doesn’t. It just worries me...”

“That Hirata will react violently when the truth about Koku comes out, and will see him as fair game because of what happened to Souja?” As the implications clicked into place, Mitsuki’s expression became one of consternation.

“I don’t know,” Juushirou admitted. “I cut him out of knowing what I told Shunsui, because I didn’t want to risk it. Hirata may have sated his pent up rage on dealing with Anabomi, but if I know him, he’ll have held back. The fact there’s still a corpse we can apparently identify as Anabomi is a good indication that he didn’t give the Wind Hawk its head. He was fighting a comrade and putting him out of his misery, he wasn’t out for blood. But the girl who killed Souja was killed already by one of Hirata’s own agents, and Keitarou was killed by one of his friends. There’s nobody for him to unleash his paternal grief on... except Koku.”

“Then that makes dealing with the Council a trickier prospect,” Mitsuki realised. Juushirou nodded.

“I might alienate a friend, but I know I can stop that friend, and so if I have to, I guess I will,” he said wearily. “It’s not what I want, Mitsuki, but I know Hirata when he’s angry. In this state, Koku couldn’t defend himself. Plus, there’s another element. Souja is dead. Hirata has no heir. However, his sister has sons, and despite her indiscretions, Eiraki has never been formally cut from the family tree. Two sons, both alive as far as we know. Katsura has given you his word to keep away from Seireitei, though Seventh continue to hunt for him and probably always will. Even if he did come here, he’d be arrested — he’s a wanted criminal and therefore any claim he might ever have had to the Endou Clan is forfeit. They’d never accept him... he’d be torn to shreds — if not by Hirata himself, then probably by Kikyue. Koku, however, has committed no crime at all. The Endou may see him as a legitimate challenge to their leader. Because Koku’s blood connection is through his mother, and the Endou are still highly chauvenistic about transference of power, there’d be no way for Hirata

to name Koku his heir through peaceable means, even if he was so inclined. *But* — and it's a big but — the Endou Clan *will* recognise a leader of close enough blood, born through the female line, *if they can kill the existing leader* in fair combat.”

“I’m sure none of that has occurred to Koku at all,” Mitsuki objected.

“Probably not, but I’m sure it *will* occur to Hirata, and to Misashi-sama, who still has significant political power whilst Hirata is here on duty,” Juushirou said gravely. “The long and the short of it is that I will have to go before the Council and make a case that not only prevents Koku being tried and killed simply because he’s Keitarou’s son and comes from Rukongai, but also justify why we hid him for so long, neutralise the threat posed by an angry Endou with serious dynastic concerns... and, in the middle of all of this, attempt to keep hold of my *haori*. It’s going to be a long and interesting day, that one — and hopefully I’ll have a little while to prepare my case. Today has thrown me for six a little — and it keeps getting more complicated.”

“Well, whatever you decide to do, I’ll back you up,” Mitsuki promised. “I’m only an unranked healer with zero clout in any quarter, but regardless, I will. I’m part of the protect Koku conspiracy movement, because I believe it’s the right thing to do. And like you believe in me, I believe in you.”

She reached up to kiss him on the cheek.

“Besides, you’re good at negotiating with difficult people, and you kill them with kindness — isn’t that how Kyouraku-kun used to put it?” she said lightly, as Juushirou cast her a startled look. “When you’re done reducing them to their component atoms, I hope we’ll get a chance to sit down and talk about other things, but for now, all you need to know is that I’ll back you up — and I’ll do what I can to make Koku more comfortable whilst the war of ideals is raging on around him.”

“I appreciate that,” Juushirou offered her a grin. “Even if you are an unranked healer with zero clout, I feel better when I know you’re on side.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” there was no mistaking the genuine pleasure that sparkled in Mitsuki’s eyes at these words, and she got to her feet, resting her hand gently on his shoulder before turning towards the door. “While it’s quiet, I’ll go back to Fourth and beg some extra supplies. Maybe I can find something that will help stimulate appetite, or at least, suppress the fits of nausea and dizziness his *reiryoku* seems

to bring on. Koku should sleep for a bit, so you can start plotting how to take on the Powers That Be.”

Before Juushirou could respond, there was a knock at the door of the chamber and it slid back to reveal Enishi, a bothered expression on his genial features.

“Sorry to butt in on the both of you like this,” he said, by way of preamble, “but there’s messengers at the gate, Taichou, and they want to speak to you.”

“To me?” Juushirou’s brows knitted together, but he got to his feet, nodding his head. “I’ll come, then — but from where? I thought we’d received all the relevant reports from the day’s events and the rest was going to wait until the missing Captains returned?”

“Well, that’s what the message is about, sir,” Enishi looked rueful. “The message is from Nagesu-sama. Erm. Well. Actually... he gave it in person, but left a couple of his officers to see it was carried through.”

“*What?*” Juushirou’s eyes almost fell out of his head, and Mitsuki cast him a dismayed glance. “But the *Senkaimon*... I thought that...”

“Apparently it’s not so easy to strand a scientist Captain in the Real World by simply blowing up one main Gate,” Enishi scratched his head. “No clue how they did it, but the whole damn lot of them just turned up and started pouring out of the Gate that used to stand between here and Twelfth. I was on my way back here, since Atsushidono’s men were waking up and Sekime-taichou’s been trotted off to Fourth to be checked over. They gave me the fright of my life, coming out of nowhere like that. I had no chance to ask for any explanations, though it looks like they were bringing back some injured — I didn’t see any corpses, but there was some blood about. That’s all I saw, because Nagesu-sama saw me and pounced on me. Sent two of his officers back here with me to make sure I carried the message direct — it was a job getting them to wait in the main courtyard whilst I came to find you.”

He looked awkward, then,

“I told them I thought you might be bathing,” he admitted sheepishly. “The officers in question are girls... and they got all flustered at the thought of walking in on you naked.”

“I see the sneaky underhand tactics vis-a-vis roadblocks have corrupted even Houjou-kun,” Mitsuki observed, as Juushirou gave a wry smile, and Enishi shrugged.

“Well, the boy’s here,” he said grimly. “Shikibu filled me in on all the facts behind that. You’re my Captain, Ukitake, so what you say goes and I’m sure you’ve a smarter reason than I can fathom out for taking this line. However, I didn’t s’pose you wanted outsiders traipsing round here turning up stuff before you were ready.”

“Thanks, Enishi. I appreciate that,” Juushirou recovered himself, grimacing. “All right. I’ll come, if that’s the message. Though Nagesu-sama didn’t say anything more specific?”

“Well, he wants to know what you know about Rukongai and the Spiritless Zone,” Enishi replied. “I tried to tell him that he was walking into the middle of a warzone and that nobody really cares too hoots for a patch of Rukongai right now when Ninth’s awash with blood and there are doped up officers staggering all around Eleventh and Twelfth, but he didn’t seem to want to listen. I’m sorry, sir, I did my best, but sometimes a Vice Captain just isn’t an opponent for a Clan Leader.”

“You’ve done all you could, and you can continue by taking charge here and making sure we’re not invaded in my absence,” Juushirou sighed. “I’ll go to Third, and try and limit the damage... though I have a feeling that, once Nagesu-sama sees what’s left of his *Senkaimon*, he’s not going to be in the mood for a polite chat.”

72. District Steel

Chapter Seventy: District Steel

So, it was time to face the music.

Juushirou gazed up at the entrance of the Council hall, gathering his composure as he tried to settle his nerves. Absently his fingers smoothed the surface of his pristine white *haori*, though the expression on his face was one of resolution, not of fear. He had made a decision and he would see it through, no matter what.

He had avoided the falling axe the night before, for on his arrival at Third Division he had found the whole place a hive of chaos and activity. Shiketsu had appeared, flustered and apologetic, telling him that Nagesu had been tied up by unforeseen problems, but had asked him to convey a message. There would be a meeting of the Council of Elders the following morning, at first light, and he would be expected to appear there, to discuss matters relating to the day's events. Juushirou had gone home, glad of the short reprieve, and he had spent much of the evening working through the paper documents he had gathered, adding the notes Ketsui and Izumi had put together to the fragmented reports he and Shunsui had uncovered. These were tucked into the folds of his *obi*, in case they were needed, though somehow he felt that this would be more about answering the questions the right way than it would be providing proof.

There was no avoiding the mention of Kohaku, not now. It had to come out, and all hell would simply have to follow.

“You know, it’s a funny world we live in, Juushirou,”

As he reached the door of the main Chamber, a voice stopped him in his tracks, and he turned, his expression becoming clouded as he recognised the speaker. Shunsui was lounging up against one of the outer pillars, his arms folded nonchalantly across his chest, but it did not escape Juushirou’s attention that, beneath the pink embroidered robe Riri had given him, the Eighth Division Captain wore no official white *haori*. His wavy brown hair, normally fastened back by an expensive Clan tie, was scattered loose over his shoulders, giving him an unexpectedly casual appearance and belying the rank Seireitei had bestowed upon him at graduation more than two decades before. It was an odd apparel to choose in such an exalted location, and on closer inspection Juushirou noted shadows under his friend’s eyes,

evidence that the man had probably not slept the night before. Still, there were no signs of bandages, scrapes or blood, and despite his own complicated feelings about the previous day's events, Juushirou was relieved to see that Shunsui was not injured — at least, not physically.

He paused, eying his friend quizzically, and the other man sighed, shrugging his shoulders.

"They sent for me, first thing, before it was even light. After finding the scene of the crime in his own back yard, Nagesu-sama decided that they wanted to hear from me, before they saw you," he said, answering the question Juushirou had not asked. "I knew you'd be coming here, so I waited around. It's not as though I can do anything, particularly, but Sora has everything under control at Eighth, and I'm feeling a bit of a spare part."

"You're not wearing your *haori*."

"Bloody and sliced about a bit," Shunsui's expression belied the casual nature of his words. 'Not the best impression when called before the Council. It's going back to Eighth for repair and cleaning, on my brother's orders. Apparently I should take better care of it, but honestly, right now I don't care. It's not something I'm desperate to reacquaint with. This one,' he brushed the pink cloth, "will serve me fine for today."

"I see," Juushirou glanced towards the big oaken door, digesting this. "I suppose it makes sense that they'd want you. A lot happened, yesterday."

"It did," Shunsui confirmed sadly. "And Council logic often leaves much to be desired."

"In what sense?"

"Juu, you can't be oblivious of everything that went on at Third," Shunsui spoke softly, and Juushirou's lips thinned. Slowly he shook his head.

"I'm not," he admitted pensively. "It's not really a good time to discuss it, though."

"No, no it isn't. And there probably won't ever be a good time," Shunsui admitted. "The boy's all right, I trust? He did a number on Nagesu-sama's *Senkaimon*, but I didn't see hide nor hair of him, so I assumed that your angels of mercy had carried him off."

"Koku is safe, yes," Juushirou confirmed gravely. "He's very upset... but he's safe, and I intend to keep it that way, if I can."

Shunsui flinched slightly at this, and immediately Juushirou felt guilty for his choice of words, but before he could amend them, the other man spoke again.

“Like I say, it’s a funny world,” he observed bitterly. “I’m a murderer, yet I’m made out to be the hero. You protected that kid, and your judgement in doing so saved many, many lives... yet you’re about to be scolded as though you did something wrong. If proof was ever needed that Clan government and the Council system is reaching its sell-by date, that would be it.”

Juushirou eyed his friend for a moment, then he let out his breath in a heavy rush of air.

“We’ll talk, later,” he said softly. “For now, I have to go do what I can for Koku.”

Shunsui pressed his lips together, but there was resignation in his eyes, and he nodded his head. He made no attempt to stop his companion from passing him, and Juushirou placed his hands against the heavy wooden door, pushing it open and slipping into the darkness beyond.

“Ukitake Juushirou,” As he made his obeissance before the Eight members of the Council of Elders, it was Nagesu whose voice broke the oppressive silence. “Thank you for coming so promptly. You understand why you have been summoned here, I think?”

“Yes, sir,” Juushirou raised his head, his gaze scanning quickly around the chamber and taking in the composed, grave expressions on the faces of each individual. They were all present, even Yuuichi, despite the fact that the bulk of First Division, including its Vice Captain, remained stationed at the Academy, and Juushirou’s heart lurched in his throat. The man must have ridden through the night to be able to attend this meeting, as all *Senkaimon* had been shut down the previous evening following the discovery of Third’s broken Gate, and the fact he had done so told Juushirou the significance this meeting held.

“Then we’d like you to explain to us, Juushirou,” this was Midori. “Stand, and tell us why you asked Nagesu-sama about the Spiritless Zone, what you know about yesterday’s events, and why you withheld information regarding the whereabouts of the outlaw, Aizen Keitarou.”

“The battle may be over, but the war is just beginning,”

Madeki pushed open the door of the side chamber, casting the anxious Shikiki a weary smile and ducking out into the corridor beyond. "The soldiers finish slashing and expect us to stitch up the mess. I'm surprised you chose this life, Shikiki... you're not an Uohana, nor a born healer, and it must be hard on you."

"No, I think it's easier on me than on most," Shikiki returned the smile with a pensive one of her own, moving to the small window embedded in the wall and resting her hands against the glass. "I don't suffer from the reactions some healers do, when faced with another's pain. I want to help, but I've never been overwhelmed by someone else's suffering to the point I can't do my job. It's times like now that I'm glad of it — though, honestly, I never thought Kei-nii... Keitarou would ever go this far."

"Ah yes, you knew him, didn't you?" Madeki dropped back against the wall alongside her, sending her a sidelong glance. "So that expression was for him, then, not for the patients lying in their beds? You're sad that he's dead, or shocked at what he's done?"

"Both," Shikiki lowered her hands, turning to meet his gaze. "It's hard to explain. I haven't forgiven him for hurting people I care about, and probably, I never will. I just find it sad that the man who saved me and treated me so kindly could do such cruel things. I knew he was damaged, but to make Anabomi-taichou slaughter his way through his subordinates, then turn Hollow... is beyond what I thought him able to do. I guess I'm realising that I didn't know him at all... and if I had, what could I have done to stop him?"

"As I understand it, you were eight years old," Madeki observed. "No child can control an adult, even if they want to. It's not your fault, and you shouldn't dwell on it. He chose his path, like you did yours. We need you focused now. I know you're tired, Shikiki — you haven't slept, and you've barely left Mikihara-fukutaichou's side since you were summoned to Ninth — but you can't let things get to you. We're here and we do our job. We have to, because otherwise, they,' he patted the glass, "don't live."

"Mm," Shikiki nodded her head. "I know, but I'd like to stay with him a little longer. I know there's nothing else I can really do, not right now, but... I wasn't able to heal him as fully as I wanted. And I need to check on Shiba-fukutaichou before I take any kind of a break. The bite marks around his shoulder were showing signs of infection, and..."

"And there are other healers, including me, who can take care of Ryuusei-dono," Madeki put a finger gently to her lips, shaking his

head. 'I know you consider them all your patients, but you aren't the only healer on duty, and Fourth Division are short-handed but capable of saving lives. Ryuusei-dono's injuries are nasty, but he's stable and resting. The pain medication has kicked in and we're working on the risk of infection. The other members of Fifth and the two young lads from Sixth are also resting comfortably. Aomori is well out of danger now and even if Edogawa's been seconded to Thirteenth to take care of another patient, we can manage. Erika-dono is overseeing Ryuusei-dono herself, and I,' he lowered his hand with a grin, "am making sure you don't burn yourself out. You're a tremendous talent, Shikiki. I never met a healer with your skills and I won't let you overreach your limits."

Shikiki sighed heavily.

"I'm happy that you're smiling, at least," she murmured, more than half to herself, and, as Madeki shot her a quizzical look, she blushed, looking sheepish.

"I know. That sounded rude. I'm sorry, you're my superior officer," she acknowledged. "I guess it's because I'm so used to talking to Juunii without any formality that I just... forgot where I was and who I was talking to for a moment. But when we first met, Madeki-dono, so much had happened and you didn't smile. Now maybe it seems like I'm seeing the real Madeki-dono... and I like him. I mean, you. I mean... I should shut up, before I create all kinds of misunderstandings and wind up getting myself disciplined."

Madeki chuckled, shaking his head.

"For this once, I'll overlook it," he promised. "You're tired, we're overworked, and smiling is an inappropriate reaction anyway given the carnage of the last twenty-four hours. But... it's hard to put into words. Keitarou's death won't bring back my comrades. It won't change anything that's happened, but I feel as though, through that one thing, the world might begin to heal. I don't know how else to see it — but I feel like they didn't die in vain. We can move on, and work hard to do the things they believed in, and it will be all right."

"I hope so," Shikiki recovered herself, looking rueful. "Maybe I am tireder than I thought. Thank you for understanding, sir. I grew up in an unconventional family, and well, formality is one of my weak points."

"I don't suppose Mikihara-fukutaichou cares much about that," Madeki's gaze flitted to the glass divide. "I'm sure he won't mind at all that you ripped apart what was left of his uniform in order to save his

life.”

“Now you’re teasing me,” Shikiki objected, and Madeki nodded.

“I am,” he agreed, “but Mikihara owes his life to that lack of formal inhibition, so don’t lose it. I have a feeling that if you’re the calibre of healer that comes from the Districts, we probably need to start recruiting more of you.”

“Madeki-dono! Shikiki!”

A voice prevented Shikiki from answering, and the two healers turned to see Shirogane striding down the corridor towards them. He was robed in a pristine fresh uniform, his badge gleaming on his arm, and gazing at him, Shikiki could hardly believe that he had been in a fight for his life such a short time before. At her glance, he offered a smile, inclining his head in acknowledgement.

“I’m assuming your Captain is at the Council Meeting, because my Captain is,” he said, addressing Madeki. “I asked someone on my way in where Erika-dono was, but I was told that she was with Ryuusei-dono and I didn’t like to disturb her. I was going to leave, but I heard your voices... I trust I’m not intruding.”

“You’re not,” Madeki shook his head, “but I can’t give you much more news on the two officers from your squad. They’re comfortable and they’ll both live — but there’s been no significant change in their condition since they were admitted.”

“I haven’t come about them. I’ve come on Guren-sama’s instruction, to find out about Hyakken,” Shirogane’s features became grave. “Ryuu is at Ninth, taking hold of things there, but at present there’s no native officer to call on and, understandably, things are unsettled as a result.”

“You’ve had a full report about what happened at Ninth?” Madeki asked, and Shirogane nodded.

“I inspected the bodies and the scene myself, last night,” he said grimly. “Ryuu and I both did. Keitarou should be glad that he’s dead, since there were some very angry Kuchiki on our return to Seireitei.”

“Very angry is a contagious symptom at present,” Madeki reflected. “Mikihara-fukutaichou is asleep. We’ve induced a coma, though he wasn’t responsive when we finally managed to bring him here. We didn’t think we’d be able to transfer him from Ninth so soon... but Shikiki worked flat out to keep him stable and so we brought him early this morning. There’s more that can be done for him so close to the heart of Fourth’s supplies and with so many healers on call... so

his chances are improved and we'll continue to do what we can."

"You've been treating him?" Shirogane's gaze flitted to Shikiki, who nodded.

"I couldn't completely heal him," she said apologetically. "I wanted to, Shirogane-nii... er... I mean... Shirogane-dono, but I couldn't."

"Shirogane-nii, huh?" Madeki arched an eyebrow. "I see what you mean, Shikiki. Formality really isn't your strong suit."

"It's a long story. We go back a way," Shirogane offered Madeki a rueful smile. "Shikiki saved my life once... and she's never been afraid to tell me exactly what she thinks."

"I'm starting to get that feeling," Madeki remarked. "It's an interesting mindset in a Clan world, but I can see why Retsu-sama has faith in her."

He cast Shikiki a grin.

"I'm going to see Aomori, then look in on the Fifth Division officer with the concussion," he said. "Since Mikihara-fukutaichou is your patient, you can talk Shirogane-dono through his care and his condition, I trust? Just remember what I said about taking a break. There's nothing else you can do right now, except rest and recuperate for whatever hits us next."

With that he was gone, and Shikiki let out a heavy sigh.

"I'm sorry, Shirogane-nii. I didn't mean to drop the friendly nickname like that in front of my superior officer."

"You're tired," Shirogane eyed her critically. "And I'm more interested in Hyakken right now. I was amazed to hear he'd survived. I saw the scene of carnage — more importantly, I know what kind of a swordsman Anabomi is... no, I mean... I mean, *was*. I trained with him a few times. He could take my sword in a sealed weapon fight — though that's not something I like to broadcast, especially not in light of this particular tragedy. Given the state of the other officers, how is it that Hyakken lived long enough for Hirata-dono to arrive with help?"

"Kidou," Shikiki unfastened the door of the little room, pushing it back with a soft hiss and gesturing for her companion to join her inside. "It's all right. He's very drugged, and so long as we're quiet, he won't be disturbed by us being here. A kidou blast cauterised a lot of the wounds in the chest area, and Anabomi-taichou didn't manage to get to his heart. I'm not sure what else happened, exactly. I heard a

rumour that one of Hirata-dono's men jump-started his heart with *Tsuzuri Raiden* — but I didn't see it happen, so I don't know for certain if its true."

"A lot of people really worked hard to keep him alive," Shirogane let out a low whistle, and Shikiki nodded, settling herself down beside the bed and gesturing for her companion to do the same.

"Starting with Mikihara-fukutaichou himself," she said quietly, extending a chubby index finger to indicate the man's heavily bandaged arms. "He used these to defend himself as much as possible. He took horrendous wounds to his arms, Shirogane-nii. It's amazing that he didn't lose one of them."

"His arms," Shirogane looked troubled. "His sword arm, too?"

"Yes," Shikiki agreed. "His *zanpakutou* was found at the scene beside him. He lost two fingers on his left hand as well. We couldn't save them. They had to come off, so Retsu-sama removed them. The others we've done our best with. Under the bandages — its more stitch than skin right now."

"And the rest of him?"

"Lacerations to the liver, the spleen, and the small intestine," Shikiki responded. "Lots of muscle and vessel damage, ribs sliced clean through but by some miracle, the lungs weren't perforated. Scorchmarks across his chest, too... it will scar, most likely, if he survives everything else."

"Hrm," Shirogane rested his hand pensively against the bed, then, "And you didn't heal him fully? You didn't use your power on him? Why? You could reverse all of this, surely?"

"I wanted to," Shikiki looked troubled. "I wanted to, Shirogane-nii, but I couldn't. When I first got to Ninth, I tried, but the moment I started increasing the level of power I was using, his pulse began to go into an arrhythmia. I was scared that I might kill him before I cured him, so I scaled back. It's why I had to work on him for so long. He was barely clinging to life when I got there. If not for the kidou cauterising his chest wounds, and whatever hocus-pocus Hirata-dono's man did on him before I got there, he would have been another marked corpse in the autopsy chamber."

She shrugged helplessly.

"I did what I could, but I discovered I have limits," she said at length. "I knew, since I healed you, that I can't reconstitute blood very well. Mikihara-fukutaichou lost a lot of that, but fortunately, not as

much as Souja-dono or any of the men in Anabomi-taichou's office. I can heal tissue and organs, but my spirit power is stronger now than it was when I healed you, and that can take a toll on a patient if I'm not really careful. I've healed as much as I dare. I've sealed off all the cut vessels I can find, and through the night I patched up his organs, one by one. I've fixed his abdomen, more or less, but he's still at risk for shock or infection in the burns on his chest. Or his arms."

She grimaced.

"I discovered one more limitation I have," she added unwillingly. "The longer it is since an incident occurred, Shirogane-nii, it's harder for me to reverse it. New tissue begins to form, changes take place... and with each passing moment, a little part of the original *reishi* is broken away and gone forever, replaced by something new. I saved you because I could find all the parts of you and put you back as you were, even if I couldn't fix your blood. With Juu-nii, I was right there when Shunsui-nii stabbed him, so I could heal him right away, before the body had the chance to go through any major changes. But the more time that passes since Mikihara-dono was hurt, the less effective my skills are and the more I'm afraid of hurting him. My power isn't a healing power, it's the power to undo things. If undoing means undoing healing, and if I can't move quickly because of the patient's delicate state, I could cause huge amounts of haemorrhaging by re-opening blood vessels that have already knitted themselves back together, even if that knitting means more limited function or an ugly scar. I've done everything I can for him, but it's not enough for me. Madeki-dono wants me to leave him — but I can't. I feel it's a job half-done, but I can't finish it."

"It's all right, since you began it," Shirogane offered her a smile. "Hyakken's a stubborn man. Quiet, disciplined, focused and duty-minded. He took on Anabomi because it was what he felt he ought to do. Now, somewhere in there I'm sure he knows that Ninth need him more than they need anyone. He'll pull through for them. You've given him the start he needs to go on and heal — I believe that."

"I hope you're right," Shikiki admitted. "I don't know him, but I don't want him to die. He fought very hard, and I know he was protecting other members of his Division. People like that should get another chance."

"But you can't heal his arms?"

"No... they will have to heal on their own, alongside whatever reconstructive work Retsu-sama can do," Shikiki shook her head.

“And Ryuusei-dono?”

“I heard you did some first aid for him, in the Real World?” Shikiki asked, and Shirogane nodded.

“He’s not a close friend, but a respected comrade, and, in some ways, I didn’t want to lose another piece in my projected future Clan puzzle,” he admitted. “As a Clan heir, it’s helpful to know and get along with the people who will inherit your neighbours’ lands. Souja-dono’s death means that District Seven is once more a question... I didn’t need District Five to be added to that equation.”

“Ryuusei-dono will live, but there’s nothing that can be done for his arm,” Shikiki looked regretful. ‘If it was just the torn limb, maybe, but he was bitten badly all over his upper body. The Hollow’s saliva left a lot of bacteria, and it’s become infected. It wasn’t your fault,’ as Shirogane looked stricken. “There was nothing you could’ve done to prevent it, not given the circumstances you were in. Ryuusei-dono will live. He’s stronger than Mikihara-fukutaichou right now, and his heart is standing up to the strain well. Erika-dono is with him, and she’s top notch when it comes to this kind of infection. He’s in very safe hands... but he will heal without his arm.”

“Well, at least it’s his left arm,” Shirogane gazed at his own hands pensively, “though I imagine it will be a blow, when that begins to sink in.”

“Yes, but everyone seems preoccupied with other things right at the moment,” Shikiki paused, then, “Shirogane-nii, you’ll know, and I know you’ll tell me the truth. The Council Meeting this morning — is it true that Juu-nii’s been summoned?”

“Ukitake?” Shirogane looked surprised, then he shrugged.

“I’m not party to all Council information, and you aren’t either,” he warned. “Some things aren’t to be gossip among lower ranks, you know.”

“I know, and I won’t, but Kirio came by here earlier with another message and she told me that Juu-nii was called to see the Council first thing,” Shikiki bit her lip. “She thought I should know, because Juu-nii is family to me. Please, Shirogane-nii. I won’t gossip, I promise. I’ll say nothing — but tell me what you know.”

Shirogane sighed.

“Very little, as it happens,” he admitted. “It seems to be Nagesu-sama’s affair, but it has something to do with data relating to Keitarou’s location and the battle that brought him down. Apparently

Nagesu-sama thinks Ukitake knows something or knew something... anyhow, I wouldn't worry. Ukitake has more political lives than a cat, and you're better off keeping out of it, whatever it happens to be."

"Kirio thought it was serious," Shikiki murmured, and Shirogane nodded.

"Whenever the Council call en masse, it's serious," he agreed, "but the truth is, Shikiki, while we were in the Real World, a lot of things happened. Seireitei was invaded. People were killed. And, Nagesu-sama came home to find his cousin's corpse cooling on his Division cobbles and his *Senkaimon* blown to kingdom come."

"Yes, but Juu-nii wasn't there. He wasn't at Third," Shikiki objected. "He was with Kirio, because she told me so. Whatever it is they think he's done, he didn't do anything. I'm worried about him... and about what this all means."

"If I knew more, I'd tell you," Shirogane told her, "but what I am sure of is that your adoptive brother is no pushover and nor is he the type to be cowed by a few Council bigwigs demanding explanations. I'm sure Ukitake will talk his way out of trouble — or, which I think is more likely — they'll send him back to Thirteenth because he won't *stop* talking. One or the other."

"I hope you're right," Shikiki sighed, turning her gaze towards her sleeping patient. "Madedi-dono said that the battle is over but the war has begun. Maybe he was right, in more ways than one."

"What do you mean?" Shirogane was startled, and Shikiki shrugged.

"Juu-nii believes in fighting for the things he has faith in, whatever they are and wherever they lead," she said softly. "Because he's like that, people like me are able to be shinigami. There's something in the atmosphere, Shirogane-nii. Whatever it is, it's not just the aftermath of Kei-nii's death, or the bloodshed, or anything else. It's something different."

"Something to do with this chimera people keep talking about?"

"I don't know. Maybe," Shikiki was cautious. "I didn't see it — nobody here did — so I can't be sure. Like I said, it's just a feeling. This is more than just another battle won. It's... the beginning of something else. And I just hope that, if Juu-nii's any part of whatever it is, he knows what he's doing."

Silence hung over the chamber following Midori's questions, an

intimidating, choking silence that seemed to thicken the air. Obediently, though not without misgivings, Juushirou did as he was instructed, taking a deep breath into his lungs to steady himself and hoping against hope that the tension and adrenaline suddenly coursing through his body would not cause him to cough.

“I’ll provide whatever I can,” he said gravely, “although I would appreciate it if the Council did not jump to sweeping conclusions before all the evidence has been reviewed. I have not concealed the whereabouts of Aizen Keitarou. If I had had firm proof of where he was before yesterday’s attack, I would have reported it immediately. I had no such proof. All I had was a hunch — a conviction that Shunsui and I both believed likely but unprovable.”

“A hunch that he and his people were hiding in the Spiritless Zone?” Yuuichi eyed him quizzically. “Why there, of all places? What would lead to such a hunch, when Nagesu-sama saw him in the Real World in person?”

“That exact thing,” Juushirou said earnestly. “Both Shunsui and I know Keitarou of old, Yuuichi-sama. We know that his forte is showing himself in places he has no intention of staying.”

“So you guessed?” Midori looked sceptical. “And this random, lucky guess somehow had my younger brother disappearing off there to arrest Endou Eiraki and bring her into Second Division custody? Kai isn’t talking about why he went, and given the result, I’m not planning on disciplining him — but I find it hard to believe that Eiraki’s arrest was a complete fluke of luck. I know you and Shunsui met with Kai and I’m sure that he went because you asked him to. He isn’t telling me why — but I’d like it if you did, now the event is over.”

“Shunsui and I knew that Keitarou was sheltering Rukongai vagrants,” Juushirou said frankly. “He couldn’t take those to the Real World, and couldn’t leave them in the wasteland Rukon, because they’d starve. The only viable place to take them was the Spiritless Zone, and all the information we had pointed to that as a high likelihood... as well as the risk of him using it as a launchpad to attack us here. The Onmitsukidou were the best placed team to tackle that kind of an investigation, so we spoke to Kai accordingly. It wasn’t a random guess, but a process of elimination.”

“Which you failed to mention to a senior officer,” Yuuichi remarked.

“With respect, Yuuichi-sama, I spoke to Nagesu-sama directly about my concerns relating to people in Rukongai, and my hesitations about

the Real World mission,” Juushirou replied quietly. “I was told that they were unfounded. It’s not as though I have any political influence or authority of my own to prevent a trip to the Real World voted on and acted upon by members of the Council. All I could do was prepare for the worst and hope for the best.”

“You didn’t mention any of this to me, Juushirou,” now Hirata spoke, and Juushirou turned, meeting his friend’s pale gaze. “Why would you cut me out of it? If you had information, you could’ve come to me. I would’ve listened — as I would think you’d know by this point.”

Juushirou was silent for a moment. Then, slowly, he nodded.

“I know,” he admitted. “I’m sorry, Hirata. I did cut you out and it was my fault, not Shunsui’s. What we discussed and the reasons we discussed them... I was worried about the pressure it would put on you and how it would make you feel. You’d lost your son, and you had lots of burdens around Seventh, with Tenichi’s arrest and Ohara’s incapacitation. I didn’t want to add more to the pile.”

“And that was the only reason?” Hirata’s gaze bored into Juushirou, who frowned, shrugging his shoulders.

“One more reason,” he owned, “but I’ll come to it in a little while, if I may. You might be cross with me, but I feel as though there’s a lot to say and I’ve barely begun scratching the surface.”

Hirata’s eyes narrowed slightly behind his glasses, but he made no reply, and Juushirou took a deep breath into his lungs. He fumbled at his *obi*, pulling out the sheets of paper written by Izumi and Ketsui, and approaching Hirata’s position, held them out.

“You should see these, too,” he murmured, and Hirata’s brows creased, but he took them, glancing them over.

“I don’t understand,” he admitted. “I can’t read any of this. Why are you giving me scientific papers, when they should surely go to...”

He paused, trailing off as realisation dawned in his eyes, and Juushirou saw the consternation that flickered across his expression. He folded the sheets absently, glancing at Juushirou questioningly.

“These are from where I think they are?”

“They are,” Juushirou nodded.

“And whatever is contained in here is part of why you didn’t report in full detail before the Council about your suspicions relating to Keitarou?”

“In part, yes,” Juushirou nodded again. “I couldn’t do that without your permission.”

“Hirata, what did Juushirou give you?” Midori’s eyes were glittering with curiosity, and Hirata sighed, handing the papers back to his friend.

“Give them to Nagesu-sama,” he said wearily. “They should be with him.”

Juushirou bowed his head, retrieving the sheets and padding across the chamber to where Nagesu sat in the chair reserved for the current Head of the Council.

Nagesu took the sheets, glancing at them, and his eyebrows shot up. He stared at Juushirou incredulously.

“Where did you get this?”

“From the same place as the last lot of data relating to Keitarou’s base in the Rukon territory,” Juushirou said simply. “An anonymous source, whose information seemed to be reliable.”

“Anonymous source?” Kyouki’s eyes became slits. “Juushirou, I don’t think we’re at a point where ‘anonymous’ anything is appropriate. We need to know the full truth of this matter — including all resources and whether those resources might have saved the lives of officers cut down both in yesterday’s events and the Real World. I’m sure you’re fully aware of the injuries suffered by the Fifth and we are all reeling from the murders at Ninth... these are serious situations, and if you had a source working on something so specific, why didn’t you bring the evidence forward sooner?”

“Because my source might have been in danger of her life,” Juushirou replied quietly. “I wasn’t about to barter her safety on something I couldn’t conclusively prove was correct.”

“*Her* life?” Nagesu’s brows knitted together in confusion. “This came from a girl?”

“You don’t need to sound so stunned, Nagesu-sama,” Midori interjected. “There are many women capable of the same skills as men, or better, as you should well know. Otherwise why do you trust in Sekime Mareiko’s work as much as you do?”

“That wasn’t my intention,” Nagesu looked startled, then abashed, shaking his head. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to give that impression. I had thought that Ukitake must have uncovered some work of Keitarou’s own, but I can’t imagine... Eiraki-hime is no scientist, and

this level of calculation... she could not have understood..."

"The source is not affiliated with Aizen Keitarou, but has been victimised by him," Juushirou said simply. "Members of her family were attacked and murdered by him. I am not at liberty to divulge any further information. Doing so would be in breach of the promise I made to protect her, and I already made it clear that I will not put her life in danger, not even to satisfy Clan curiosity."

"And you know something about this, Hirata-dono?" Retsu asked softly. Hirata nodded.

"Juushirou is withholding information on my request," he replied evenly. "The individuals in question are under my protection and their identities and whereabouts have been a strict secret for a very long time. I will vouch for Juushirou's judgement in this matter. If he held back information from you, Nagesu-sama, it is because my father and I impressed on him the need to keep that secret, no matter what. Especially, I'm afraid, from you."

"I don't understand," Nagesu looked bewildered. "If someone had such scientific evidence, and these abilities, why would it be inappropriate for her to meet with me? I will accept that, in this regard, Ukitake is not at fault, not if he was ordered to act in a certain way by a Council member, but even so, it seems high-handed."

"So is the fact that the Urahara Clan have not rescinded their persecution laws against certain individuals, even though all those who committed the alleged offences are long since dead." Hirata said flatly, and Nagesu's eyes widened with horror.

"Then these are...?"

"Descendants of families your father's laws decided would be better off dead," Hirata spoke bluntly. "A lot of families fled to District Seven following Keitsune-sama's downfall, and not all of them were in league with Keitarou's rebels. Some became trusted agents of my family, thanks to my father's foresight in protecting them from harm during my Grandfather and my cousin's eras. Ojiisama and Seimaru never discovered them, and when Juushirou came to Seventh, he encountered them — but he has always treated that information with the ultimate discretion. Neither father nor I wanted any kind of altercation with the Urahara when District Seven was in so much turmoil of its own, and so we kept their existence a secret. My son also knew this secret, and it was upon their information that he apparently travelled to Rukongai in the first place."

"Where he was attacked?" Kyouki asked softly, and Hirata's eyes

flickered with something unreadable. He nodded.

“Souja went to Rukongai to investigate a scientific lead put to him by the same people that Juushirou received his information from,” he said quietly. “Those who provided it were trusted friends of my son, and wanted to avenge his death as much as did I. I didn’t know till now that they were continuing to act in such a way — but I have seen ample evidence of their recent activities to realise that they have made an important difference. My son’s death was a senseless waste and a personal tragedy, but the information he brought back allowed us to know that Keitarou had returned, and that was thanks to the agents working in the shadows on our behalf. The children of sinners aren’t sinners, Nagesu-sama — but these individuals have nobody else to speak for them but me and those I trust. More, Souja wouldn’t forgive me if I let harm befall them because of his rash judgement in going to Rukongai without consulting me first, and so even if you demand to know their names and whereabouts, until we have assurance they will not be persecuted, I will not answer and nor will Juushirou.”

“I have never sought to persecute the descendents of people my father believed guilty of treason,” Nagesu looked weary. “I had no idea that such a situation persisted, and I will address it if it is in my power to do so. We shall hold further discussion on this, Hirata-dono, in a more private location. I have no wish to hurt innocents for crimes they did not commit, especially if they are capable of such intricate and intelligent work.”

He set the paper aside.

“With your permission, Ukitake, I should like to keep this and examine it in more detail. Just by glancing at it I can see the scientific theories applied and I understand your reservations about the Real World trip and the reasons you were afraid of a Seireitei attack. I am sorry that Clan issues dogged your ability to communicate those concerns. If you had been able to be more frank with me, I would have taken your worries more seriously, but I see now that that was beyond both of our control and, once again, rooted in the decisions of dead men. In deference to Hirata-dono’s words, I won’t ask any more questions now about how you came by this information. I feel to blame for those issues, even though I had no knowledge that such people even still existed.”

“They are good people, Nagesu-sama, and their contributions have saved lives,” Juushirou said earnestly. “It’s not my business to interfere, but I sincerely hope that a settlement can be reached so that

they are no longer hunted and forced into hiding.”

“Well, so if this magic document of Juushirou’s clears up the questions about what information was available, and why that information was withheld, what about the matter of the Rukongai strays?” Tokutarou looked thoughtful. “A scientific survey surely didn’t involve illicit trips to Rukongai as well?”

“No, sir. It did not,” Juushirou shook his head. “The study was conducted within Seireitei, based on existing records held here and with the knowledge of the people concerned. Records which came, largely, from Sekime-taichou, on Nagesu-sama’s request, I believe.”

“Indeed,” Nagesu’s lips thinned. “I did ask her if she would talk to you about your source... it seems she did more than that, but I can’t fault her judgement, given the result.”

“Then we return to the question of why the Spiritless Zone, and why the belief there were people in Rukongai who weren’t in the Spiritless Zone,” Tokutarou pressed. “You seem to have found this important, and so I think we should consider it so, too. Where did that tip come from? If not Hirata-dono’s hidden helpers, then who?”

Juushirou bit his lip, hesitating for a moment. Then he sighed, nodding his head.

“I came here today to disclose that,” he admitted. “The current situation on the other side of the Sekkiseki wall can’t persist, so I intended to come tell the truth as best I can. I am fearful of doing so, not for myself, but for the witness in question. Hirata is protecting the people who produced the scientific data, but I am all this witness has in the way of protection, and I don’t have the same reach of influence. What I say now might cost an innocent man his life, but nor can I continue to conceal it and hope nobody sees. I have to put my trust in the Council’s justice.”

“That was awfully melodramatic, Juushirou-kun,” Kyouki rubbed her chin. “And, if I may say, most unlike you. You’ve never shied away from giving full testimony before. Why now?”

“Because the person who told me about the Rukongai strays came from Rukongai himself,” Juushirou said sadly. “He broke the law, though he didn’t do it with intent... quite the opposite. He came here attempting to save the life of another, only he didn’t succeed.”

“Souja!” Hirata’s eyes widened in dismay, and Juushirou nodded.

“Yes.”

“He didn’t find Souja in Seireitei, but came back with him, from Rukongai?” Kyouki asked thoughtfully. “Then he must have seen something important, relating to the attack?”

“He confirmed Souja’s own words,” Juushirou agreed, “Souja was attacked by the girl, Sakaki, with a dead blade. He disturbed the confrontation, and she fled. He brought Souja back on Souja’s request. Souja’s sword opened the *Senkaimon*, and Koku came back with him. He was subsequently injured, and has been in the custody of Thirteenth Division since, under the care of Edogawa Mitsuki.”

Retsu inclined her head in confirmation of this last point, but there was no surprise in her gentle gaze, and Juushirou’s eyes narrowed slightly as he wondered what the Fourth Division Captain knew and why she had so willingly allowed Mitsuki to return to Thirteenth with so few questions in the middle of a pitched battle. Had she realised the truth? The healer said nothing, however, and the moment was gone as soon as it had come.

“So the stray you’ve been treating at Thirteenth Division was one of the Rukongai vagrants?” Guren mused. “I suppose that makes some sense. And why you’d protect him — but surely you don’t think the Council would punish the boy in circumstances like this?”

His gaze flitted to Hirata, then,

“Thanks to that boy, Hirata-dono at least was able to speak to his son before his death,” he added regretfully. “I wish I had had that opportunity with Ribari before he was ripped away from me. This stray acted to save a life, and brought a valued officer home to those who cared about him. Nobody would take his life for that. On the contrary, he’s to be commended for taking the risk. The Council is capable of mercy in situations such as this, and I don’t suppose any of us would vote to kill him based on what you’ve said. We already know that Souja-dono’s sword opened the Gate, and so, effectively, Souja-dono brought the Rukon boy back with him.”

“Given the severity of his wounds, Souja-dono wouldn’t have made it back without help,” Retsu spoke softly now, and Nagesu’s gaze flitted to her in consternation.

“Retsu-sama? You knew this boy was from Rukongai?”

“I admit, I did,” Retsu offered a smile that, to Juushirou, looked anything but apologetic. ‘I don’t believe in killing children who have acted in kindness, even if they’ve broken rules to do it. The boy was Souja-dono’s rescuer. Because of him, Souja-dono was able to return here. Ukitake-taichou,’ this last to Juushirou, “I am sorry I didn’t raise

it with you sooner, but it was clear from the moment I saw Souja-dono's condition that he didn't return here alone. Also, that whoever saved him had reiatsu — because I found traces of it all over Souja-dono, evidence that this boy had more or less carried Souja-dono through the gate. He wasn't an ordinary Plus soul, and therefore he didn't come from the Spiritless Zone. Given all of these factors, I couldn't risk having him brought to Fourth and treated officially, in case the truth was discovered and he was put in danger. That's why I trusted it to Mitsuki, and to you."

"But we wouldn't kill a boy who broke rules helping one of ours," Kyouki objected. "Souja-dono was a Clan heir and a fine Vice Captain. I think we can trust his judgement in trusting this stray. If that's the only reason you kept the information back, Juushirou, you overreacted. It's like Guren-sama said — we're not merciless monsters. We can judge based on individual circumstances, and these were clearly exceptional."

"It's a bit more complicated than that," aware that Hirata's hawkish eyes were now fixed on him, Juushirou avoided his friend's gaze, turning back towards the other members of the Council with a troubled look on his face. "He did come here with the intention of helping Souja-dono, but he isn't a Rukongai stray. At least, not in the way you're imagining."

There was a pause silent enough to hear the sound of a pin dropping, then,

"He's Keitarou's missing son. Kohaku."

"Aizen *Kohaku*?" Immediately there was uproar, and Nagesu was on his feet, a stricken expression crossing his features. "Ukitake, are you saying you've been shielding the son of my cousin — an outlaw — a man under orders of death? Do you understand the ramifications for such a thing? Do you know the amount of danger you could have put everyone in by shielding such a man?"

"All reports we have suggest Kohaku is highly dangerous," Yuuichi agreed. "You should have brought him here with you, Ukitake... left alone at Thirteenth, who knows what damage he could be doing?"

"We might just have eradicated the father, when suddenly we're dealing with the son," Midori added bleakly. "Did Kai know about this, Juushirou? Is that the reason he won't talk to me about his mission to Rukongai?"

"He should be arrested at once," Guren decided. "Ukitake, this is a serious issue. Even if you lack Clan authority, you should know

that...”

“With all due respect, Guren-sama, I’m not going to hand over Kohaku to the Council,” Juushirou cut across the Kuchiki Clan leader, his eyes apprehensive but his words firm. “I didn’t come here today to do that. Without Kohaku yesterday, more of us would’ve been dead. Without his actions, his foresight, and his decision to help us, the battle might not have been won. That boy sacrificed everything to bring an end to this conflict, and I won’t see that gamble betrayed.”

“What do you mean, sacrificed everything?” Kyouki demanded, and Juushirou offered her a grim smile.

“Kohaku is the only one who could undo Keitarou’s control, other than Keitarou himself,” he said matter-of-factly. “All those who were possessed, yesterday, were freed by Kohaku’s power. Including your son, Kyouki-sama. Hakubei-dono was one of Keitarou’s puppets... because of Kohaku, he’s now safe.”

“And Ohara?” Hirata demanded, as Kyouki’s eyes widened, and Juushirou felt a suppressed whip of air sweep around the chamber as his friend fought to keep a hand on his rising emotions. “Juushirou, you mean the chimera, don’t you? The hallucination we all saw in Seireitei — that was Kohaku’s power?”

“It was,” Juushirou confirmed. “Kohaku’s power has been described as the power of prophesy, but he can make people see the past, the present and the future. He’s a very powerful young boy, but he isn’t like his father. He can be trusted. He’s on our side.”

“Or he’s waiting until we believe in him before he stabs us all in the back,” Yuuichi interjected sceptically. “I haven’t heard anything about any chimera, but I would wager it was a trick.”

“I don’t know what it was,” Hirata admitted. “But I saw it all and in vivid colours. I believe Juushirou, Yuuichi-dono. I think I saw a similar thing cure J... one of my other men, though he refused to give me all the information about how he had been freed. If I’m right...”

His gaze darted towards Juushirou’s quizzically, and Juushirou inclined his head.

“Yes, he did,” he agreed cryptically. “The man in question spoke to me after the event. He chose not to speak to you, because he knew about the Kill on Sight order and he didn’t want Kohaku to be hurt. He realised that Kohaku wasn’t acting as an enemy acts — and so he wanted to keep him safe.”

“To the extent that he lied to my face, twice,” Hirata’s lips twitched

in displeasure, and Juushirou offered a wan smile.

“I’m sorry,” he admitted, “but I imagine he did so for the same reason Shunsui and I kept this from you. We didn’t know how you would react. You didn’t have the girl, Sakaki, to take out your feelings on, nor did you have Keitarou in your sights. I didn’t want Kohaku to become a victim, and I didn’t want to put you in a situation like that. I’m sure your man felt the same way.”

“In short, you, Shunsui *and* my subordinate didn’t trust me to manage the Wind Hawk and react sensibly to the presence of my sister’s son in your midst, even if he was the one who brought Souja home,” Hirata gazed at his hands for a moment, then he sighed, nodding his head. “I don’t know. Maybe you’re right. I can’t guarantee how I might have felt, before yesterday... before facing Anabomi.”

“But none of this proves this Kohaku is an innocent party,” Yuuichi persisted, “or that the rescue of Endou Souja wasn’t some kind of a trap... even a conspiracy designed to win our trust. Plus, the circumstances leading up to the death of Anabomi still have to be fully investigated. Even more so if one of Keitarou’s children was at such close quarters — aiding and abetting his father, most probably. We decided on outlawing the offspring for a reason, Ukitake. Even more so, if he’s making Captains conceal important information from one another. Like father, like son.”

“It’s a pity you’re not more like your father, Yuuichi-dono,” A fresh voice cut through the discussion at that juncture, and Juushirou started, swinging around to see the door of the chamber suddenly open, a familiar figure silhouetted in its frame. Shunsui sauntered forwards, the casual pink *haori* still cast over his shoulders with no attempt at formality, and at the sight of him, Tokutarou’s brows knitted together in annoyance.

“Shunsui, the Council are done with you. You were dismissed, and this is nothing to do with you,” he began, but Shunsui snorted, shaking his head.

“With respect, Nii-sama, you don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said frankly, and Juushirou stared at his friend in disbelief. “Before you scold me, yes, I was eavesdropping, but that’s because you dismissed me without listening to everything I had to say. This is to do with Kohaku, and Juushirou isn’t the only one who’s been protecting him. I have been, too — albeit until yesterday, I still had my reservations about it.”

“What is this, a Gotei-wide conspiracy?” Guren demanded, as

Tokutarou buried his head in his hands in frustration, and Shunsui shrugged his shoulders.

“The person most hurting in Seireitei right now is Kohaku,” he said quietly. “There’s something that you need to know, though. Something regarding which even Juushirou might not know all the details. Yesterday, I killed Aizen Keitarou. I think everyone knows that. What they don’t know is that, without Kohaku, I wouldn’t have been able to do it. Without that boy’s intervention, we might all now be dead.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Yuuichi snorted. “Keitarou was one man, and even if First wasn’t on site, with the rest of the Gotei deployed and people returning from the Real World...”

“Keitarou was banking on them returning from the Real World,” Shunsui’s eyes had become flinty and cold, and despite himself, Juushirou stifled a shiver at their expression. “That was part of his plan. He wanted us separated, not because he thought Seireitei would be easier to attack in the absence of most of its Council Captains, but because he thought those Council Captains might make useful weapons, later on in the game.”

“What are you...” Midori faltered, and Shunsui offered her a hollow smile.

“Keitarou was going to Third Division to wait for you to return through the Gate,” he said quietly. “That’s why I killed him there. He wanted you to come back, battle-weary and off-guard, and he was going to use Chudokuga to possess you. Whether he would’ve managed to snare you or not, I don’t know — but from the battle reports in the Real World, I imagine you weren’t any of you at full throttle. He left those monsters there to wear you out, so you’d be easier for him to manipulate when you came home. He wanted to use you to kill the rest of us. Those who had survived the initial round, which was only the tip of the iceberg. All of these things he more or less confirmed to me, during our fight, so I have no doubt in their truth.”

“Shunsui...” Juushirou’s eyes rounded with horror, but Shunsui continued, not acknowledging his friend’s words.

“The day before yesterday, Kohaku asked to speak to me,” he continued. “He showed me what he had seen, in a way similar to what he did across all of Seireitei, though on a much more minor scale. He impressed on me the reality of the situation. He told me that I was the only one capable of stopping Keitarou, because my sword could not be

controlled by Keitarou's skill, a fact which Keitarou himself more or less acknowledged during our fight. He told me where Keitarou was going, why he was going there, and what he intended to do. He asked me to stop Keitarou from killing anyone else, and he knew, when he asked me, that it meant killing his father. I can only imagine what the boy is feeling now... but he chose to act to protect Seireitei. I believe in his integrity. And, more than that, I believe we're here to talk about his integrity because he chose to sacrifice something dear to him, instead of the things dear to all of us."

"It could still be a trap," Nagesu murmured, and Juushirou shook his head.

"It's not a trap," he said firmly. "Nagesu-sama, you said yourself that you don't believe in punishing an innocent for sins that weren't theirs. This is that exact thing. There's no evidence of Kohaku committing any crime at all, bar crossing into Seireitei to bring Souja home. Killing him would be murder. And it would be an act founded in fear, not justice."

"Also, if the Council really feels like storming the Thirteenth for him, they'll have to get through the Eighth as well," Shunsui interjected lazily. 'I didn't cut apart my own moral beliefs yesterday to see Juushirou or his pet stray punished for saving Seireitei, so if you decide to invade Thirteenth to take him by force, I'll be deploying some of my officers — *including* my Vice Captain,' this last with a pointed glance at the stricken Kyouki, "to protect Thirteenth's perimeter, just to even the score."

"*Shunsui!*" Tokutarou exclaimed, clearly angry now, but Kyouki shook her head, holding up her hands.

"No, Tokkun, wait," she said slowly. "If what Juushirou said is correct, then we're discussing slaughtering a young man who gave me back my son and prevented him and my daughter from hurting each other. If that's true, then I want no part of harming him. Whoever's child he is."

"He's also the person who brought Souja back," Hirata said quietly, and Juushirou gazed at his friend, relieved to see that it really wasn't feral anger, but genuine emotion that glistened as tears behind the wire-rimmed glasses. "It's more than just being in the right place at the right time, and now, I'm starting to understand everything much more clearly than I did before. If Kohaku had hurt Souja, Souja wouldn't have begged me to protect the lad. More than his own life, more than his need to report to me, Souja was concerned about Koku's safety. Souja knew something about Kohaku that meant he was

worried about the boy's safety. My son was smart, and his judgement of people was sound... but the fervent way in which he pleaded with Juushirou and I to protect the lad suggested he knew something more about him — something he either chose not to tell us, or decided he couldn't."

He glanced at Juushirou.

"We discussed, once, the possibility that someone saw my son's death before it happened, and wrote a prophesy about it. That was Kohaku, wasn't it?"

"Yes," Juushirou nodded solemnly. "Yes, it was."

"Then he saw the incident, and actively tried to stop it, didn't he?"

"He did," Juushirou agreed. "He waited to warn Souja, but he wasn't able to convince him to turn back, and lacked the skill to follow him at the speed Souja could move. By the time he reached the scene, Souja was already hurt. Kohaku chased away his sister, but it was too late for him to do anything but help Souja come home. Even now, he considers himself to blame because he failed, even though it wasn't his fault. Kohaku said he spoke to Souja first at the hut, where Keitarou used to confine him, and tried to persuade him to return to Seireitei. Souja wouldn't go. I don't know exactly what else was said during that conversation, but Kohaku did say that Souja knew he was connected to Keitarou based on that brief meeting. Despite that, Souja decided to protect him. Even from you and I, Hirata, by choosing not to tell us the truth. He didn't see Kohaku as his enemy — and I agree with you. He's not someone who could be easily fooled. Knowing those things, he still judged Kohaku as his ally — and on his deathbed, ensured his protection. I've acted on his request ever since, although I've only known Kohaku's real identity since very recently. Since... since his brother Katsura assaulted the Seventh Division."

"A suspect who is still at large," Guren pointed out.

"Yes, but we can't punish Kohaku for the crimes of which we know Katsura is guilty," Shunsui pointed out. "One brother is not as good as another. If and when Katsura is found, he'll have to face justice for what he did and nobody will stand against that. He murdered innocent people and that can't be ignored. Kohaku, however..."

He shook his head.

"In the brief moment in which Kohaku impressed on me his vision and his request, I think I understood the battle he'd been fighting inside of himself," he said softly. "The fight between his loyalty to

those he loved and his desire to do what was right. I think he tried to not do anything, and hoped it would all go away. I've felt that way, too, in the past — but I've learned you can't take that line, because things only get worse. I think Kohaku realised it too, and probably, that's why he came to me. He knew I could kill Keitarou where he couldn't... and put things right."

"At the very least, perhaps the Council ought to hear this boy's words for themselves," Retsu offered her suggestion, and at the calmness in her words, Juushirou suddenly had the uncanny sensation that the healer's silent deductions had gone far beyond simply placing Kohaku in Rukongai. "I was never happy with the Kill on Sight order, and I requested then that if any of Keitarou's children should be detained, we should evaluate that circumstance appropriately. Now, that seems prudent."

"Retsu-sama is right," Tokutarou admitted. "Unforgivably rude as my brother has been, we can't uphold a Kill on Sight order when there are so many variables in play. We don't know anything about this Kohaku, and we ought to assess his guilt or innocence directly, and hear what he has to say for himself about what happened here yesterday."

"I think the Council should speak to him too," Juushirou rallied his courage, meeting the gaze of his friend's brother head on as he remembered the promises he had made to himself that morning before leaving Thirteenth's barracks. "But with all respect, Tokutarou-sama, yesterday's battle was won here in Seireitei, largely in the absence of the Council of Elders. Hirata aside, it was the other Divisions — those *without* Council authority — who worked together to protect Inner Seireitei under highly dangerous circumstances. Because of that fact, Anabomi is dead, as are several good officers, and Mikiyama Hyakken is still fighting for his life in the care of the Fourth. Despite that, we won. Protecting Kohaku was a part of why we prevailed. Without him, Hakubei-dono, Sekime-taichou and Souryou-kun would probably not have been saved and more people might've been hurt. Without him, Keitarou might still be alive. Without him, we might all have fallen foul of Keitarou's scheme. Those of us left behind acted independently because the Council, despite receiving warnings about the risks of going to the Real World, fell into Keitarou's trap and jeopardised the lives of everyone here and everyone there. If Kohaku's role must be 'assessed' for guilt, perhaps the Council of Elders should be so assessed, too — as I think the deaths of the Ninth Division officers are less on his conscience than on your own."

"Juu..." Shunsui let out a low whistle at the tone of Juushirou's

words, but Nagesu sighed, removing his spectacles and rubbing his brow as though trying to remove a sudden headache.

“Ukitake is right,” he says heavily. “We can jump to all the conclusions we like about this son of Keitarou, but so far, the only crime we can pin against his name is having an unsavoury father. Keitarou is my cousin. I am also tainted by a blood connection to this man, yet I hope you won’t adjudge me a traitor because of it.”

“Ukitake is *rude*,” Midori cast Juushirou a pensive glance. “I’ve never heard you be quite that directly offensive towards us before, Juushirou — you care that much about this boy’s safety that you’d risk our wrath to protect him?”

“Kohaku made the choices he did because he didn’t want me to die,” Juushirou said sadly. “He chose, actively, not to let me die. How can I let him die in return? He didn’t think he’d survive yesterday, he gave everything he had to project his illusion across Inner Seireitei and break Keitarou’s spell. One of Eighth Division found him collapsed in the middle of the street and he had to be carried back to safety, but even then he still was concerned about the *Senkaimon*, and about people coming back and being at risk.”

“The *Senkaimon* that Shunsui broke?” Kyouki’s eyes became slits, and Shunsui looked rueful.

“Well, Kohaku might have helped,” he admitted. ‘I only added the final touches. Really, it was a mangled mess by the time I got to it — Kohaku destroyed it so you couldn’t come back and walk into Keitarou’s trap. But I will still pay for it, Nagesu-sama,’ he added, turning to the Third Division Captain. “Kohaku told me his spirit power was Kyouraku in nature, so it seems only fair that I do.”

“Paying for that is the last of my worries right now,” Nagesu said grimly. “The deaths of Anabomi Seizuku, the events at Ninth, the invasion and everything else we discovered in the Real World is a much bigger concern. We need the truth, even when sometimes it is hard to hear, and bit by bit, we will have it.”

He glanced around at his companions.

“A vote on whether to stay the Kill on Sight order pertaining to Aizen Kohaku?” he asked. “Are there any objections?”

Juushirou held his breath, but the room held its silence, and Nagesu nodded.

“Then by decree of the Council, the Kill on Sight order is so rescinded,” he said wearily. “Ukitake, your manner of phrasing was

not the best, but your words held truth and I take particular responsibility for that fact. We will speak to the boy — we must — but unless any new evidence comes to light suggesting his complicity, we will not pursue further charges, nor will we persecute him for coming from Rukongai. Inner Seireitei is indebted to the actions of those left behind, and will honour the lives of those lost in the fight. There are many witnesses we need to speak to. Kohaku will be one of them, but for the time being, he belongs to Thirteenth and that is where he should stay.”

“And for being rude?” Juushirou looked apprehensive, and despite herself, Kyouki chuckled.

“This time, you get away with it, since Shunsui was ruder first,” she said amiably. “It takes courage to face up to Clan leaders and speak your mind. I trust this boy is worth your conviction... I look forward to having the chance to meet him, and thank him in person for helping to save my son.”

Author’s Note: Shikiki’s Power

So I know Orihime can reverse pretty much anything after pretty much any amount of time, but this didn’t suit me. It seemed plotkai to think that Shikiki would have the power to magically fix everyone immediately after such a fierce round of fighting. I gave her limits, first, way back when she was eight years old and she couldn’t bring Daisuke back from the dead. I added to it when she could only heal Juushirou because his spirit was still there. Then Shirogane’s bleeding — she could stop it ,but she couldn’t replace the blood. And now, as her experience evolves, so do the parameters I’ve put on her abilities.

Shikiki is not a healer, she is someone who can reverse things. Orihime, by contrast, rejects their ever having happened. In this respect, Shikiki is different from Orihime, and I wanted her to be. Shikiki has always utilised her spirit power around reishi and she has only been able to heal people providing the parts she needs of them are there to heal with. In Shikiki’s case, then, healing someone like Hyakken whose arm wounds have begun to heal could be counter-productive... and reconstituting a missing arm that was eaten in the Real World some time earlier somewhat beyond her capabilities.

So, perhaps this isn’t true to the kind of power Orihime has. But it’s the kind of power Shikiki has, and honestly, one I’m more comfortable writing.

73. The Shadows Of Death

Chapter Seventy One: The Shadows Of Death

“I don’t think I’ve ever been so rude to the Council of Elders,”

Juushirou sank down onto his cushions beside the window of Ugendou with a rueful sigh.

“At least, not all of them, and not all at once. I almost wonder how I had the courage... but with everything you said, I didn’t think I could make it much worse.”

“You shocked even me,” Shunsui lounged against the window, setting a ceramic bottle on the ledge between them. “But it seems to have done the trick. I didn’t think you had it in you to give them hell — at least, not to their faces. I was impressed, Juu... and so I wasn’t going to let you fight the battle alone.”

He grinned, but Juushirou could see the shadows still lurking in his friend’s eyes.

“I’ve corrupted you more than I thought,” he reflected. “Maybe I should be proud of that fact... our long acquaintance has impacted on you as much as it has on me.”

“Mm,” Juushirou reached a hand over to pick up the ceramic vessel, turning it so that he could see the stamp. His eyes widened.

“Vintage Kyouraku sake? This is from your cellar... and I don’t mean the stuff you usually crack open when you come to Thirteenth to visit. What’s the occasion, or are you hoping that, if you get me drunk, I might forget to ask you all the awkward questions that we haven’t yet discussed?”

“The occasion is that I need something strong to drink and I don’t feel like drinking it alone,” Shunsui admitted, taking the bottle and glancing at it, before settling himself down on the floor opposite his friend. “Sora’s thrown me out of the Division for the day, and with good cause. I’m not fit to be there, so she gave me this and sent me on my way. She thought I’d come to you eventually — though I don’t suppose she saw my impromptu appearance in your hearing as part of my itinerary.”

“She threw you out?” Juushirou blinked, and Shunsui nodded.

“She said I needed to work out things for myself and not try and hide from it by burying my head in unimportant Division minutiae,” he said resignedly. “Besides, she had some things to go over of her own with Kanshi and Kikyue. Hirata assigned them to oversee the investigation at Ninth, and so they’re doing their best to puzzle through all of the details. I’m not a part of that, and apparently, nor am I wanted on site. Most of the Division is still far, far away, thanks to my overly cautious deployments, so it’s not as though there’s a lot to supervise.”

“And Shizuka?” Juushirou asked, setting two fresh *sakazuki* down between them, and Shunsui frowned.

“I have to be the mean Captain and discipline her properly, too,” he admitted. “It terrified me, Juu, when I realised she had disobeyed me and stayed behind. Thank you for keeping her at Thirteenth. If she’d run into the battle, Keitarou would’ve used her against me and I couldn’t have done what I had to do with her there. I couldn’t have hurt another person I cared about because of that man’s sword... so I’m grateful. To the boy too, actually... since she tripped over his legs.”

“Well, I have a full squad on site and we’ve been tied up with helping at Eleventh and Twelfth, so having Shizuka to help has been a positive. It’s no problem,” Juushirou assured his friend. “She and Ketsui train together all the time anyway, and she slots in as an honorary member because she’s here so much as she is. Besides, she did find Koku and she did help him, so it all worked out well in the end. Don’t be too hard on her, Shunsui. She was worried about you because of how much she cares about you... and you know that she’s just following the examples she’s been set.”

“Meaning I’m a lousy role model?” Shunsui demanded, and Juushirou shrugged.

“Better she didn’t see what happened at Third, even though she knows what did,” he said matter-of-factly. “We can dance around it all evening, but it’s not something you can brush off and avoid. Sora threw you out because she knew it would take you time to get your head around it. If a bottle of good sake and my company can help you do that, then I’m all ears. Besides, I think you owe me some explanation... in particular, for not telling me yourself the things Koku admitted after Keitarou was dead.”

Shunsui pursed his lips, and for a moment there was silence, as the older man scooped up the sake bottle, pouring the clear liquid carefully into the two *sakazuki*. His hand trembled slightly, and

Juushirou was too perceptive not to notice it, but he made no comment, simply waiting for his companion to compose his feelings.

At length, Shunsui sighed.

"I know," he agreed reluctantly. "I thought you might be cross with me... and that you'd want an explanation. I'm just not quite sure how to give it. This morning, when I saw you outside the Council, I waited for you. I wanted to see if you still spoke to me... or if my shedding blood behind your back would change our friendship."

"Why would it do that?" Juushirou scooped up his *sakazuki*, casting his companion a look of surprise. "I don't say I want you to go out there and slit throats for fun, but this was different. It was the necessary removal of a very dangerous man and taking his life will undoubtedly have saved countless others. You did your job, Shunsui — why would I hold that against you?"

"Because I remember, just as I'm sure you do, that when Sensei first told me Katen Kyoukotsu might be able to bring down Keitarou, you said you'd not leave me to do that alone," Shunsui said gravely. "But I consciously made the decision to shut you out of it. I never told you what Koku had asked of me, and I acted on it, without sending to Thirteenth at all."

"That part of it did bother me, some," Juushirou admitted. "Koku explained a little, but he was incoherent, and I don't suppose I fully understand everything he tried to say. I know that protecting me was a part of it — though I'm sure I've told you that I don't need your protection. Especially not now, when I'm a Captain in my own right."

"You don't need my protection," Shunsui agreed, "and Keitarou, he wouldn't have killed you. Not this time. I know that being in Seventh District taught you a lot about defending your own life, and even if you never killed anyone with that sword, you wouldn't have hesitated if Keitarou had posed you a threat. It wasn't that."

"Then what you told the Council? About him controlling others and using them to decimate Inner Seireitei?"

"Koku showed me that future," Shunsui lifted his *sakazuki*, draining it in one gulp. "He showed me you, dead and bloody on the cobbles of the Thirteenth. If the other Captains had come back through the *Senkaimon*, Keitarou was going to use them. It wasn't just the image, Juu. In that split-second, it was like I saw it through Keitarou's eyes, not Koku's, and I felt the intent and the spite behind it. He was going to make sure every single member of Thirteenth was dead, but his key target was you. It wouldn't have mattered if you had been in the fight

with Keitarou, because he alone had no way to kill you. But his puppets, they could. And fighting an ally — doing what Hirata had to do — that's not something you could do without a moment's thought."

"You'd be surprised," Juushirou's eyes darkened, and he shook his head. "I wouldn't relish it, Shunsui, but if an ally was in the position Anabomi was, I wouldn't hold back. I saw the illusion Kohaku made us all see. I saw how Sakanoue suffered, and I know that, in Minaichi's position, I would've done the same as he did. I wouldn't have needed time to think. If there was no way to save them, I would've put them out of their misery. Just like you put me out of mine, all those years ago. You suffered for that, but I sometimes think that, if our roles had been reversed, I would've suffered less for making the same choice."

"Oh, so you'd have happily killed me and walked away?" Shunsui arched an eyebrow. "Thanks. And I thought we were friends."

"No, silly," Juushirou shook his head, a wry smile touching his lips. He took a sip of sake, setting the *sakazuki* aside. "I wouldn't have liked it, and I wouldn't have been all right. But I have... I suppose, I know that sometimes, those decisions have to be made and we have to make them. I don't say that you don't — I know you do — but I think, after spending so long in Seventh District, I could say when something had to happen for the benefit of many, and acted accordingly. I could have killed Keitarou, this time around. I didn't want to, but I would have, if he had threatened my people directly. And I could've stopped Anabomi, too — because nobody would want to live like that. You're the one who's always hated the idea of killing someone, even out of duty. I know you're capable — and now we've both seen the proof — but it bothers me that you'd shoulder that burden alone, and double your own guilt by not letting me help."

"Don't be foolish," Shunsui snorted, refilling his *sakazuki* and sipping the contents. "Everything you say is probably true, but in this particular scenario, all bets are off. You can't pretend that that boy doesn't bother you. You said, this morning, that he was upset. You sent men to protect him, not to find Keitarou. You might've been able to do as you say, if Koku hadn't been involved — but he was, and that changed everything. Koku is an innocent and you knew it — therefore doing something to hurt him would've been much more difficult for you to face."

He reached out a hand to pat his friend's arm.

"You're an idealist, I'm not," he added. "You can kill the bad guys and protect the good guys, but not everything is black and white. I don't see anything but shades of grey, and I don't know, most of the

time, if there's any such thing as good or bad. Even here in Seireitei — holding the swords, making the decisions... that doesn't make us right. We learned that, years ago, the ones in power aren't always those who promote justice. Still, even though taking Keitarou's life was against my grain, I could do it. I knew it had to be done, so I did it. It leaves a bad taste in my mouth, and I probably won't sleep for a while... but Koku came to me because he knew I was capable. Not just in spirit power, but in my mindset. He knew that, if it became necessary, I could kill him as well, even if it meant you hated me. You would never have been able to do that... which is why Keitarou's found so many different ways to manipulate you, even without using Chudokuga, over the years."

"Harsh judgement," Juushirou said reprovingly, "on both our characters."

"That doesn't make it any less true," Shunsui shrugged. "Listen, Juu. You went at the Council with all guns blazing, today. You put your life and your *haori* on the line for that boy's sake. I know you were right. I believe Koku is on our side, now, even if I doubted him at first, and that's why I backed you up — though if I'd needed to, I would've abandoned my post and dragged you into exile before they tied you to the proverbial stake. I could've shared what he said with you, and you could've helped me, but I didn't want that. Not because you needed my protection, but because I'd rather fight that kind of battle with my own spirit power and on my own terms. I didn't want you dragged into Katen Kyoukotsu's games... especially this one, because I took a big risk. I hadn't ever used it in battle before, and I didn't know if I could defeat a genius with strategy. Fortunately, I did, but he could've killed me. I didn't need a distraction or you near the *Senkaimon*, in case I was defeated and Koku's vision came true. And, there was one other reason, too."

"Which was?"

"That boy," Shunsui said earnestly, tapping his fingers against the ceramic of the sake bottle. "I didn't want you to be complicit in the death of Kohaku's father."

"But..."

"I know that your interest in him is more than just political, and it's more than just charity," Shunsui continued simply. "A long time ago, I remember you saying that, even if you didn't have your own children, maybe, one day, you'd find someone else like Shikiki who needed your help. Whether he asked for it or not is debateable, but I think you've made Koku that person. You defended him in there like a

father would defend his son, and you've been like that with him since the start. I couldn't make you a part of what I had to do. I had to do it, and I don't regret it, but it was my job and not yours. You're someone Koku trusts. Do you think that relationship would've been able to continue if you had been party to this plot?"

"As I understand it, this plot was Koku's idea," Juushirou objected, but Shunsui shook his head.

"No. It wasn't," he replied softly. "It was what Koku *saw*, it wasn't his idea. He had two futures in his mind, and he chose to bring one of them true — the death of his father. He said that he'd not acted in the past, but that this time, he had to, else lots of people would die. If the other future had happened, it would've wiped us all out, Juu. You, me, everything. He made me see bits of it, and I'm glad I never got to see the whole thing. Maybe that was when I believed that he really didn't want you to die. He mightn't have been looking for a mentor, but he found one and I believe that you're more to him than just his keeper."

Juushirou pursed his lips.

"Koku loved Keitarou," he said sadly, and Shunsui nodded.

"I think maybe *because* he did, he wanted to stop him from hurting other people," he reflected. "It's complicated, Juu, when your father isn't a hero. There are things in that boy I understand — maybe it's his Kyouraku blood, or maybe it's not. I just... I'm all right with being the one who took Keitarou away from him. If I'm that, you can be the one to support him from this point on. Whatever he decides, I think he'll look to you for guidance. And you're the one who should give it. If he needs to hate me, he can. I just don't think that he can survive here, in Seireitei, if he has any reason to hate you. He's very fragile... more than I realised, and I don't mean because of his spirit power. He may be an adult in years, but really he's a child who never knew if his father loved him — and that's something I can relate to better than you ever can. I needed to be the villain, and so I was. Now you can be the hero... and take Keitarou's place in Koku's life as mentor and guide."

Juushirou stared, momentarily taken aback, then he sighed, shrugging his shoulders.

"I'm not his father, and I won't try and replace Keitarou, it wouldn't be right," he murmured. "I wish I could say you were wrong, though I know I can't. It has been like that. I want to look after the boy. When Keitarou came to take him from Thirteenth, he spoke as though Koku

was a thing, not a person, and it made me so angry. So many things about that man's behaviour towards his son... I think that might've made me more resolved to kill him than I would've been before, so perhaps it was better things happened the way they did. I'm sorry for the burden it put on you, and I'm sorry for the grief it's caused him, but after today's clash with the Council, I'm not angry you did it. And I will keep looking out for Koku. We have a chance to stop the rot, and I intend to stop it. Keitsune-sama's death caused Keitarou's life to be ruined before it had a chance to begin. Koku's been through a lot, but he isn't beyond saving, not yet. Thirteenth — and me — we'll do everything we can to make sure that, even if Katsura and Sakaki were beyond our help, Kohaku isn't."

"Rehabilitating the Aizen name wouldn't go amiss with my kinsfolk in District Eight, either," Shunsui pointed out wryly. "This is where your talents come into their own, though. You have a way with people, and that talent helped, this time, to prevent a much bigger disaster."

He offered a droll smile.

"And, as I understand it, Mitsuki-chan's already slotted herself nicely into the role of surrogate mother," he said flippantly. "You should take the opportunity to keep her here, now you've a child to take care of."

"*Shunsui!*" Juushirou's eyebrows shot up in indignation at this, but Shunsui spread his hands unrepentantly.

"She was gone a long time, but you wouldn't know it," he said evenly. "If you let her disappear again, Juu, it'll be more fool you."

"We haven't talked, yet, about the future." Juushirou admitted. "We both have things we believe in doing, and that hasn't changed. Nor has the Clan and District divide. I'll do what I can for Koku, first and foremost, and so will she. Anything else can wait until the world has returned to some level of normality."

"Speaking of which, I heard that the Council intend to speak to Minaichi about the Rukon," Shunsui's expression became thoughtful. "I wonder how he'll play that. I mean, assuming that what Koku showed the world was true... but I imagine that it is."

"I don't doubt that it is," Juushirou agreed. "I feel guilty that I ever doubted him — but I can't see him now as the kind of person that Keitarou would make a spy. Minaichi might not be very likeable, but he is duty-bound and we can trust his integrity. That vision showed as much. None of us knew that Kusakawa Shougo was the one

experimenting in Rukongai, and I'm sure there's more to that than we know."

"Perhaps it connects with Anabomi's death, judging from the little I gleaned from my Vice Captain before she told me to get lost," Shunsui reflected pensively. "They found something at Ninth with a Third Division crest, and Sora doesn't think it's anything to do with the main house. It doesn't take a genius to tie the threads between that and Anabomi."

"But Anabomi isn't our spy, is he?" Juushirou looked troubled, and Shunsui shook his head.

"No," he agreed. "Anabomi was secretive and private, but I find it hard to believe a proud Kuchiki would turn against his family and side with the man who brought them such grief. No, I think that Anabomi was a victim of misunderstanding caught up in something even he didn't understand. Why he had those items is anyone's guess, but if he and Kusakawa were friends, it's quite possible that he was looking after them without knowing what they were. I'm sure that it was Kusakawa's potion that turned Anabomi, judging by how Hirata described their encounter, not Keitarou's *reidoku*. Whether Keitarou knew it was there, I don't know, but it seems possible that, if Keitarou was still acting inside Anabomi during his fight with Hirata, that mad scientist might have made him drink it against his will. Or, he thought it was something other than what it was... and drank it in error."

"Either way, his death could've been prevented if we'd known about Kusakawa sooner," Juushirou rubbed his temples, "but with Kusakawa long dead, I don't suppose anyone can blame Minaichi for not reporting everything. Not if he didn't have proof."

"Well, if Anabomi didn't know what Kusakawa was doing, and Minaichi did, but isn't the spy, that means we have to look elsewhere," Shunsui observed. "The only trouble is, even if we find them... I'm not sure we'd ever prove it."

"You have a suspicion, don't you?" Juushirou asked sharply, and Shunsui nodded.

"There were no Urahara at Third," he said grimly. "Twelfth Division never sent people to guard the *Senkaimon*... the Gate that Keitarou needed to launch his ambush on Nagesu-sama and the others."

"Sekime?" Juushirou's eyes almost fell out of his head, and Shunsui shrugged.

"I know, it sits ill with me too, but she's the only person I can think of who would have been close enough to Kusakawa to know anything, and to want to exact revenge of some kind for his death," he admitted. "I never thought of her as the subversive type, but then, I don't know her as well as I could."

"I thought I knew her, but if you're right, I wonder," Juushirou looked stricken. "But no, Shunsui, wait. She gave Nagesu-sama's information to me. She gave me data which ultimately helped Ketsui and Izumi to forge their theories. And she was used by Keitarou to attack Minaichi. Why would he do that, if she was working for him?"

"Because he didn't?" Shunsui's eyes became grave. "Juu, when Keitarou spoke to you, did he mention Anabomi? Did he mention what he'd done since arriving in Seireitei?"

"Mm," Juushirou looked grim. "He bragged about it, to get a rise out of me. Why?"

"Well, if he said to you what he said to me, then the answer's in his own words," Shunsui said simply. "Juu, Keitarou took control of the Captains of the Ninth and Tenth Divisions, and the Tenth Vice Captain. He never said anything about the Captain of the Twelfth Division. And..."

"Sekime was pretending to be under his control, in order to avenge her Captain's death?" Juushirou paled. Shunsui shrugged.

"It's a theory," he pointed out. "We have no proof of it, though, so it may be way off the mark. It all fits nicely, but for two things. One, that Michihashi apparently reported to Nagesu-sama late last night that Mareiko-chan was under some kind of foreign control when she attacked her Division, and secondly, that Minaichi apparently reported the same thing when he came here for help."

"Enishi said so," Juushirou confirmed, "which is probably why I never considered what Keitarou said to me at all. Keitarou might've been trying to create a scapegoat, but he might not. Michihashi might've been mistaken, since he was doped with kidou... but why would Minaichi lie, if she came for his life?"

"You saw the vision," Shunsui said frankly. "Minaichi was *in love* with Mareiko-chan, and if he was then, his silence means he probably still is now. Of course he wouldn't betray her. Not even if she wanted him dead. Just like you've failed to mention Mitsuki's little indiscretion over Katsura to the Council thus far."

"Gah," Juushirou buried his head in his hands, and Shunsui reached

across to pat his friend's shoulder reassuringly.

"I know. Intrigue never sits well with good sake, does it?"

"I'm getting used to the combination," Juushirou groaned. "All right. So what do we do? Do we mention these suspicions, or do we let it lie?"

"I think we leave it to the Council," Shunsui said matter-of-factly. "Keitarou is dead, and whatever secrets there were floating around about Kusakawa, now they're all coming out. I like Mareiko-chan, Juu. I think she's a good Captain — and I don't imagine, after Nagesu-sama's heard everything about Kusakawa, he's going to want to hear about more of his kin committing treason. We'll see what they come up with, and how things pan out."

"But if she's dangerous..?"

"In that chimera, Kusakawa said that Mareiko didn't know anything about what he was doing, and he intended to kill her," Shunsui said softly. "I can't imagine that she knew those things. I don't know, Juu. I can't picture her as a vicious, traitorous criminal against Seireitei. She had beef with Minaichi, and she may have done some silly things to create an opportunity for revenge. But... we can't prove anything, and so I suggest we let it lie. Sometimes it's better the devil you know. If we're wrong, no harm done. If we're right, we can keep an eye on her without her knowing we suspect anything. And, if she is really a traitor, and not just an idiot making bad decisions under Keitarou's considerably persuasive influence, then we'll have had a chance to build a meaningful case against her."

Juushirou let out his breath in a rush, reaching for the sake bottle. Slowly, he nodded.

"All right," he admitted. "We'll do it your way. We'll keep it between us, and see how things pan out. I agree that enough dust has been stirred up for one lifetime... we should at least give it a chance to settle, so we can see who everyone really is."

"And there's been no change since then?"

Kai cast his companion a quizzical look, his brow furrowed in deep consternation. "Saku, are you certain you searched her for any and everything? I know you're usually thorough, but perhaps when she screamed and fainted, maybe she was trying to distract you, and..."

"I'm certain, sir, I had searched her and I was preparing to take her down when the message came from Endou-taichou," Saku spoke

politely, but Kai could tell from the glitter of frustration in her eyes that she was growing tired of repeating the same information over and over again. "She screamed, she fainted, she was taken downstairs and since then, she's been like this. We've kept a close twenty-four hour watch on her, in case it's a trap, but if it is, it's one that's operating on a long haul agenda."

"I see,"

Kai rested his hands against the bars of the cell, his gaze running over the chamber's sole occupant one more time. Eiraki was being held in the securest part of the Second Division's prison accommodation, but her room was clean, if simple, and furnished with the absolute necessities on account of her status as a Clan *hime*. As a result, it was not as dank or as stale as some of the other cells within the fledgling Maggots Nest complex, and even from here Kai could see a fresh basin of water and a small, reinforced mirror set on the side for the prisoner to wash and neaten her appearance as she saw fit.

It had not been touched, and nor had the plate of food that sat on the shelf alongside it.

Eiraki was sitting on the floor of the room, leaning up against the cold outer wall, with a rough shawl pulled around her shoulders. This had been on Kai's own instructions for, when he had first received the alert from Saku, he had been anxious about the prisoner catching cold or taking sick. He had seen it as a ploy to get herself transferred, but as time had gone on, and Eiraki had maintained her vigil, Kai had started to believe something else was seriously wrong.

Eiraki was silent, her eyes vacant, her lips moving occasionally but forming no kind of word. Her clothes were rumpled and unkempt, unattended since her arrest, and her hair had not been touched since the journey from Rukongai.

"And she's not moved since the last time I came down here?"

"No, sir. She's not moved at all, and she didn't even react when I brought her her food," Saku shook her head. "I don't know if it's some kind of hunger strike, or if she's taken something, but it's as though her body's here and her mind is somewhere else completely."

"I'm not a healer," Kai said grimly, "but I have seen this kind of behaviour before. My cousin, Tomoyuki was like this, when he took Eiminyaku in an attempt to kill himself. It's a slow acting, debilitating drug, and if she's taken it, probably, we won't be able to do anything about it. Still, if you're sure you searched her, that seems unlikely. Unless she took it somehow before we left Rukongai... but that would

mean she knew that we were coming, and expected to be put under arrest.”

“I don’t think she took anything, sir,” Saku pursed her lips, leaning up against the wall opposite the cell door. “Whatever this is, I don’t think it’s an attempt at suicide. Midori-sama trained me in all the necessary arts of a Shihouin, and I understand about Eiminyaku and its uses. Eiraki-hime is an Endou, however, not a Shihouin. Would she even know of such a potion, even if she had the materials available to her in Rukongai?”

“I put nothing past the self-proclaimed wife of that man,” Kai admitted. ‘All right. Open the door. I’ll go and see if I can speak to her. Don’t worry,’ as Saku looked doubtful, “if she tries anything, I’ll restrain her before she gets a chance to slip our hold. We’re not letting her go anywhere... Keitarou might be dealt with, but Eiraki has her own charges to face and it’s for us to make sure she faces them.”

“Yes, sir,” Saku sighed, but nodded, producing the heavy key from the chain on her obi and sliding it into the lock of the door. It creaked slightly as she turned it, then the door swung stiffly open, just enough for Kai to slide through the gap and into the cell beyond.

Eiraki did not react to his entrance, and as Kai approached her, he felt an eerie sense of déjà-vu, remembering Onoe’s blank stare. And yet, as he knelt down before the young woman, reaching out to touch her gently on the arm, he realised that Saku was right. Eiraki’s eyes were empty, but they were not dead and soulless. Rather, it was as though they had clouded over, like the light had been extinguished from within to leave only darkness and confusion in its place. Eiraki had not taken any drug, he realised with a jolt, as he cupped his other hand beneath her chin, turning her face to his and examining her with more care. This was something deeper, something darker.

“Did Keitarou do this to you?” he wondered aloud, and, as though stirred by the sound of her husband’s name, Eiraki flinched slightly, her eyes flickering briefly before returning to the same, dull gaze as before. She had not pushed away his touch, Kai realised, nor was there any sign of the feral defiance he had seen up until the announcement of Keitarou’s death had spread through Soul Society. He sat back on his heels, contemplating.

“Saku?” he called, and Saku’s face appeared at the cell door. “Saku, this sounds extreme, and I hope you’ll forgive me for asking you, but I want your opinion on something.”

“Yes sir?” Saku looked startled, and Kai chewed on his lip.

“Have you ever been in love with anyone?”

“Sir?” Saku’s eyes became huge, and Kai looked rueful. He shrugged.

“I don’t want to know any details about your personal life, past or present,” he assured her quickly. “It’s not that. I just... I’ve never been in love with anyone, so I can’t pretend I understand its complexities. I wondered if you had any experience that I didn’t in that regard.”

“Is it relevant to Eiraki-hime’s condition for me to answer, sir?” Saku was clearly uncomfortable, and Kai nodded.

“I think so,” he said apologetically, and Saku sighed.

“Once, I was,” she admitted reluctantly. “It was a foolish match, and nothing came of it. But I loved him very much.”

“To the point that you would do anything for him?”

“Sir, I don’t see what this...”

“Eiraki’s condition,” Kai cut across her protestations, jerking his head towards his silent companion. “It seems crazy, but I was wondering. In your opinion, do you think love could do this to someone?”

“Love?” Saku blinked, and Kai frowned.

“Or lost love,” he amended. “Eiraki seems to me like she’s in some kind of shocked trance. I wondered... if it was possible to love someone that much. If Eiraki’s current behaviour isn’t drug-induced, or an act, but grief and shock because her husband is dead. But I don’t really understand being in love, so if you do, I’d appreciate your input. Like I said, personal details aren’t important. I just want to work out what we’re dealing with and whether there’s a way to treat it. Eiraki needs to stand trial for murdering Ribari-sama. Like this, though, that won’t be possible, and before we can cure her, we need to know what the cause was.”

“Oh, I see,” Saku’s features visibly relaxed, and she offered a rueful smile. “I’m sorry, sir. Those memories are still a little tender inside of me, and I prefer not to bring them out. But...”

She frowned, and Kai saw her gaze flit towards Eiraki thoughtfully. Slowly she nodded.

“In my opinion, a broken heart can be as devastating an affliction as any physical wound,” she said softly. “Losing someone you love is not nice, Kai-dono. If the one I loved had died... even though we had

parted... I think I would have dealt with it very badly indeed. Perhaps not quite like this, but... my situation is not like Eiraki-hime's. She left her whole life to be Keitarou's wife, and she made him her world. Perhaps such a blow can cause this kind of shock... but how to cure it, I do not know."

"We'll have to ask someone from Fourth to come and examine her," Kai decided, getting to his feet and dusting down his hakama absently. Eiraki did not react, nor did she show the slightest bit of interest when Saku opened the door once more to let her supervisor out, and Kai stepped over the threshold, letting out a heavy sigh.

"That complicates things," he admitted. "I hope it's temporary. Guren-sama has waited a long time to get justice for Ribari-sama's death."

"Shall I go to Fourth, sir?" Saku asked quizzically. "It seems quite urgent, and the Council will want a report — so will Midori-sama. They'll want to know that we're doing everything we can — so quicker seems better."

"Yes, go. Go and bring someone back with you, if you can," Kai agreed, running his fingers through his thick violet hair with a grimace. "And Saku?"

"Yes, sir?"

"Heaven forbid me ever to fall in love, if it lays you open to this kind of weakness."

Saku cast him an amused glance, and Kai held up his hands.

"Respond to that and I'll discipline you," he warned her with a grin. "Go, fulfil your orders. I'll stay here till you return. Eiraki's a top priority prisoner and whatever her condition, there's no letting down our guard."

It was growing late, the sun having long since set over the horizon, yet from First Division to Thirteenth, Seireitei remained a hive of activity.

At Seventh, the Captain's office was in semi-darkness, and Kikyue pushed back the door cautiously, wondering whether her father was even present, for the shadows of the chamber seemed to suggest he had left the barracks to attend to some business elsewhere. At first she could not see him, but then, out of the darkness, she saw a figure move, and she hurriedly bowed her head, slipping through the divide into the room proper and closing the door softly behind her.

“I’m sorry to disturb you, Otousama,” she said softly, “but there’s a message from Nagesu-sama. Yunosuke-dono brought it — apparently the Council of Elders is to meet again tomorrow, to address the issues relating to Minaichi-taichou and the vision we all saw, and he wanted to make sure in advance that you would be present. You’re the only Council member who saw the chimera, so apparently they need your testimony in particular.”

“I see,” There was a slight rustling sound, then the room became illuminated as Hirata activated the Kidou lamp nearest to his desk. “It’s fine, Kikyue. I’ll send a Hell Butterfly to Nagesu-sama directly — I’ll attend, of course. It’s my duty, so I shall.”

“Otousama, are you all right?” Kikyue hesitated, then ventured the question, and Hirata glanced at her, offering her a faint smile. He lifted his hand, gesturing for her to approach the desk, and she did so, standing a respectful distance away. Her Captain cast his glance over her, then he nodded.

“I’m all right,” he admitted. “But it’s such a strange feeling, after so much has happened. I suppose I’m trying to make sense of it all — and there’s so much to make sense of, it’s hard to know where to start.”

“Sir?” Kikyue looked confused, and Hirata sighed, taking off his glasses and setting them down on the desk before rubbing his eyes.

“I’ve made a decision regarding Souja’s post in the Division,” he said softly. “That, and other things.”

“Oniisama’s...” Kikyue’s eyes became clouded, and she nodded her head. “You mean, Vice Captain?”

“Yes, that’s what I mean.”

There was a moment of silence between them, then Kikyue spoke.

“It’s Hajime-dono, isn’t it?”

A further silence, then Hirata inclined his head again.

“That is the way I’m thinking,” he admitted. “It’s traditional for the spot to be held where possible by the heir to the Clan, and in my case, I have no heir. I have you, but... Kikyue... I...”

“I don’t want Oniisama’s badge,” Kikyue said firmly. “I never did, and I don’t now. I’m not ready, Otousama. The things that Niisama did, I can’t do, not yet. I’m a different kind of person. I know that... I know it best of all because of what happened when Keitarou’s son attacked Seventh Division. I can be rashly driven by my emotions and that’s not something a Vice Captain should do. I can hurt people who

aren't my enemies, and besides..."

She bit her lip, then,

"Oniisama was an Endou, but he had so much control over the predator inside," she whispered, tears glittering on her lashes as she remembered her brother. "I'm not like that. I'm... I'm not like him, or like Ojiisama. I'm like you, Otousama. I find it hard, sometimes, to control my kestrel's spirit. I know Grandfather made sure you were held back until you were in a position whereby you could take office in Seventh and not cause harm. I'm not at that point yet... and I don't want to become the kind of Endou who kills first and asks questions later."

"Kikyue..." Hirata gazed at her in surprise, then he smiled, retrieving his glasses and toying with them between his fingers.

"You have already grown up a huge amount," he observed, and Kikyue could hear the relief and pride in his voice. "Your brother would be proud of you for that, you know. Souja always believed in you one hundred and ten percent. I know he'd approve of what you just said to me, and I promise, I'll do all I can to ensure that you're able to progress in the way you want. Hajime is a good, solid officer, and I can trust him to fill Souja's rank and do the mundane parts of the duty to his utmost ability. He isn't as potentially powerful as we both know you are, but that's the other reason for my decision. I don't want a child of mine in the Vice Captain's seat again, not if it means putting their lives in danger... and the power that an Endou fosters can easily bring danger. I'm glad you understand. It helps that you do."

"Oniisama would approve," Kikyue said simply. "I'll give Hajime-dono my full support, Taichou. You have my word."

"Good," Hirata returned the spectacles to his nose. "Then when things have settled down, I'll submit his name for approval. I haven't spoken to him about it yet, but I trust there'll be no problem. He's proven himself quite adequately alongside you during the crisis, and that should be rewarded."

He sighed.

"Kikyue, at the Council Meeting this morning, I discovered some other facts which I think its important you know," he continued, and Kikyue could hear the note of caution in her father's weary tones. "You know, I think, that Juushirou and Shunsui were both called to speak before us?"

“Yes, sir,” Kikyue was surprised. “But, with respect, I thought that the matters that passed through that session were restricted and private? I know it had to do with the death of Aizen Keitarou, and I’m glad he’s dead, but I’ve been busy with Kanshi-dono and Sora-dono, putting together the pieces of what we found at Ninth for the official report they’re compiling.”

“Ah, of course,” Hirata nodded, then, “it isn’t really Keitarou’s death that I want to talk to you about. It’s something else, which may... potentially... have greater repercussions for all of us.”

“I’m listening,” Kikyue’s brows knitted together, and Hirata let out another sigh.

“You know, I think, that you aunt is in Second Division custody?”

“She’s not my aunt, sir, she’s a traitor to Seireitei.”

“Indeed,” Hirata pursed his lips. “I suppose that’s true. In your eyes, Eiraki wouldn’t be anything else. In any case, it hardly matters. Whether she’ll ever be tried for her crimes is currently under question. I had a message from Kai earlier on this evening to say that she collapsed following the news of Keitarou’s death. They’re watching her in case it’s a trap, but someone from the Fourth has seen her and believes she’s fallen into some catatonic state of shock. What will happen in the long run I have no idea... the matter of Ribari-sama’s murder still requires justice, but I’ve heard nothing from Guren-sama’s quarter and clearly, if she remains in that state, she’s unlikely to be tried.”

“I don’t really care,” Kikyue said honestly. “Like I said, sir, to me she’s not my aunt. She’s a traitor and a woman I never met. I know she’s different to you, but to me, that’s all she is. It’s for the Council to deal with her as they see fit, just like they did with Keitarou.”

“Yes, perhaps,” Hirata paused, then, “but it’s not really Eiraki, but her children that I wanted to talk to you about.”

“Her children?” Kikyue stiffened, remembering the bloody state of Souja’s body. “I know Joumei killed the girl who took my brother away. The other one, the one who invaded here, we’ve not found a trace of a body, but I’m sure we’ll keep looking. Hajime-dono is determined, too. We’ll find him and bring him in, sir.”

“I wasn’t talking about him,” Hirata seemed hesitant, as though apprehensive about what to say, and Kikyue stared at him in consternation.

“Otou... sama?”

“Eiraki and Keitarou have another son, Kiki.” Hirata admitted, and at the old, affectionate nickname, Kikyue swallowed hard.

“You haven’t called me that since I was tiny,” she murmured. “Souja-nii did, often, but as soon as I started using a sword, you said I should be addressed as an adult and you’ve never called me Kiki since.”

“I know, but this is me speaking to my daughter, not my Third Seated officer,” Hirata said heavily. “Kikyue, it seems that Juushirou and Shunsui kept an important secret from me — from both of us. That secret is the fact that the boy who brought your brother back... who intervened and chased away the girl who killed him... who, even, warned him that his life was in danger in the first place... was Keitarou’s second son, Kohaku.”

“*What?*” Colour drained from Kikyue’s features, and Hirata reached across the desk to brush his fingers against hers.

“I know. It was a shock to me, too.”

“The boy I... the one who...” Kikyue’s fingers slipped over the hilt of her sword, and Hirata nodded again.

“Yes. He’s been in the care of the Thirteenth since then. In that time, he apparently put himself on Juushirou’s mercy and changed sides. The one who projected the chimera was Kohaku. From the meeting we had this morning, it’s clear that he played a big part in our victory yesterday... and was complicit in helping Shunsui to kill Keitarou. I don’t know this lad, Kikyue, I haven’t met him. But Juushirou was willing to stand before the Council and risk everything to protect him, so I believe he is probably not as his siblings were. It seems... he is not an enemy, and the Council are not judging him as an enemy. There is no proof of guilt in his quarter, so, although they will meet him, the Council intend to let him go.”

“And you wonder if I’ll take it upon myself to kill him after that happens?” Kikyue asked quizzically. Hirata shrugged.

“I don’t know,” he owned. “Juushirou didn’t tell me because he expected that kind of reaction from me. Before I faced Anabomi, perhaps that would have happened. My anger didn’t dissipate with Anabomi, nor was it sated by Keitarou’s death, but I suppose, in that fight, I saw how a shinigami can become a monster bent only on killing. An Endou shinigami is little better if he or she allows that killer impulse to overtake them. I can’t bring back my son, Kikyue, and it’s my greatest regret. However, I will not kill the young man who brought him home. Whoever he is... the anger I ought to feel, I

don't."

"And if he challenges you? Uses his bloodline to try and claim favour with the Clan?" Kikyue murmured. Hirata nodded.

"You've seen that, too?" he asked. "I thought you would. In the absence of an heir, of course, something must be done there. I will talk to Juushirou, and see what can be negotiated. I am intending to declare your aunt's marriage to Keitarou null-and-void, if I can, and if this young Kohaku is willing to accept the stigma of illegitimacy, I intend to accept him and move on."

Kikyue was silent for a moment, then,

"With respect, sir, are you holding back because you think it's the right thing to do, or because you don't want to make Juushirou-dono cross with you?" she asked astutely. "If he's backing this boy's cause, surely..."

"I don't want to kill someone who's done nothing to deserve being killed for," Hirata said pensively. "I think that's a good value to cling hold of, even if it doesn't come naturally to people like you or I. Isn't that why we shelter Joumei? Besides, Souja wanted it this way. He begged for us to protect the boy, and even though Juushirou took the promise on, it extends to me as well. If Kohaku does something to make himself an enemy of the Endou or of Seireitei, I won't hold back. If he challenges me, I will do my level best to eradicate the danger... but from what I've heard, that seems unlikely. He doesn't appear to possess an Endou spirit. I'm hoping that we can negotiate, so that the Clan don't feel threatened by his existence."

Kikyue sighed.

"I have spent a lot of time thinking about when I attacked him," she admitted. "I felt bad for it, when I knew he'd helped Oniisama. Now you're saying he was Keitarou's son, and so maybe my instincts weren't wrong, even if my target was. But... Oniisama... did he know, do you think? Did he know who helped him, the day he died?"

"I believe he must have, or at least, suspected," Hirata agreed. "He wouldn't have asked so desperately otherwise, if he just thought the boy a random stray. No, your brother made this decision for us... and more than upsetting Juushirou, I don't want to unsettle Souja's ghost. He was a voice of reason to the hunters inside both you and I, and I want to keep that element of him with us, even if he's no longer here. I believe that his death was the first step in bringing Keitarou to justice, and he was a sacrifice of war to a greater cause. He didn't die as an Endou, Kikyue, but as a shinigami, and sometimes... we have to

see ourselves as shinigami, and forget the Clan traditions that bind us together.”

Kikyue was silent for a long time, digesting this, then,

“I won’t hurt him, Otousama. The boy, I mean. I won’t do anything to touch him,” she said eventually. “Oniisama felt that way, so I will try to, too. Even if he is Keitarou’s son... he did bring my brother home and I am grateful that he did. So long as he accepts that his bloodline is unsuitable for the Clan, and doesn’t seek to take my brother’s place... I will leave him alone.”

“When he stands before the Council, I will meet him for myself,” Hirata agreed. “Then, I suppose, I’ll know what kind of man he is. If Souja, Juushirou and Shunsui all wanted to defend him, there must be something worth defending. And I know full well the danger of being judged according to your bloodline. I grew up in Seimaru’s shadow, and so if Kohaku proves benign, I won’t try and prevent him from finding his own life here.”

“As your nephew, sir, or as a stranger who happens to reside here?” Kikyue asked sharply, and Hirata shrugged his shoulders.

“It depends on the boy and on the way things turn out,” he admitted. “For the time being, I simply wanted you to know the situation. I won’t tell you how to view him or expect you to judge him as family, and I don’t know, yet, if I will ever consider him so. I will ride home at first light, and have already sent messages to your grandfather to summon together my key advisors, as I don’t think this matter can be left to rest without their knowledge and involvement. I will tackle them on my own and see what transpires, but I wanted to be certain that you wouldn’t take matters into your own hands. The Kill on Sight order has been rescinded, and to act against him now would put Seventh in more trouble it can’t afford.”

“There’s Tenichi’s hearing, too, to settle,” Kikyue acknowledged grimly. “You are going to stand by him, sir, aren’t you? So he lost his temper and his wits a little... we need him, and I won’t believe he was ever in league with that man.”

“I will listen to the evidence and judge him when there is a verdict to consider, not before,” Hirata said sombrely. “I understand your feelings, Kikyue, but right now, I intend to let Seireitei justice speak for our Eighth Seat. I will abide by the decisions they make. If he’s proven not guilty of treason and collaboration, then I will accept him back when his punishment is over. But there are bigger issues to resolve before he’s brought for judgement... not least the business at

Ninth.”

“Mm,” Kikyue frowned. “I don’t know, Otousama. Mikihara is still a comatose, bloody mess, and there’s no other officer above Sixth Seat there. The whole place is in shock and chaos, and I can’t see any solution for it but to close down the Ninth until such time when there are suitable officers to lead it. Ryu-dono has been at the barracks helping to sort things out, but it’s clear he won’t take the role on permanently, and Mikihara might yet die or be so maimed he can’t return to office.”

“As I said, there are bigger issues to resolve,” Hirata agreed. “Still, at least one piece of good has come out of this. Have you been to see Ohara today?”

“Not yet,” Kikyue admitted. “I’ve been at Eighth a lot of the day, and then at Ninth, gathering things for the report. I heard that he was awake, though. Nakata said he’s seen him... apparently he’s come out of whatever Keitarou did to him completely now.”

“I understand that was another part of Kohaku’s chimera. He had the power to break Keitarou’s spell, and he freed Joumei from it, too, although Joumei withheld that information from us when we asked,” Hirata mused. “However it happened, though, it’s a relief to know there was some purpose behind your bringing Ohara back alive. Seventh are low on seated officers at full fitness, so we need him.”

“I’ve missed him,” Kikyue admitted honestly. “I didn’t think I ever could, because he drives me up the wall most of the time. But when he turned on me in the forest, I saw in his eyes how afraid he was to hurt me, and how much he’d rather I killed him than the other way around. I suppose he has more use to him than I’d realised — and it will be a help, having an extra head and pair of hands to do tasks. It’s just a pity that Anabomi-taichou’s office is so much cleaner now we’ve been investigating and sorting out... I would’ve liked to see his reaction to all that blood.”

“Ohara is an Endou. He would’ve done the job as per his brief, no matter how much he might’ve complained about the mess,” despite himself, Hirata’s lips twitched into a smile. “I think you should go see him, though. You are his patrol officer, and he is your second. I have given him today to rest, but I will expect him up and about tomorrow, since he doesn’t appear to have any permanent damage.”

“I’ll go now, then, sir,” Kikyue decided. “I’ll keep in mind all you’ve said to me and I’ll think it over, I promise. I won’t do anything rash about it... I’ll trust the Council and Oniisama and leave it alone for

now. Without Tenichi and with Nakata still injured, my patrol is short-handed anyway. I'll go brief Ohara on all the things he's missed. I'm sure I can find him extra chores to do to make up for his absence."

She bowed her head, withdrawing from the chamber and pulling the door softly shut behind her before making her way slowly along the corridor that led to the officers' quarters, deep in thought.

Her father's preference for Hajime as his next Vice Captain had not shocked her, nor had it upset her in the slightest, for she had already resolved in her own heart that, if Hirata had suggested promoting her, she would have refused and recommended the Fourth seat in her place. Hajime was older, more experienced, more objective and, she owed to herself, more capable of managing the duties Souja had left behind. Since her brother's death, she had been forced to feel many things that she would sooner have never encountered, but because of it, she had also been able to see herself in a more open light, viewing and assessing her own flaws and resolving, bit by bit, to overcome them.

I'll be the shinigami you wanted me to be, Oniisama, and I can do that just as well at my current rank. You won't see it, maybe, but it doesn't make it any less important that I do it. If I remember everything you taught me, and the way you managed things, then it will be like your existence here was important and your influence remains. I can't hear you speak out loud any more, nor feel your hand on my shoulder when I'm frustrated or upset. But I can see you, in my mind's eye, and in my head, I can always hear your voice. When Father called me Kiki, it reminded me of that close childhood we shared, and maybe, it's strengthened my bond with him now, too. Everything you left behind, Souja-nii, its in safe hands. Hajime-dono and I, between us, we'll do Father proud. And whatever my destiny as an Endou hime... as a Seventh Division shinigami, I will not let anyone down.

With this resolve in her heart, she reached her destination, rapping sharply on the chamber door and waiting impatiently to be called in. There was a moment of silence, then she heard the cultured tones of her subordinate, and she pushed back the door, stepping purposefully into the room. Unlike the office, Ohara's chamber was brightly illuminated by kidou lamps, for the occupant had been reading, but at the sight of her, he hastily tossed his book aside, scrambling to his feet. He was dressed, Kikyue realised with a jolt, robed in plain, fresh *shihakushou*, though his sword still lay in its sheath against the wall, and his dark hair was loose over his shoulders, as opposed to fastened in its normal warrior queue. The expensive silver clasp that normally held it, engraved with the hunting bird of the Endou Clan lay on the bedside unit, and as Ohara got to his feet, Kikyue was aware of his gaze darting towards it, as though he had been caught with his guard

down.

“You don’t need to,” she said, before he could reach over to pick it up. “Father told me you’d been given today at ease. I’m not conducting an inspection, and you’ve been indisposed. I didn’t expect to see you in uniform — I had supposed you were still in bed, especially considering it’s late.”

“*Hime*.” Ohara swallowed hard, bowing his head towards her, and Kikyue offered him a brisk, rueful smile.

“I’m not cross with you. Nobody is,” she assured him. “If you’re not up and out bright and early tomorrow to help me clear up the rest of the Ninth Division, then I will be, but right now, I’m not. What happened out there wasn’t your fault. We all know that. You should forget it. It’s not an Endou trait, to dwell on trivial things.”

“To attack my Clan’s *hime* is not a trivial matter,” Ohara raised his gaze, and Kikyue could see the deep self-censure and shame in his eyes. “Whatever the reason, my actions were unforgivable. You should not have forgiven me. I raised my blade to you and would’ve killed you. Why didn’t you kill me?”

“Because I’m done giving members of Seventh over to the whims of a madman,” Kikyue said matter-of-factly, gesturing for her companion to sit down and he did so, hesitantly perching on the end of the bed without taking his gaze off her for a moment. Kikyue was struck by the uncertainty in the normally pompous man’s aura, and, as she regarded him anew, she could see how pale he still was, the shadows beneath his eyes telling of the strain he had been under.

In a moment, she understood.

“You weren’t unconscious, were you?” she demanded, and Ohara flinched, starting at the sudden sharpness in her voice. “All that time, between the forest and now... you were paralysed, but you were still able to hear us, weren’t you? You were awake the whole time.”

Ohara faltered for a moment, then, slowly, he lowered his head in acknowledgement.

“I didn’t intend eavesdropping on any of the conversations held here,” he said gravely. “The secret of the silver-haired boy, I understand now, and I will speak of it to noone, because it was not for my ears to hear. You have no idea of the terror involved, *hime*, in having your whole body under another’s control, then in being frozen and unable to move, unable to sleep, unable to do anything whilst a demon plays havoc with your heart. Then... hallucinations... and

suddenly... the demon was gone.”

“And Father released the kidou, when he knew the spell was broken,” Kikyue murmured. “I didn’t know. I thought I had stunned you... I didn’t realise you were conscious for the whole time. I’m sorry, Ohara. That was my misjudgement. I wanted to save your life — I wasn’t intending to torture you for what happened. You didn’t mean to hurt me. I know you never would.”

“*Hime?*” Ohara blinked, and Kikyue grimaced, pulling a graphic face.

“You probably know about Tenichi, too, if you overheard us talking about Joumei.”

“Yes,” Ohara’s expression became grave, and Kikyue nodded.

“Then you’ll also know that I’m resolved,” she said quietly. “This is Seventh Division. It is the province of Endou and a home of shinigami, it isn’t for outsiders to come in and rip us apart. I expect Tenichi to be returned to us, even if he has to serve some time before he is, and when he is, I’ll turn him into a proper, ruthless fighter who won’t shame the uniform a second time. You are my patrol second, so I want you to absorb that mentality, too. Whatever happens from hereon in, I’m not willing to sacrifice Seventh’s squad members along the way.”

“Those sound like the words of a Vice Captain, *hime*,” A little of the swagger had returned to Ohara’s voice at this, and Kikyue snorted, shaking her head.

“I won’t be,” she said matter-of-factly. “Taichou hasn’t spoken to him yet, but he’s spoken to me, and I’m speaking to you, on the understanding you don’t discuss it with anyone until its formally arranged. The new Vice Captain will be Hajime-dono... and I intend to support him wholeheartedly. It’s what I want, Ohara, so whatever your personal feelings, I expect you to do so too.”

Ohara was silent for a moment, then he shrugged his shoulders.

“When I was forced to attack you, Hajime-dono and Nakata put their lives in peril to ensure your safety. Neither one of them hesitated for even a second,” he said honestly. “I have considered both beneath me based on birth, but between them they acted bravely before my blade. Furthermore, whatever you say, my shame at having attacked you will not fade easily. If those are your wishes, *hime*, I will not contest them. I will do as you instruct me, to the best of my ability, and attempt — even if it’s only a little — to ease the burden of my sin.”

“The world is changing,” Kikyue said simply. “We have to change with it, you as well as me. Ruthless Endou killers and position based on birth are going to be the thing of the past. The way Taichou was talking, I think it’s something that can’t be stopped. You and I have to prove ourselves just as much as anyone else, regardless of how we were born. Forget what happened in the forest, Ohara, and move on. I don’t need a second who’s constantly fussing about things that happened beyond his control. I need you to be ready to deal with new recruits and new patrol schedules and whatever Seventh Division requires from this point on.”

She grinned, shrugging her shoulders.

“Strikes me that there might be a vacant Fourth Seat spot up for the taking, if you do well,” she added flippantly. “There’s not much blood to wade around in in Ninth, now, lucky for you, so you won’t ruin your *tabi* like I did yesterday — but if you work hard and help, I’ll recommend to Father that that spot be given to you at the same time Hajime-dono vacates it.”

“I don’t deserve a promotion!” Ohara looked aghast. “I tried to kill you! I...”

“No. No you didn’t.” Kikyue crossed the room, grabbing the man by his shoulders and, despite her diminutive stature in comparison, she hauled him to his feet, giving him a firm shake. “You tried your hardest not to release your sword. Your lips are still swollen and cut because you bit them shut to prevent it from happening. You wanted me to kill you, and you tried tooth and nail to make it stop. I saw courage and determination in you then, Ohara, which won you more points of praise with me than anything you’ve ever said or done before. I thought you were a self-absorbed idiot, to be honest, but now I know there are times when you’re not, and that means I know I can trust you as my patrol second.”

“A self-absorbed...” Ohara visibly wilted at this scathing criticism, then, “that’s truly how you see me?”

“It’s the Ohara Masayuki that comes on duty regularly,” Kikyue was unperturbed. “I’d rather he didn’t bother showing up for work tomorrow, though. I want the man who was willing to die to protect me, only I’d rather you didn’t do the actual dying... because that’d be messy and there’s been enough killing already.”

Ohara stared at her for a moment, then he looked sheepish.

“You truly are not a bit like an Endou *hime*, no matter how I try to think otherwise,” he murmured. “You must realise how confusing that

is for me. I was raised to understand a different kind of woman, but you are a shinigami as much as Fukutaichou was, and you do not need a weak man like me to protect you. Since I became your patrol second, I believe I have known that, which has made my job harder. I will be ready early tomorrow, you have my word. I might sleep tonight, but in truth, I'd rather be active and involved than spend more time in my bed. You can count on me, I promise. You chose to save my life — and whilst you may not appreciate more eloquent language to this effect, I believe that life is truly yours to instruct as you see fit.”

“We can definitely do without the flowery language, or the unnecessary compliments,” Kikyue said thoughtfully. “Oniisama was convinced you were trying to secure my hand in marriage, but I don’t know that I ever intend to marry, and if I do, well, it’s not something I’m ready to consider yet. Most Endou *hime* are married off early and left at home while their menfolk do all the work, and that doesn’t suit me at all. I won’t be that kind of *hime* — I’m a shinigami and I intend on being one until the day I die. So if your father did send you into the squad to secure me as your bride, you should tell him that it won’t happen. I’m not looking for a mate. I don’t need one. I’m looking for a patrol second — one I can count on, through thick and thin, and that’s who I want and need you to be.”

Ohara did not respond to begin with, then a sad smile touched his lips.

“Father has never said anything to that effect,” he admitted. “I chose this path of my own free will and I have formed my own loyalties where you are concerned. Whatever I thought before I entered the squad, serving under your command has only strengthened the sensation, and even if it causes you displeasure to hear it, I confess that I think it unlikely my views will change. There is no *hime* in this Clan or any other who is your like or equal. Well, my mother taught me that some men are fortunate in the women that attract them, and others face a greater challenge. I am not your equal in either birth or ability, nor am I deserving of your attention even if you should wish to make a match. Still, my convictions are unaffected. I am at your command, Kikyue-hime. Now and always, in whatever way you see fit. Though, even if I concede your terms, I cannot guarantee that there will never be an appropriate suitor waiting to marry you. With Souja-dono gone, and Sayuri-hime such a child still, the future of the Endou is uncertain.”

“It’s not uncertain,” Kikyue shook her head, her cheeks pinkening slightly at Ohara’s honesty. “Souja-nii wouldn’t want us to fall apart

because of a decision he made, and so we won't. I can't inherit the Clan, but I can still support it. Everything else can wait. We have work that needs doing, and I intend to make sure you help me do it. Nakata is still injured and not much use with that arm, but Joumei's been moonlighting as a shinigami in Tenichi's absence, and so tomorrow I intend to take him, and you with me to Ninth to finish cataloguing everything in Anabomi's office. I know the last time you two met, you were threatening to kill him, but since we're officially on the same side, I'll trust you can work together. There's a lot still to do, and I've two Vice Captains breathing down my neck over this so that they can finalise their report."

"Nakata told me what had happened at Ninth, and I realised how fortunate I was all over again," Ohara spoke gravely. "I will be there, *hime*. You have my word, I shall not let you down."

"Then I'll see you tomorrow," Kikyue nodded her approval, turning to leave. At the door she paused, glancing back at her fellow officer.

"Sleep," she added. "That's an order. The past is the past, it can't hurt you, and I'll need you alert and on song tomorrow. I won't tolerate laziness or lax mistakes because you aren't fully rested."

With that she left the room, shutting the door behind her but, as she did so, she felt a warm sense of relief stir inside her heart as she made her way back along the hall.

Oniisama is gone, but Seventh Division are still fighting and, bit by bit, everything is coming back together. Whatever he endured between then and now, I'm glad Ohara is alive and I'm glad he's still there as my patrol second. Whatever happens with the Endou now, too, we'll face it together, as a squad should. That's what Souja-nii would've wanted to see most of all... us working together for the benefit of everyone. Maybe even this child of Keitarou's, too. I don't know how I feel about that yet, and I didn't mention it to Ohara, but maybe Father is right about letting him move outside of his father's shadow and live his own life. Endou are good at clinging onto grievances, but there's nobody left alive for me to hate, not now. I'm going to try and move on with my life without my brother's guidance, and I'm going to make my own decisions. I'm going to preserve the life of my men as much as I can, and make sure that I fight as a shinig

mi to defend the things shinigami are here to defend.

She paused outside the door of Souja's old chamber, running her fingers briefly over the seams in the wood, then she lowered her hand.

Watch over me, Souja-nii. When you died, your soul left the pyre as smoke. Instead of hunting down your enemies, I hope that you'll watch

over us instead. Help us. Protect us. Keep us strong and focused on the things we need to do. You were always my greatest inspiration. Now I'll make sure that I become a shinigami you could be proud of, no matter how long it takes.

Author's Note:

Message to a regular reader and reviewer who currently has PMs blocked — apologies for not replying to your last couple of reviews but the PM block also prevents review replies. So please don't think I'm ignoring you O.O.

74. The Ties That Bind

Chapter Seventy Two : The Ties That Bind

“Atsushi-dono, you may enter the chamber now.”

From the shadows of the entrance, a slim figure began to advance the short distance that separated the door from the arc of seats that held the eight members of the Clans, and from his position to the right, Hirata ran his gaze over his fellow Captain, trying to read his comrade's emotions. Minaichi's eyes were sombre, his expression giving nothing away, and as he reached the heart of the Council Chamber, he dropped down on his knees, giving the regulation obeissance without a moment of hesitation.

“Raise your head, Atsushi-dono,” Nagesu's words were soft, and edged with pain, and at his instruction, Atsushi raised his head, meeting the gaze of the Third Division Captain without a word. Silence reigned between them for a moment, then Nagesu sighed, reaching up to remove his glasses. He rubbed his brow, clearly troubled, and at his action, Atsushi's lips thinned.

“You sent for me, Nagesu-sama,” his words were impossibly calm, and Hirata felt certain that, if he hadn't seen that image of his comrade, desperate, alone and bloody in the Rukon valley, he would never have believed this man had any emotion at all towards the circumstances of twenty five years before. It was the unflappable, military persona that Atsushi had lived by in the whole of their acquaintance, but Hirata found himself reassessing the man in light of new evidence.

“You can be under no misapprehension as to why the Council wanted to speak to you, Atsushi-dono,” Guren's words were quiet, but his voice had the uncanny knack of carrying, and Atsushi's eyes narrowed very slightly, his gaze flitting towards the seat held by the Head of Sixth District. “I trust you have come prepared to speak to us candidly and without reserve.”

Another moment of silence, then Atsushi nodded.

“I seem to be in no position to do anything else,” his words were edged with resignation, and Guren nodded.

“Then we would like to hear, please, your account of what happened in the Rukon, twenty five years ago,” he said simply.

“A statement was given to the Council at the time that incident occurred.”

“A statement which has been roundly suggested to be false,” Nagesu rejoined the conversation at this point, and Hirata’s eyes widened slightly as he registered the genuine anger in Nagesu’s tones. “I am sick of being deceived, whether for my benefit or to my detriment. I am clearly considered a fool by all and sundry, that so many things can go on behind my back. I am obviously simple in my trust in the words of my comrades, but I will tolerate it no longer. I will have the truth of what happened in Rukongai from you, Minaichi Atsushi — here, before the Council as witness, so don’t believe that you can conceal it any longer.”

“Nagesu,” Kyouki held up a placatory hand, but Nagesu shook his head.

“A kinsman of mine was killed in the Rukon, and a kinswoman took serious injury,” he said quietly. “I am entitled to know the truth of that event from the lips of one who was there, and, by all accounts, closely involved in everything that occurred.”

Atsushi’s expression darkened slightly at this, and he nodded.

“Very well,” he said flatly, curling his hand around the hilt of his *zanpakutou* and pulling it from its sheath. Gently he lay it down on the ground before him, gesturing towards it.

“Minaichi-dono?” Tokutarou’s brows knitted together, and Atsushi mustered a hollow smile.

“Here before you lies the weapon which took the lives of Sakanoue Heiji and Kusakawa Shougo,” he said simply. “I killed both of them. If the Council wishes to pursue justice for their deaths, so be it.”

“There appear to have been mitigating circumstances,” Hirata interjected, and Atsushi arched an eyebrow.

“There are no such things as mitigating circumstances when you are sent on a military mission,” he said coldly. “With respect, Hirata-dono, the events in the Rukon all stemmed from decisions I made as Captain of the Eleventh. I have responsibility in everything that occurred. I am not such a weak man that I shy away from the bald truth.”

“Yet you chose not to report anything of the kind to us when you returned to Seireitei?” Yuuichi asked archly. “If you take that attitude, Minaichi, why did you not lay your sword before the Council then and give them a true account of what happened? Last night, I read Father’s

copy of the depositions following that incident, and I know precisely what evidence you gave. If you weren't trying to shield yourself from judgement, and you insist on taking the view that there are no 'mitigating circumstances' involved, then explain yourself to us. You are claiming to have killed two men through incompetence... at the very least, explain why we should not add deception and an attempt to avoid judgement to the list of criticisms."

"Yuuichi-sama, such words are harsh," Retsu said reprovingly.

"I am only speaking to my kinsman in the way he has chosen to report the incident to us," Yuuichi was unrepentant. "Well, Atsushi-dono? Your explanation, please. As your Head of Clan, I wish to know the truth."

For the briefest of moments, Hirata saw Minaichi's passive expression falter, and with a jolt he realised that, beneath the harsh, military exterior, his fellow Captain was only just holding himself together.

"Yuuichi-sama," he began, but Yuuichi held up his hand to stop him.

"Atsushi-dono is a Yamamoto, and I will hear his words," he said frankly. "This is not a matter for the Endou to trespass into, not at this point."

Atsushi closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them, meeting his Clan Leader's gaze head on.

"It was my intention to make a full and detailed report as to the death of Sakanoue Heiji, and I was fully prepared to submit my sword and resign my rank, even receive further punishment for my actions in that regard," he said quietly. "He was a Vice Captain I considered extremely talented and promising, and his loss was to the detriment of Eleventh Division. However, in order to explain Sakanoue's death, I needed... other evidence."

"Evidence relating to my kinsman, Kusakawa Shougo?" Nagesu asked softly, and Atsushi nodded.

"Sakanoue and I had been suspicious of his actions for a while," he admitted with a sigh. "It was my poor judgement that decided we would confront him in Rukongai, because I believed it to be a sound location, away from Seireitei and the possibility of his calling on his Clan or escaping to his territorial holdings. Kusakawa held higher Clan rank than either Sakanoue or I, and was deeply in Nagesu-sama's trust. He boasted as much before me, how he and his father both had

benefited from the *reidoku* scandal and were beyond suspicion in the eyes of the Urahara Clan. He said that Seireitei would blame Keitarou for everything he did, and I had no hard proof of what he was doing. I needed... we needed... him. We needed to arrest him, and make him confess. There was no other hard proof.”

“There was proof,” Nagesu’s expression became grim, and he reached down to scoop up the collection of papers that had rested at his feet. “Proof found in the Real World, by myself and Midori-sama during our sojourn there. Evidence enough to convict Kusakawa Shougo on the highest level of Clan treason and of several counts of malicious behaviour towards Soul Society, including the perpetuation of illegal experiments begun by his late father Daigo — experiments which I strongly believe we encountered in the Real World, and as a result of which, suffered grievous injury.”

He glanced at Kyouki, who nodded, her eyes becoming sad. She made no comment, however, and Nagesu continued, his tones still strained and edgy.

“Given all that we discovered beneath that mountain, the evidence against my kinsman is heavy indeed. With even a fraction of this material presented before the Council, he would’ve been sentenced to death, without question.”

“I had no knowledge of such a place,” Atsushi confessed. “Eleventh Division members sometimes patrolled in the Real World, but I visited it but rarely, and I did not realise his research had spread to that location, too. The outbreaks I knew of were entirely in the Rukon, and so I... erroneously, it seems... believed that his research base was in the Rukon territories.”

“In this regard, Nagesu-sama, Minaichi cannot be considered at fault,” Tokutarou put in evenly. “You and your kin did not know of this research laboratory, either — although from your own account, it was established in the time of Shougo-dono’s father, Daigo. This treason was afoot long before Minaichi was even given his Captaincy — and, most likely, a Captain from outside of the Urahara could not possibly have guessed that things ran as deep as we now know they did. He made a fair judgement based on the evidence before him — evidence which related to outbreaks of mutation in the Rukon Valley.”

“I suppose that is true,” Nagesu sighed, but relented, accepting Tokutarou’s point. He returned the papers to their original position, folding his hands in his lap. “I am sorry, Atsushi-dono. Tokutarou-sama is correct. If we could not know it, as kin, you had no way to realise the depths of his experimentation. You said your suspicions

were aroused — will you tell us how and why that occurred?”

“I worked with Kusakawa more than any other Captain,” Minaichi said frankly. “I also went to the Rukon more often than any other. Although there was suspicion towards Aizen, because of his actions against the Kuchiki, I knew those times and dates did not add up. There were days we were dispatched to deal with mutations during times which we clearly knew Aizen Keitarou was not only in Seireitei, but launching direct attacks on members of Guren-sama’s family. Kusakawa was the one who reported to the Captains that there was a discrepancy. This was his arrogance — he told me that he did so in order to make it seem as though his science was incompetent, for he was certain that the Gotei would conclude the massacre in Rukongai to be Keitarou’s work. He wanted to make people look away from him, but his words made me look towards him instead. Seireitei had no other suspect, so I began to think the unthinkable... that perhaps, the real enemy was an ally.”

He glanced down at Mokizuki’s blade, pursing his lips.

“I don’t spend time forming social alliances with my comrades. I work with them, and expect them to hold the same values of duty and discipline I do,” he added. “For a few trips, I simply observed Kusakawa, and how often he disappeared from my line of sight. I never saw him kill any of the mutated creatures, yet when we returned, he always reported a number of kills, and the right number of bodies materialised to meet his claims. There was something... unnatural in the whole business. I could hardly charge into Twelfth and demand truths, however... so I sent Sakanoue, whose pleasant manner I felt would be more disarming. We found no physical evidence, but for both Heiji and I, something was... wrong. I felt certain that Kusakawa’s involvement in the Rukon business was deeper than the Gotei understood, so I made the decision to confront him and try and force a confession from him, through whatever means necessary. We had tried to locate his research facility in the Rukon, but we never found it. I went back to Rukongai a couple of times to look for it, after Sakanoue died, in the hope of locating it and putting the whole truth before Seireitei, but I never found it. My only hope in exposing this was to take Kusakawa himself. I intended to do that, but ultimately, I failed. He confessed to me in full, or rather, boasted of it — but that confession was worthless the moment he lost his life. He could never be made to repeat it, and so my proof died with him.”

“If you had made report to us, we could at least have investigated your claims. Even if we had arrested you, we would’ve looked into the incident thoroughly,” Midori remarked. “That’s the job of the

Onmitsukidou, not to mention the responsibility of the Council. Serious crimes committed by Captains are frowned upon in the strictest sense. To find you guilty, or prove you innocent of Kusakawa's murder, we would've left no stone unturned."

"I think it possible that those stones had already been turned, though, Midori-dono," Guren spoke wearily, and Midori turned to glance at him in confusion.

"Guren-sama?"

"Some odd paraphernalia was found at Ninth Division, in the possession of Anabomi Seizuku," Guren pursed his lips. "I understand the Vice Captains of the Eighth and Tenth and the Third Seat of the Seventh are in the process of compiling an official report on all the findings and circumstances, so currently what, exactly, those items were and why they were there isn't clear, though from the initial evidence I'm led to understand that the notebook and the papers Nagesu-dono has imply it may have contained mutated reishi, maybe even taken from Hollows. This ingredient has never been found in *reidoku* Keitarou produced..?"

He paused, glancing at Nagesu, who nodded a weary confirmation, then continued, "but it seems the casket was decorated with the crest of Kusakawa's branch of the Urahara, and the written documents — though in some kind of code — in Kusakawa's hand."

"Kusakawa said that Anabomi didn't know what he was doing," Atsushi shook his head firmly. "He was quite certain about it — he said that Anabomi would never have perceived the level of his science, and he chose to keep him out of it."

"But those items were definitely located at Ninth," Hirata said slowly. "My officers were the first to enter the scene, and, on consulting with the only coherent witness of the massacre, it seems that Anabomi opened the compartment that held them after he had killed his officers. Whilst it's beyond doubt that he maimed Mikihara and killed the others under the influence of Keitarou's *zanpakutou*, my officers found an empty vial at the scene. Though the Third have possession of that evidence, and will need to further test the trace residue on the vial to confirm whether the notes are accurate, I'm left in no doubt what it did. Anabomi drank it, and it turned him into the creature I fought in Ninth's courtyard."

He glanced at Guren apologetically.

"I feel Anabomi almost told me as much, in that fight," he added. "When I asked him what had happened to him, he said that something

‘hadn’t worked’, and that he’d wanted to ‘stop it’. The words were in the height of a difficult battle, and I didn’t consider them in any detail until later, but I believe we can consider it testimony from the man himself about what happened immediately after the killing of his men, in the time period for which we have no living witness. Moreover, I also witnessed the chimera that young boy pumped into the atmosphere, in an attempt to break Keitarou’s spell over afflicted shinigami. The way in which Anabomi behaved was eerily similar to how Kohaku’s vision portrayed Sakanoue. If those memories were real and accurate, Atsushi-dono, we need to know that they were. In the vision, you asked Sakanoue if he’d drunk anything. Anabomi clearly drank something. What he thought he was drinking is anyone’s guess, and I believe he thought it to be some kind of cure or antidote against Keitarou’s control. What we can be sure of is that whatever it was, it almost certainly turned Anabomi into a Hollow.”

“Anabomi’s corpse shows deformation, but it bears no permanent evidence of actual Hollowfication,” Retsu added. “My officers are currently examining his blood for anomalies, because of Hirata-sama’s findings, but no such test was carried out on Sakanoue’s corpse. I have retrieved the relevant records from that incident. At the time any bone warping found on his body was put down to having been caused by the wounds that ended his life. There was no permanent evidence of Hollowfication, and since we weren’t looking for any such circumstances, it appeared we didn’t find them. It is only a theory at this time, but it seems likely that, unlike Keitarou’s *reidoku*, which turned common folk to Hollows in a fairly immediate and irreversible way, Kusakawa’s serum resulted in gradual degrees of Hollowfication, damaging the body but not maintaining the transformation indefinitely. I think it highly unlikely this condition could’ve been cured... and that, in the case of Anabomi Seizuku, death was the greatest mercy he could’ve received. If Sakanoue Heiji’s death was in the same circumstances, and from drinking the same substance, then the same judgement would apply.”

Atsushi’s eyes closed once more, and now Hirata saw a single glistening tear roll silently down the older man’s harsh, battle-worn features.

“I couldn’t save him,” he said softly. “I involved him in my investigation, and I put him at risk... but in the end, all I could do to protect or help him was to take his life. I have spent every day since regretting my inadequacy as a superior officer, and I have worked twice as hard since to discharge my duty efficiently and without the distraction of emotion and affection. Sakanoue’s blood is on my hands — bearing the guilt of that in secret is a far heavier burden than

admitting it before your honourable selves here today. Yuuichi-sama, therein lies my answer. I did not confess, because I did not deserve to be forgiven or judged for it. His death is my fault, regardless of the Council's decision, and I am simply a tool of the Gotei, here to serve by my sword until I am no longer of any use to it."

"Harsh words, Atsushi-dono," Kyouki spoke gently, but Atsushi shook his head.

"Too many Clans put their heirs in a position of duty and responsibility," he said thickly. "Sometimes, that choice costs them dear. I am not a Clan leader, but Sakanoue was like my son. I put him in that danger due to my own partiality and desire to see him progress. If I had not, he would not be dead. Such is the fate of war."

Hirata's heart spasmed at these words, an image of his own son coming to mind, and he nodded.

"Atsushi-dono has a point," he said grimly. "We do exactly that, and then we pay the price for doing so. It is a heavy burden — more, one that potentially threatens the future of Soul Society. I, too, have decided to follow the same course of action as Atsushi-dono has. I will not appoint a child of mine as my adjutant again, unless they prove to be the only and most suitable candidate for the job, and I can send them out in absolute confidence of their ability to return home alive."

"We have much to discuss in that regard," Kyouki said evenly. "The matter of Ninth also remains, but for now we must not become distracted. I understand your words, Hirata-dono, because my eldest son's injury is a grave one, and I am fortunate he still has his life. As was made clear to me in yesterday's session, I might well have lost all of my children in this encounter, so I understand particularly keenly the risks you and Atsushi-dono mean. That is for another meeting, however. Not for this."

"Atsushi-dono, how much of this hallucination that's been reported did you see?" Tokutarou turned his gaze on the Eleventh Captain, who frowned, dashing his tears away roughly as though ashamed of himself for allowing a crack to appear in his usually formidable armour.

"All of it," he said frankly. "As did anyone else within the vicinity, I imagine."

"Of those here present, Hirata-dono is the only one who witnessed it," Midori pointed out. "Retsu-sama was the only other Council member in Inner Seireitei at the time, but it appears that the chimera did not break through the heavy barriers of protective Kidou placed

over the Fourth Division on our departure. Retsu-sama, Keitarou's sword did not reach into Fourth either, correct?"

"That is correct," Retsu inclined her head sagely. "We were cocooned from the attack, but as a consequence, were not party to Kohaku-kun's illusion."

"Which leaves Hirata-dono as the sole Council witness," Midori nodded. "As I thought. The rest of us were in the Real World, or away from Inner Seireitei. My own adjutant was undertaking his own... manoeuvres, and also did not witness it. As a result, I have not had a complete report of its contents, simply the bare bones. But I understand from several different sources what was transmitted. As you witnessed it too, Atsushi-dono, how much of it was truth?"

Atsushi was silent for a moment, and Hirata wondered if the man would answer at all. Then he lowered his head, more to hide his expression than out of a gesture of submission.

"All of it," he spoke reluctantly, as though admitting such a thing reopened the old wounds once again and laid him vulnerable and exposed before his superiors. "It was entirely truth, Midori-sama. To my shame, I can deny nothing."

"Kohaku's power is significant indeed," Nagesu murmured, and Kyouki nodded her head.

"So it would seem," she said pensively, "but I will not hear a word said against him, Nagesu-dono. After hearing Juushirou and Shunsui speak for him yesterday, I am convinced that I should be his ally, not his enemy. My younger son and daughter may have fought one another to the death of one or both if not for that child's interference. Whatever his heritage, I believe the Council are correct to have heard and abided by Juushirou's plea for clemency."

"We will speak to the boy, when he is fit and able, but we will not punish him. So we have already decided," Nagesu agreed. "I am sick of the divisions within my family, and I seek to close all of them through whatever means are available to me. Keitarou's son has shown himself sympathetic to shinigami, and so I will not consider him in the way I must view his father. You needn't worry, Kyouki-dono. I am not regretting the Council's decision to stay the kill on sight order. Rather, like yourself, with a night's sleep, I feel more confident in our having made it. I believe Kohaku's actions have allowed us to open up and adjudge events we might not otherwise have been able to see."

"I think Atsushi-dono would rather we had not been able to do so,"

Tokutarou murmured, and Atsushi frowned, raising his head to gaze at the head of the Kyouraku. Slowly, he shook his head.

“The truth is what it is,” he said simply. “I am not afraid of being punished for my actions. I lied, and I concealed important evidence. If I had not, then perhaps things would have worked differently.”

His gaze flitted to Hirata, and resignation flooded his gaze once more.

“Hirata-sama will bear witness to it, even if I do not speak it aloud,” he said regretfully. “There was another reason for my reticence, and one I had hoped not to acknowledge, but I cannot hide from it. A large part of my reason for concealing Kusakawa’s true intent was... because I didn’t want to bring grief to the remaining members of the Twelfth. In particular...”

“Mareiko,” Nagesu’s eyes widened in surprise, and Atsushi nodded his head.

“Then, Sekime and I were friends,” he said honestly. “We have not been these twenty five years, mostly by my actions, but then, we were. I chose to confront Kusakawa in the Rukon because I wanted to do it in a way that would not hurt her... and to make sure that she was not involved. When he died... I realised that it would hurt her more to know how much he had betrayed her. He was dead, and so the incidents ceased. I thought... Mokizuki and I thought... it would be best left alone. It was enough of a burden for Mareiko to bear, seeing her Captain dead, without...”

He trailed off, and Kyouki let out a low whistle.

“I see,” she murmured, and at the expression on her face, Atsushi’s sallow cheeks reddened slightly. “True enough, Kusakawa’s death prevented him facing trial. Twelfth were spared that shame.”

“But ultimately that decision was wrong, too,” Atsushi said evenly. “The truth has come out, and it is just as painful now as it was then. I have protected nobody — and deferred justice.”

“Sekime was also a victim of Keitarou’s sword, I believe?” Yuuuchi asked, and Atsushi hesitated for a moment, before nodding his head.

“Yes, sir,” he agreed softly. “She came to attack me, but that boy’s illusions put a stop to it. The vision was... a big shock to her. It upset her badly... even now, I believe she was fond of her Captain’s memory.”

“Mareiko only agreed to become Captain of Twelfth because of her

admiration for Shougo-dono,” Nagesu agreed gravely. “He did much for her, and she adored him. She felt it was all she could do to continue his work alongside the Urahara Clan, even though she did not believe herself worthy of the promotion. She couldn’t have known how twisted his true intentions were... I imagine of everyone, the shock has been greatest for her to bear.”

“It is a heavy weight for everyone,” Guren said frankly. “But as Minaichi rightly said, it is the way of war. We are all wounded, but we are here and we must go on. So must Sekime — or rescind the Twelfth Captaincy in favour of someone who can take on the role.”

“You won’t take away Sekime’s Captaincy because of my actions, surely?” Minaichi’s composure was shattered by this final implication, and Hirata saw desperation glitter in the man’s dark eyes. “She doesn’t deserve... she’s hurt because...”

“No Captaincies will be revoked by us, Atsushi-dono,” Nagesu shook his head. “Guren-sama means that this is a decision and a situation for Mareiko to face herself, and to decide whether she still wishes to continue in her current role. I will be grieved indeed if she chooses to resign, but I will allow it, if she feels unable to carry on with her duties. In the meantime, Michihashi is a solid, sound Vice Captain and capable of keeping the rest of the division in order whilst she comes to terms with everything. We are not here to punish the innocent.”

Atsushi took a heavy breath into his body to steady himself, and Hirata pursed his lips, realising that the claims Kusakawa had made in Kohaku’s illusion had been founded in more than just rumour.

Minaichi was in love with Sekime then, and still is now.

His eyes narrowed behind his glasses.
He’s distanced himself from her since Sakanoue’s death, because he knew he was responsible for the death of her Captain, but even so, deep beneath all of his harsh words and military discipline, he’s in love with her.

Out loud he said,

“Perhaps the best person to discuss that with Sekime is Atsushi-dono himself.”

“Hirata-sama?” Atsushi stared at him blankly, and Hirata shrugged his shoulders.

“Sekime deserves to hear from you, directly, the fate of her Captain and what he did,” he said quietly. “Otherwise there is no closure for either of you, and, as Captains of neighbouring divisions, that state of

affairs suits the Gotei not at all.”

“Captains...?” Atsushi touched the edge of his *haori* absently, then, “I had assumed that my rank would be revoked as a result of this meeting, given that I have concealed so much, and acted in such a violent, vigilante way...”

“In your own words, you killed a Hollow, who Kusakawa created,” Hirata said softly. “I saw what nobody else here did, and so I know that, even faced with Kusakawa’s jibes and provocation, you made it clear to him your intent to arrest him and bring him before Seireitei justice. You did not intend to kill him. The defensive skill your sword has is a dangerous one, but no shinigami who witnessed that encounter could judge you guilty of murder. Many shinigami outside of the Council did see it, in part or in full, and it will probably be much talked of. That’s unavoidable. But whilst the Council wish to know the exact truth... I don’t suppose we are voting on whether to remove you from your position in Eleventh.”

“As with Mareiko, it’s a matter of whether you wish to keep your position, now everyone in Seireitei knows your secrets?” Nagesu eyed Atsushi quizzically, and the other man sighed, massaging his brow with his index fingers as though trying to stave off a sudden headache.

“I am Captain of the Eleventh until such time as death or disgrace makes it otherwise,” he said at length. “I am subject to your justice, not my own. I will remain in post. Whatever these revelations bring me, within or without my Division, I shall do my best to shut them out and to continue in a vein that will not shame my family or my position. Heiji would expect that of me... he died a soldier, and so will I.”

“Then I think Hirata’s advice is the best,” Midori reflected. “When she can receive visitors, you ought to visit Sekime and talk to her, honestly, about her Captain. Even if she doesn’t want to hear it, she ought to. Kusakawa’s life was forfeit — it was taken in less than ideal circumstances, but as far as I am concerned, justice was served and the matter over. You killed a felon, Minaichi, and by doing so, protected the lives of several innocents within the Rukon. What you have lived with since, only you know — but you have continued to do your duty regardless. For me, there is no judgement to pass. If anything, you were too eager to bring him back. A man guilty of as many sins as that should not expect to live, nor should you have aimed to allow him to.”

“Midori-sama!” Nagesu’s eyes widened, and Midori offered her neighbour a flinty smile.

“At long last, Aizen Keitarou, who hurt so many people, is dead,” she said matter-of-factly. “Whilst it might be a matter of personal grief to you, Nagesu-dono, to the rest of us it is evidence that, sometimes, legislative court justice is a hindrance, not a help. Had we taken him prisoner, keeping him that way would have been challenging, and holding a trial near impossible. Nobody has contested Kyouraku Shunsui’s actions as being anything but appropriate. In this light, I believe Minaichi’s actions in Rukongai entirely acceptable, if overly lenient. Courts and judgements are positive endeavours, but not in all cases. Sometimes, the old fashioned ways are best.”

Nagesu’s expression became unreadable, then he sighed, turning his gaze to the Captain who still huddled on the ground before them.

“The Council’s judgement is over, and it seems we find no guilt in your quarter, Atsushi-dono,” he said wearily. “You are dismissed.”

“Come in, Shizuka,”

Shunsui raised his gaze, and Shizuka took a hesitant step forward into the Eighth Division Captain’s office, chewing on her lip hard enough to taste blood. Although he had spent much of the previous day and night away from his native barracks, Shunsui had returned to his home roost that afternoon and, after closeting himself away with his Third and Fourth Seated officers, had, on Sora’s return from Ninth, instructed her to summon Shizuka and bring her to his office to discuss her recent conduct. In some regards, waiting for the axe to fall had been worse than it actually falling, but now, standing before him, she could feel the tension climbing notch by notch and she fervently wished herself as far from here as possible, in the safety of Riri’s village home or the patrol camp she had so defiantly snubbed.

For a moment her dark eyes met Shunsui’s identical brown ones, then lowered, her cheeks flushing an uncomfortable red at what she saw there. She faltered, unsure of what to do, and at her back she felt Sora’s hand between her shoulderblades, giving her a little nudge forward.

“Your Captain summoned you, Magaki-juuseki,” she said softly, her words light and unaccusing, but her formality of address reminding the young shinigami of her position. “You know how you ought to behave — there’s no skulking in corners in Eighth, as well you know.”

“Yes, Fukutaichou,” Shizuka’s lips moved in a crestfallen murmur, but she obediently took another step forward, dropping down before Shunsui’s position and bowing her head low in apology. “Magaki

Shizuka, sir, reporting.”

“Reporting, huh...” Shunsui’s voice trailed off, and out of the corner of her eye, she saw him gesture to Sora to shut the door behind them. This the Vice Captain did, and Shizuka heard the sound of her superior leaning up against the wood. Whether she was preventing Shizuka from escaping, or anyone else from entering, the Tenth Seat was not sure, but it did not make the heavy atmosphere in the chamber any easier to bear.

At length, Shunsui spoke again.

“Look at me, Magaki-juuseki,” he commanded evenly, and Shizuka raised her head, cheeks blazing now. Even at his crosstest, Shunsui had never addressed her with such formality, unless in jest, but there were no jokes in the dark eyes today, simply a clouded, unreadable expression that told the young woman nothing about what lay ahead. Though meeting his gaze was hard, she knew that if she looked away, she would only make her situation worse, and so she gathered her courage, taking a deep breath to steady her nerves.

“Well?” Shunsui arched an eyebrow. “I’m sure there’s a fine explanation as to why you are currently here, in my office, rather than out on patrol in the wilds of the Districts. I am fairly certain you were assigned to a patrol under the command of a superior officer, who may well be missing your skills and ability through your failure to follow orders. I have not had full reports, yet, from the dispatched forces still away from Inner Seireitei — but I know that your name was included on those personnel lists, because I put it there myself. I’m sure I told you in explicit language when you came to see me what I considered your responsibility to be. In spite of that, here you are. If you have something to say in your defence, I’d like to hear it.”

Shizuka swallowed hard, the uncharacteristically stern note in Shunsui’s normally genial tones tearing through the layers of her composure. If it continued, she knew that she would cry and humiliate herself before both her Captain and Vice Captain, so she fought valiantly against the swell of emotions, taking a moment to pull her thoughts together before attempting to speak.

“I’m sorry, sir,” she said softly. “I have... no really good explanation for my conduct. I just... thought...”

“You thought to override my orders, regardless of the manner in which I gave them?”

“I...”

“Do you understand why it was I sent you and everyone away from Eighth Division?” Shunsui broke across her stuttered response, his expression challenging her to muster an adequate defence. “I’m sure you do, because you’re not stupid. I told you I intended on clearing the Division. Eighth has a responsibility to the Districts, but most of all, I wanted as many of my lower ranked officers in a place of relative safety where they could undertake useful activities, some short term, and others further from home. The reasons for that decision were none of your business. Your responsibility was to obey the instruction you were given. As Tenth Seated officer of the Eighth Division, you have a certain position of authority over the lower ranked officers, and you hold that rank despite the fact you are younger than some of those who rank beneath you. I have never had cause to question my choice to place you there, before — but now I wonder if it was wise.”

“Shunsui, that’s harsh,” Sora’s words were chiding, but they gave Shizuka little comfort, and she sniffed, struggling to keep back the tears before the onslaught of Shunsui’s displeasure.

“Is it harsh?” Shunsui met Sora’s gaze over his subordinate’s shoulder, a question in his expression. “By her own admission, Magaki-juuseki derelicted her duty, abandoned her post and, as far as I can gather, ran recklessly around Seireitei, potentially putting herself in considerable danger. Her finding and helping Koku is immaterial — she could have drawn attackers to her, become a hostage, or created any kind of complication in a very dangerous situation. Given that, is it harsh to speak bluntly? A Tenth Seated officer ought remember her position and her responsibilities, not run off on her own whims.”

His gaze returned to Shizuka, whose body was now trembling from head to foot.

“When you came to see me, I told you to be an adult and do your duty by those who you swore to protect,” he said softly. “Your family... Riri, Inori-kun... people like them. That’s why you came here, isn’t it? To be a shinigami, and protect the people back home from the danger posed by Hollows?”

Shizuka sniffed again, swallowing the lump in her throat. Slowly, wordlessly, she shook her head.

“N... no sir.” she murmured, her words uneven. “That’s not... I didn’t... I mean... I did... but...”

“In a sentence, if you please. You know enough words to be able to put them together in the right order.”

“Shunsui...” Sora’s words held a faint reproach, but Shunsui

ignored them, his gaze fixed on the young girl, whose tears had begun to trickle silently down her cheeks. She shook her head again.

"I didn't... become a shinigami... just because I wanted to protect R... Riri-nee and Inori-nii," she spoke slowly and haltingly, her voice catching in her throat. "I did want to protect them, because they are family to me, and I love them. But I... I c... came here because... I... wanted... I... wanted to be..."

She swallowed, hard, unable to finish the sentence, and a gentle hand dropped down on her shoulder.

"Take a deep breath," Sora's voice was gentle. "You have time. Breathe and then say what you want to say. Shunsui brought you here to hear you out, so say whatever it is you need to say. Nobody will punish you until you've had a fair hearing, but if you don't speak up, we can't understand your motives for breaking rules."

"Sora, don't be soft on her," Shunsui sounded annoyed, his voice uncharacteristically on edge. "This is a disciplinary meeting, it isn't a family gathering. Magaki-juuseki broke a direct instruction, in complete defiance of my authority, and the consequences of it could have been extremely serious. Given that fact..."

"I wanted to be close to you," Shizuka's words blurted out at that moment, stopping Shunsui dead in his tracks, and for a moment he just stared at the young girl, unable to comprehend what he had just heard. Tears streaming down her cheeks now, Shizuka took shaky breaths of air into her lungs, reaching up her sleeve to wipe her eyes.

"I'm sorry I disobeyed you," she said slowly, her voice shaking as she struggled to speak through the tears. "I know it was reckless and stupid, and wrong. I know that I did something terrible, and I deserve to be punished. Even demoted. I won't fight against any punishment you give me, because I know what I did was foolish and in defiance of my duty. I just... I don't really have a way to defend my reasons why. I can't even explain it to myself. I just felt... that something was wrong."

"Even more reason to do as your Captain instructs, surely?" Sora asked quietly, and Shizuka nodded, swallowing hard.

"Yes," she agreed, "I know, but I wasn't... thinking like that. I was... afraid, but not... of being attacked. I was afraid of... of being sent away... and... and... if Taichou was k... killed... I'd never s... see him again, and... I d... didn't... I wanted... to be here. I know it was wrong, but I didn't... want to... be sent away because I was frightened that... Taichou was sending us away because... he... was going... t...

to fight... and... and d... die.”

“You thought what?” Now Shunsui was completely floored, his earlier sternness shattered in light of his young member’s admission, and Shizuka raised a hopeless gaze to his.

“I came to Eighth because of you,” she murmured. “You said that I swore to protect my family, and I did, but that family... it includes you. I... can’t think of it any other way, even if you tell me to — I can’t. I... I did something stupid, and I’m sorry. I’m really sorry. But even if it’s stupid and I know that I can’t, I wanted to... to make sure you were safe. Because you... are my family too.”

Shunsui stared at her for a moment, then he groaned, reaching up his hand to rub his brow. For a moment he didn’t speak, then,

“Sora, how am I supposed to respond to that?” he asked plaintively. “I’m attempting to be a firm, disciplining Captain, and yet she comes out with something like that... what am I meant to do to hold my authority, when a slip of a girl is telling me that she broke rules because she wanted to protect me?”

“I’d say she needs to do a bit more work in the sword arena if she’s going to reach that level of skill,” To Shizuka’s surprise, Sora sounded amused, rather than put out, and Shunsui grimaced, shaking his head. “It’s your loss, Shunsui. I told you, Shizu-chan isn’t the defiant type, not usually. True, her reason was reckless, but there *was* a reason. And more, you have blame in it too. If you go around like a bear with a sore head, keeping secrets from your subordinates and sending them away with half-truths, it’s a recipe for disaster. There are enough imaginative members of Eighth to start a mutiny, if you’re not careful.”

“Are you taking her side?” Shunsui demanded, a hurt look on his face, and Sora chuckled, shaking her head.

“No, I’m just stating it as it is,” she said comfortably. “You’re a good Captain, but sometimes, a hopeless communicator. You came in in a strop, and shut yourself away. Of course people are going to worry. I’m used to your idiocy, and I’ve worked around it for years — I tend to trust in it, because even when it’s reckless, usually the results are the right ones. But Shizuka’s young, impulsive, and more tied to you than I am. If you get your head sliced off your body, I’d like to think I’m capable of sweeping away the resultant mess and pushing Eighth on, even if it means trampling over your grave to get there. Shizuka is different, though. Of everyone in Eighth — maybe you owed her some kind of explanation. At least, an assurance that you

weren't going out to die."

Shunsui pressed his lips together for a moment, then he sighed.

"I didn't know if I was or wasn't," he owned. "I didn't know the outcome of my fight, only that I had to fight it, and if I could, I had to win. I knew that winning meant killing Kohaku's father. Even though I don't suppose I've ever hated anyone as much as I hated that man, Kohaku is a different matter. This was a man he loved... I knew that, when he spoke to me, even as he was telling me that I was the only one who could do it, and if I wanted to save Seireitei, I must. Now, I've blood on my hands and my blade, metaphorically if not physically. Preparing for that eventuality was enough to be going on with, without inviting Shizuka — or anyone else — to my chamber for a quick run-down of the next day's plan of action."

"No, but you should've understood Shizuka's own feelings," Sora said matter-of-factly. "She shouldn't have defied you and stayed here in secret, that was wrong and if you'll let me, I'll find some new and exciting punishments to make sure she doesn't forget that, next time, Taichou's orders are absolute. But... given the particular circumstances of this... I think you should have let her stay behind. It's not nice, when there's blood involved. Fighting Haku-nii, that wasn't pleasant for me... but I'd rather have been there, facing and fighting him than sent away somewhere, wondering what was going on."

She paused for a moment, then,

"Seeing Ryuusei-nii yesterday evening was a bigger shock than having to meet Haku-nii's blade, and I felt guilty, because I hadn't given the Real World a thought," she admitted. "I should have done — I should've realised what Shizuka did — that it might have been the last time I saw my brother, or my mother, or my nephew, but I didn't. That was my bad... I'm just lucky that they came back alive and that, even despite its severity, Ryuusei-nii's injury hasn't turned out to be fatal. It might've been a different story. Okaasama said last night that she might've lost all three of her children in this business, and it hit home, when she said it. I might've lost my whole family, too. Given that... I understand how Shizuka feels. Riri-san, Inori-kun... they're not here. They're far away, and probably, quite safe from harm. You, on the other hand... were preparing to throw yourself into danger. And Shizuka is more sensitive than I am. Doubtless she realised sooner than I did how you were planning to act... she seems to have inherited that trait."

"Inherited, huh," Shunsui looked rueful, his gaze flitting to Shizuka,

who was fighting desperately to gain control of the tears that still insisted on falling. “Maybe you’re right, though I still think this was one of those situations where a firm hand was necessary. Shizuka, in case you haven’t realised, there are people here in Eighth who care about you, too. Not just me, but others — people who consider you part of the team, and who would’ve been grieved to bury you. My life would not be worth living, either, if I’d had to report back to Riri that you’d ended up carved into pieces. This was a dangerous situation, with a dangerous enemy... it could’ve ended differently, and I might not have been able to protect you.”

He tilted his head on one side, considering.

“I admit I didn’t give you all much explanation of what to expect, though,” he conceded at length. “I didn’t tell you the level of danger involved, and I should have. Maybe if I had, you’d have understood my orders more clearly. And we wouldn’t be having this conversation.”

Shizuka closed her eyes briefly, finally regaining control of her composure, and she shook her head.

“I don’t care what punishment you give me,” she said honestly. “You came back alive, and Sora-dono and Tetsuya-dono both did too, and Eighth didn’t lose anyone, and so... even if I have to scrub out the latrines for six months together, I don’t care. My family is still in one piece... so... so it’s all all right. Even if you send me back to being a recruit, I won’t mind.”

Shunsui got to his feet, moving towards her and resting a hand on her head.

“You should watch it, though, if Sora’s right about your intuition,” he said warningly. “It can get you into more trouble than you might imagine.”

He grasped her hand, pulling her gently to her feet, and before she knew what she was doing, Shizuka flung her arms around him, burying her head in her companion’s thick pink *haori*.

“Shizu...?”

“I’m glad you’re safe,” Shizuka’s voice was muffled by the fabric, and she did not release her hold. “I’m really glad, Shunsui-nii. But I wish you hadn’t’ve had to kill Koku-kun’s father. If it had been the other way around... I don’t really know Koku-kun yet, but I guess... even if his father was as bad a criminal as people say, it must hurt to know he’s dead.”

“Yes, I think it probably does,” Shunsui relented, detaching the young woman’s hold and holding her at arm’s length, meeting her gaze with a pensive one of his own. “He asked me, he showed me, he led me down the path to do it, but I don’t think that means he wanted it to happen the way it did. It was the only way to prevent the deaths of many, many people, and so he made a choice — but that choice has personal repercussions for him and I feel bad that it’s the case.”

“Which is why you’ve left him in Juushirou’s hands, and come back to wreak havoc here instead,” Sora deduced astutely. Shunsui nodded.

“Even though it was Koku’s request, I don’t feel ready to meet him face to face, yet,” he said gravely. “He deserves time to grieve and adjust without seeing his father’s killer lurking around in the shadows. It’s not my place to be right now — and Juu is far better at dealing with such things than me, anyway. Koku trusts Juushirou, and Juushirou will make sure the Council doesn’t lay a finger on the lad. I hate to admit that Juu’s belief in Koku was sound... there’s no doubt that, without his insight and his help, we would’ve been in a far worse position. Maybe even overrun.”

Shizuka was silent for a moment, then she raised her gaze to her companion.

“I realise I’m going to have a lot of icky extra duties for the foreseeable future,” she said hesitantly, “but I wondered if you’d mind if, after that, I... if I went to Thirteenth, and saw him in your place?”

“Koku?” Shunsui was taken aback, and Shizuka nodded.

“I found him, and I’d like to see that he’s really all right,” she agreed. “More, though, he’s lost so many things. When I heard his whole story, it made me sad. I know that, if Riri-nee hadn’t taken Inori-nii and I in, we would’ve probably been left to starve... nobody cares much about the children of prostitutes, and if I hadn’t met Riri-nee, I would never have met you or Sora-dono, or understood who I was or what I was meant to do with my life. Inori-nii and I weren’t abandoned, even though in some ways we lost family. Koku-kun has lost all of his family now, hasn’t he? He’s sacrificed all those things to make sure we don’t die, even though most of us he doesn’t even know. I think... I should at least go once. It seems right... that it’s me, if it’s not you.”

“That intuition again,” Sora rolled her eyes. “Let her go, Shunsui. She’s right, in any case. She did find the lad, and I doubt Juushirou will mind if she pays a house call. She’s there enough, anyway, training with Ketsui, so nobody will bat an eyelid if she does.”

"I suppose that's true," Shunsui acknowledged. "All right. Your punishment is in Sora's hands, Shizu, and make sure you do exactly as she instructs you, however horrible and outlandish it proves to be. Moreover, if you think you can protect me, I'll be taking you to task with Katen Kyoukotsu myself, and we'll see just how confident you really are of fighting off my enemies for me. If you have any free time after all of that, though, by all means, go to Thirteenth. When things have settled some, go see the lad, and see Ketsui, too. Tenichi's hearing will probably happen as soon as the red tape over Ninth and the aftermath of Keitarou's uprising is laid to rest, and he'll probably need a friend's moral support, too."

"I'd already planned to be that," Shizuka assured him, relief glittering in her expression. "I'll do as you say this time, Taichou, I promise. Everything, exactly as you said it."

"Well, if you do, it will probably be a first," Shunsui pulled a face at her. "Go on with you. Run, while you still can — who knows when the next time you'll see daylight will be, given Sora's propensity for innovative punishments!"

The swirling remnants of *reiryoku* had begun to drift away over Seireitei, blown and scattered by the morning breeze and casting a surreal hush over the whole of the surrounding area.

For a while, everything was silent, but then the hiss of the door sliding back made Kohaku open his eyes, his blurry gaze darting towards the black and white clad figure that now stood there, a tray in her hand. At his movement, she grinned, moving towards him and setting the tray down at the bedside.

"Breakfast," she said matter-of-factly, and Kohaku shivered, closing his eyes and turning his head away.

"I'm not hungry."

"You are hungry," Kirio sat down on the side of the bed, folding back the blankets that he had pulled up to his chin and gazing down on him with a sigh. "Edogawa-san says so, and she knows what she's talking about better than you. Besides, I took a message to Third, earlier, and I saw what you did to the *Senkaimon*. That kind of spirit blow-out takes it out of you, and Edogawa-san said all you've ingested since then is herbs to sleep and sugar-water. Maybe they helped calm you down, but it's not enough. She had to go back to Fourth this morning, to help with the injured from the Real World, but she was quite firm about you and Taichou supported her orders. You need to

eat something, and I volunteered for the job of making you.”

She indicated the bowl on the tray.

“It’s only porridge. Bland and gentle, and easy to swallow.”

“I told you. I’m not hungry.”

“And I told you, you are,” Kirio sighed, reaching out to grasp her young companion by the shoulders. Before Kohaku knew what was going on, she had hauled him forcibly up into a sitting position, amusement glittering in her gaze as she took in his look of bewilderment. “Yes, just because I’m a girl doesn’t mean I’m not stronger than you and right now you wouldn’t be able to fight with your shadow. You know, you’re the current hot topic of gossip among the lower ranks all over Seireitei. Since Taichou and Kyouraku-taichou’s encounter with the Council, everyone’s somehow heard about it and the whole of Seireitei is buzzing with rumours about you and the mad hallucination you made us all see. What do you suppose they’d all think if they knew their saviour was huddling beneath blankets refusing to eat like a sulky child, huh? Stop being silly... else I’ll have to force-feed you, and that won’t be fun for either of us.”

“Force... feed?” Kohaku blinked, then shook his head. “I’m no saviour. People died, Kirio-san. I knew they would, if I did the things I did. I knew that my father would be one of them. It was Kyourakudono who saved people. Not me. I vandalised the *Senkaimon*... that’s all.”

He closed his eyes before Kirio could see the tears that threatened to well up in their depths.

“I betrayed my father, too,” he murmured. “I didn’t know any other way to stop him, but I let him die. I let him be killed. That makes me a bad person and an even worse son. I knew what would happen and I did nothing about it. I don’t deserve to be called a saviour, and you shouldn’t waste time fussing over me.”

“Are you trying to starve yourself on purpose?” Kirio’s expression became one of shock and dismay, and Kohaku shrugged.

“I’m not trying to do anything,” he replied sadly. “You have other things more important than fussing over me, and you should do those things.”

He eyed her suspiciously.

“Why are you so bright and cheerful, anyway?” he demanded warily. “I lied to you. I lied to you over and over again about who I

was and where I came from. Why aren't you angry with me? I don't understand... why don't you hate me, now you know who I really am?"

"Your real name doesn't matter much to me," Kirio settled herself down comfortably beside the bed, and Kohaku groaned inwardly, knowing that whatever he said, she had no intention of leaving until she had achieved her initial goal. "If we come to it, Koku, you don't know my real name either. Names aren't important. Nor are parents. It's what we do. And I know — Taichou told all of us — what you did. You might think that it was just breaking a *Senkaimon*, but when you did that, you freed all the people under Keitarou's control and you made sure that nobody else could come back and get hurt. You might not think it a great thing, not right now, but it was. Even if you lied to me... it doesn't matter. You had a good reason... and I respect that."

"What do you mean, I don't know your real name?" Kohaku stared, momentarily taken off guard, and Kirio chuckled at his dumbfounded expression.

"I told you," she chided lightly. "I was taken in by kind people who treated me as their own. Hikifune is their name. It isn't the name I was born with. I let go of that self a long time ago... and nobody here knows me as anything else."

"Because your family abandoned you?" Kohaku asked softly, seeing his companion's eyes soften in comprehension at his question. Slowly she nodded.

"My family is here," she said honestly. "I was Hikifune Kirio when I became a shinigami. I was Hikifune Kirio the first time I met Taichou, at the Academy, when I was twelve and my spirit power was scaring my adoptive family. I was Hikifune Kirio when I decided what I was going to do with my life. So I'm Hikifune Kirio, now. I don't remember my parents very clearly, I was so young when they died. I hope they'd be happy with what I've done, but I don't feel any ties to that time or that life. It doesn't matter. It's over and I've begun again."

"You never think about your brother and sister?" Kohaku did not know why he suddenly wanted to know the answer to this question, and Kirio cast him a searching look, causing him to redden and look away.

"I'm sorry. I'm asking personal questions and you probably don't want to answer them, not to someone who lied about his own past," he murmured, but Kirio shook his head.

"I see the parallel," she said gently. "I do, Koku, and that's why I

volunteered to come here like this. I thought I might coax you to eat... and persuade you that even if everything looks dark right now, it won't always. The choices you made were hard ones — I won't pretend they weren't. The ones who did wrong, though, they were your parents, not you. It's hard and you feel guilty, you feel like you should've done something to change things... but you couldn't. All you could do was make sure the suffering stopped."

She sighed, shrugging her shoulders.

"I don't know if leaving me behind stopped my sister and brother from suffering, or if there was another reason we parted ways," she admitted sadly. "Edogawa-san told me that your brother has disappeared completely. She said she thought he'd cut ties with you for your own safety, and at least... even if you miss him, you know for sure he isn't gone because he stopped loving you. I never have had that. There probably was a reason — but it's difficult to stomach the idea that that reason might simply have been because I was me."

She reached over to squeeze Kohaku by the hand.

"Your spirit power alienated you, and mine might have alienated me from my real kin," she added. "In that, we're the same. So you can talk to me, and ask me questions as much as you like. If it helps you, I don't mind. I lost my little brother, and he was too young to decide whether we should be separated or not. Too young, maybe, to even remember me clearly... I don't know. You've lost your big brother, and so it's a good fit. I've always been an unofficial Oneesan where Ketsui's concerned, and now, I guess, that extends to you too. If you want it, of course. I know you think I'm interfering and pushy, but that's just who I am."

"No..." Kohaku hesitated, then moved his other hand to grasp her fingers loosely, managing a wan smile. "No, I... I don't want to be alone. You..have been kind to me. And I... I need that right now. I'm scared of where things have taken me. I knew that if I ever came to Seireitei, I'd never go back, but I thought I'd die when I damaged the *Senkaimon*. I didn't, though, and now I'm lost. I don't have anywhere or anyone else to turn to, just the people here. You, Ukitake-dono, Edogawa-san... that's all. I can't face Kyouraku-dono, not now I've made him do something so terrible. And my real family... are gone. They're gone forever. I won't ever get them back."

"Taichou said your mother was in Seireitei custody," Kirio pointed out, and Kohaku shook his head.

"Mother is gone, too," he said cryptically. "Even if she's here, and

alive, she's gone. She wouldn't know me, not even if I stood before her. Father was her whole world — without him, she's got nothing left. Besides, I did that to her. I took him away from her... I'm not sure I could face her, knowing that."

He pulled back his hands, glancing at them for a moment, then,

"Will you tell me about your brother and sister? What you remember, if you can? If it hurts then you don't have to, but I think... I'd like to hear about them."

"It's hard for me to talk about my sister," Kirio admitted. "We spent a lot of time together — I followed her around like a lost kitten... almost literally tied to her apron strings. She was older... but really, only in her late teens when Mother and Father were killed in the purges in Seventh District. We fled and were in a refugee camp in Eighth District. I met Tenichi and Ketsui there, but I was too young, really, to understand what was really going on. I met your father then, too, once," she smiled ruefully. "I didn't know it, then, of course. I realised it much, much later. He was looking for Tenichi and Ketsui, but they'd already left. He gave me coins for helping him, so I thought he was a kind man."

"He was. Sometimes," Kohaku said softly, and Kirio nodded.

"My friend, Shikiki, spent some time with him as a small child. Like me, she lost her family in the purges," she reflected. "She's said that he was capable of being very kind, but that he was damaged and couldn't recover from the things that had happened to him. It makes me think that his dying now was the best way to save him, Koku. Even if it hurts you and your mother, he can start over afresh without all of that baggage and pain."

"I hope so," Kohaku managed another feeble smile. "Thank you for saying that. I want to believe in it, too... but it's too raw, right now, to really take in."

"Mm," Kirio looked thoughtful. "Some things fade, some don't. Some realities are harsh, but they help make you who you are and who you want to become in the future. They're sent to shape us, and it's up to us to make sure we don't let them destroy us. Your father's challenges were too big for him to really handle, and he buckled and lost his grip. You don't have to be like that, though. Not now you're here. You have Taichou looking out for you — rumours are that he stormed the Council and more or less threatened mutiny over your safety, but he's refused to confirm whether or not that's true. Either way, though, he went with a goal and he came back with it

accomplished. Nobody's going to hurt you here, now — so you should let us help you in whatever way you can."

She smiled, gesturing to the porridge bowl, and Kohaku's gaze slid over towards it reluctantly.

"Kirio-san..."

"I'll tell you about my family, while you eat," Kirio said matter-of-factly. "I think it's a fair trade. I don't talk about them much, but I will — so I expect something in return. I won't let you fade away, Koku, and I know better than you the damage you can do to yourself if you don't refuel your body properly after using a lot of spirit power. If you died, then everything Taichou went to the Council for will be in vain. It would be selfish and then I'd be cross with you — so you eat, and I'll talk. Fair enough?"

Kohaku let out a heavy sigh, but he knew he was beaten, and he nodded, grudgingly holding out his hands to take the bowl. Kirio beamed, lifting the tray and placing it across the boy's lap.

"I need a spoon," Kohaku pointed out. "Did you forget to bring one of those?"

"Nope, I have two," Kirio produced the spoons with a smile, setting one down on the tray and nudging it across towards him encouragingly. "Just in case you threw the first one at me and I needed to resort to bully tactics. I might not be a healer, but I do know that it's not a good idea for an invalid to eat porridge with a spoon that's been tossed across the floor."

"I suppose I should be thankful for that, at least," Kohaku observed, and Kirio's beam widened.

"Eat slowly," she advised. "Edogawa-san says she thinks you're not hungry mostly because you've not been eating. When you begin, she thinks you'll start to feel your appetite again, and I'm sure she's right. She's a good healer and I've learned a lot from her... I trust her judgement when it comes to you, so I'm sure the porridge will help."

"I guess we'll see, but you'll probably be the one cleaning my room if it disagrees with me," Kohaku said wryly, sliding thin fingers around the stem of the spoon and picking it up cautiously. "I might be sick all over you. You ought to be prepared for that."

"You aren't going to scare me. You've thrown up enough times since you've been here and I'm a shinigami, not a schoolgirl," was Kirio's crushing rejoinder, and, suitably beaten, Kohaku reluctantly slid the tip of the spoon into the porridge, lifting it to his lips. It had

cooled slightly in the time they had been talking, but Kirio had been right about the bland taste and despite his body's overall dizzy state, he found it did not trigger his nausea to swallow it. On the contrary, as he felt the slick substance slide down his gullet into his stomach, he felt the first twinges of hunger begin to gnaw away at him, as if the impulse to eat had been awoken from a deep slumber.

Kirio-san is right. My body needs food. Even in the Rukon, I could never get enough food. Father used to bring me what he could, but it was never enough. Katsu-nii used to tease me for eating everyone else's rations. Right now, there's food available, and my body's crying out for it. How could I not have noticed? Kirio-san's right.

His gaze flitted to where the gleaming sword lay beside the window, and his eyes narrowed, contemplating.

Is that thanks to you, Kyouka? I don't know whether I exhausted my power to a degree you haven't managed to recover from, yet, or whether it's because of what happened at that Gate, but I feel as though the worst of the delusions are gone now. Maybe you and I have begun to forge a tentative understanding... perhaps you're willing to let me recover my way, since I fought this battle your way. Well, I suppose you were right, and I wasn't going to die that day. I imagine you won't let me give up on living particularly easily, so maybe now, now you have a proper sword to live in and a true name I understand... maybe you'll help me to heal for real this time.

He took a second mouthful, aware that the shinigami's beady gaze was fixed on him firmly, and he sighed.

"I'm eating," he pointed out. "Your turn. A promise is a promise and I won't stop now I've begun."

"All right," Kirio sat back, folding her arms across her chest. "Well, like I told you, I came from Seventh District, but I spent some time in Eighth. After my sister and brother left me, I ended up in First. It was a miracle I lived, really. My sister... her name was Junko. She

as very pretty. She had a lot of guys who thought so, but she always kept them at arm's length. She had us to look after, she'd always say. She was all we had, and I thought the world of her. She was my sister, but she might as well have been my mother. It's why I find it hard to imagine why she'd leave me... but I don't like to think she might be dead."

"Maybe, like Katsu-nii, it happened because she thought it would protect you somehow," Kohaku suggested, and Kirio snorted, shaking her head.

"I had no food nor shelter nor any way of obtaining them," she said categorically. "You don't abandon a child like that. Here, you're in the hands of people who will help you and you can trust us, I promise you can. I was on my own completely... you should be glad that we won't let you be that."

"You're angry at her," Kohaku observed, and Kirio nodded.

"I never let those feelings come through. I squash them and pretend they're not there, but they are," she admitted. "You're the first person I've talked about this with in a long time, though. It feels odd to be so open about what happened — but you're probably the best person to understand right now."

"Maybe," Kohaku reflected, "but if it's hard, you don't need to tell me any more about her. Tell me about your brother. If you made Ketsui-dono a substitute, and you're trying to do the same with me, you must miss him."

"I do," Kirio looked embarrassed. "I know he didn't choose us to be parted, and I wonder if he grew up and who he became. He was the cutest baby, Koku. He had the biggest green eyes and this mop of red hair and he got into everything he could yet had the most angelic smile imagineable. We used to play in the refugee hut, sometimes, when my sister was busy trying to obtain food. We'd get covered in dust, and he'd giggle and laugh and bat my hair. When we parted, he was only five years old, so I suppose when I think of him, that's how I see him, even though by now he'd be almost as old as Ketsui-kun. Where I followed Neechan, he used to follow me. His name was Haruhiko, but he couldn't say it properly, and nor could I, at first, so we always called him Hiko. It kind of stuck... Koku? What is it?"

For Kohaku had paused, spoon halfway to his lips at the sound of her words.

Hiko? Why do I feel like that name means something? Where have I heard it... felt it before? I should know, but I don't. Maybe it's nothing — maybe I don't really want to know.

Out loud he said,

"Maybe I could try and find out where they are. Your brother and sister, I mean — I could use my *reiryoku* and try and track your memories of them, see if I can bring forth an image of where they are now."

"You're eating porridge, you're not using more *reiryoku* when you haven't powered up," Kirio said sharply, shaking her head decisively. "I don't need to know. I know what you can do — I saw the chimera

like everyone else — but I don't want you to do anything of the sort. Wherever they are, their lives and mine are separate now. If I don't know if they're dead, I don't know if they abandoned me. Not knowing the answer is difficult, but knowing it, at this late stage... I'd rather not. It means we'd be strangers, now, if we met — but like I told you, I have a family here and its a place I belong. I have Tenichi and Ketsui, too. It's fine. I don't want to know."

"If that's how you feel," Kohaku pursed his lips, but nodded. "There are lots of things I'd rather not have known or seen, so I suppose I understand. If you'd rather not know, I won't try and see. It just sounded as though you wondered, just for a moment."

"I'll always wonder, but it doesn't mean I want a firm answer," Kirio looked self-conscious. "It's not logical, but it's how I feel. It's easier this way, somehow. Too much time has passed."

She reached over to tap the side of the bowl with a grin. "And that wasn't so hard, was it? I knew when you began you'd keep going... and it'll do you good. Edogawa-san said that making you eat as much as you need right away would probably make you ill, since you're not used to quantities of nutritious food, but if you keep on like you've just begun, you'll feel much better before you know it."

"I can't argue," Kohaku admitted, setting the bowl down and pushing the tray aside with a rueful sigh. "I feel more hungry now than I did when I began eating, but I suppose that's a good sign."

"I think so," Kirio agreed. "Edogawa-san will be pleased. She was very worried about you."

"I'm good at making people worry," Kohaku looked guilty. "I'm not used to so many people being around, so I hadn't thought about them caring so much about what I do or whether I'm all right. I'm sorry. I'll try and remember, in future. I'm used to being on my own a lot, but I'm quite glad that that's not the case right now. I don't think I really want to spend much time with my own thoughts at the moment."

He cast Kirio a sidelong glance.

"Kirio-san, about Tenichi-dono...?"

"Tenichi?" Kirio started, then frowned. "What about him?"

"Is he going to be in a lot of trouble, for trying to kill the silver fox?"

"For trying to kill the what?" Kirio blinked, and Kohaku smiled ruefully.

“I don’t know her name,” he admitted. “A girl with silver hair and no voice. I know he tried to hurt her, and he was arrested because of it. Will he get in a lot of trouble for it?”

“Oh, Ichimaru-san,” Kirio rubbed her chin pensively. “I wish I knew. I hope not, but it’s hard to be sure. I’ve been to see him since he was arrested, but only for a brief spell and he wasn’t really talking about much. He didn’t seem much like himself, and he spent most of the time apologising to me for making me worry and asking whether Ketsui was all right. The Second Division have him, and I don’t know when they’re going to hold his hearing. There’s so much else to settle, so it’s been delayed.”

“Is there anything I can do to help him?”

“You?” Kirio stared, and Kohaku nodded his head.

“Ukitake-dono didn’t tell you that, then?” he asked, and Kirio’s eyes became slits of curiosity.

“Tell me... what?”

“I know what happened to Tenichi-dono in Rukongai,” Kohaku told her evenly. “I was assigned to watch him, after he was abducted. I know he wasn’t there because he wanted to be, and I know he wasn’t aware of the things Father was planning in Rukongai. Father used him and manipulated him and made him paranoid, so he did foolish things.”

Kirio’s eyes became huge, and Kohaku shrugged his shoulders.

“Twice, after he came here, he came to see me,” he continued. “He saw me, the day I first arrived, because he came to tell Ukitake-dono about Souja-dono’s death. I knew he’d been here, even though I was unconscious when he was — when I’ve felt someone’s reiatsu, I never forget it, not ever. I thought he would come, and he did. He wanted to know if I’d tell anyone about our acquaintance... and he was a bit desperate about what would happen if I did. Souja-dono’s death had frightened him, and I had to convince him it wasn’t his fault. Then one of Father’s agents was taken into Second’s custody, and I guess after that he began to fall apart. I tried to warn him to let it alone and walk away, but he wanted to protect Ketsui-dono, so I suppose he felt he couldn’t.”

He looked regretful.

“He attacked the silver fox girl because he thought she was a spy for my father. It was a mistake, and Ketsui-dono stopped it. He wasn’t working for Father, Kirio-san. I just... don’t know if there’s anything I

can do to help him, or if having Keitarou's son as a witness would hurt his case."

"Why didn't you tell me about this before?" Kirio demanded, grabbing him by the shoulders, and Kohaku flinched, detaching himself carefully from her hold.

"I'm stiff," he scolded, then, "and I couldn't. You weren't supposed to know who I was. It was too dangerous... but now, if Ukitake-dono really has secured my safety..."

"I'll talk to Taichou. I'll ask him, see what he thinks," Kirio's eyes had lit up suddenly with hope, and despite himself, Kohaku felt a sense of warmth at her reaction. "If he says its a good idea, Koku, will you testify? Will you come tell the court whatever you know? I know Tenichi isn't a bad person, and I know he's done stupid things... but he's not a traitor and I don't... I don't want anyone to put him to death for making silly mistakes. He's not evil, he doesn't deserve that, and so if you can prove he wasn't Keitarou's ally, then will you? If Taichou agrees, will you?"

"I don't want Tenichi-dono to die, either," Kohaku assured her. "If I can help, Kirio-san, I will. You have my word."

He smiled faintly, glancing across towards Kyouka Raigen once more.

"If I'm going to live, I think the only way I'm going to get peace is to be proactive and take important decisions about things," he added. "This seems like a good place to start. I don't want to bring people death, Kirio-san, so if I can help save Tenichi-dono's life, then, well, that's what I'll have to do."

75. Olive Branch

Chapter Seventy Three : Olive Branch

Nagesu stood at the window of his office, resting his hands on the sill with a sigh as he watched the sky change colours, the dark indigos and mauves of the departing night paling and brightening into the azure sheen of the morning. It was going to be another bright, sunny day over Seireitei. Only the barest wisps of cloud broke up the wide stretch of warm colour, but, as he gazed across in the direction of the Rukongai wall, he almost thought he could see the heavy hazed skyline that cloaked the sun from view on the other side of the divide. *Such separate worlds, and yet, maybe not.*

He turned, his gaze resting on the piles of documents that littered his desk. He had not slept much since the return from the Real World, the burden of guilt for the decisions made weighing more heavily on his shoulders than he would have liked. Reviewing Shougo's records with a fine tooth comb had unlocked secret after secret, and though it had pained him to read, Nagesu had forced himself to go through everything, reading and understanding all the facets of his kinsman's treason.

There had been no flaws in the man's demeanour, he reflected bitterly, moving to sit back down behind his desk and reaching for the uppermost documentation, scanning over it once again. Both Shougo and Daigo before him had played their roles to perfection, escaping from the scandal of Keitsune's disgrace and learning from it enough to conceal their own experiments. It had been Daigo who had created the three creatures the shinigami had faced and fought, and, once the chaos in Seireitei had begun to calm, Nagesu had sent Yunosuke and Shiketsu with a group of men to retrieve the three corpses for further scientific study.

Their identities were no longer a mystery, and as he brushed his fingers across the aged document to smooth it, the fading ink characters seemed to jump out at him.

Nakamoto Haruya. Nakamoto Aki.

Siblings convicted of rebellion and uprising, imprisoned and sentenced to death for their crimes more than a hundred years earlier. Each death warrant had been signed by Daigo's own looping hand and confirmed by Nagesu's father's seal, yet the sentence had never been carried out. Daigo had not killed them, but had taken them to use as

his experiments and, for more than a century, they had been at his mercy, and then that of his son as their bodies and minds were warped and broken in the name of spirit science. Shougo had used Rukongai's spiritually touched souls to try and replicate his father's work, but all he had succeeded in doing was destroying his subjects and turning them into crazed Hollows — ending with Sakanoue Heiji, and, by a tragic twist of fate, Anabomi Seizuku. It had begun a long long time ago, and Nagesu had no way of knowing how many lives it had cost.

Haruya and Aki's death warrants were not the only ones included in the files. There had been other felons, those with suitable bloodline and spirit power, who had been taken in much the same way. Whilst these were convicted as traitors, therefore beyond the help of law, Nagesu knew better than most how strict and paranoid his Father had become in his later years, and how many of the 'treasonable' offences had in reality been quite minor. Nagesu was too fair-minded an individual not to feel that even the worst criminals would not have deserved so many years of torture — and the feeling was compounded by the list of failures who, according to Daigo's diary, had died in similar horrific circumstances to Sakanoue and Anabomi along the way. Haruya and Aki had survived the procedure, but they were not the only victims of the Kusakawa family's ambition, and this fact alone made Nagesu feel physically sick.

Guren-sama reported that the one he fought... Haruya... said they were illegitimate children of the Clan. What better subjects for experimentation than children with power in their blood who nobody wanted? My father's regime encouraged shameful things indeed... though, thank goodness, I can't find any indication that he supported such experiments. Horrendous as this all is, at least I can take comfort in the fact that he too was fooled by Daigo-dono and his son, and not complicit in their work.

As for the third figure, identifying him had proven more difficult. Guren had recalled Haruya using the name "Moe", but there had been no warrant under that name in the files. Daigo's diary too had mentioned a "Moe", but the name had been written in phonetic characters and no clues to his original identity had been forthcoming. It had taken him the best part of the night, and he had been on the verge of giving up, when, moving some of Daigo's books off his desk, he had dislodged two or three sheets of thin paper, sending them tumbling to the floor. Bending to pick them up, he had realised they were letters, and, as he had read the contents of the first, his heart had almost stopped in his chest.

Moe had not been a criminal. He had not even been an illegitimate

son. He had been an infant born too soon, an imperfect child in an overly perfect Clan world. His father had discarded him, and Daigo had taken advantage.

Urahara Kizashi.

Nagesu drew a deep breath into his body to calm himself.

To think, his father was at my court until his death, fifteen years ago. To think he was respected, when all the time, he kept such a secret. He told everyone his son Kizashi died in infancy... but it was a lie. Did he know what Daigo-dono did to the boy, or did he simply pay him to take away a child he considered an embarrassment? How could a father act so, to his own flesh and blood?

His mind flitted to his own son and daughters, and involuntarily he shivered at the thought of any of them going through the same set of ordeals.

I could not do it. I could not look at a child of mine and turn my back on him or her, no matter how challenged their life might have been. A father who does such a thing is hardly a man, and yet I can do nothing for Kizashi now. I cannot help him and I cannot punish his father. All I have are empty regrets and belated understanding. My family is riddled with ambition, deceit and corruption, crumbling from the inside out. It did not begin with Keitarou, and nor, I am sure, will it so easily end with his death. No wonder Hirata-dono didn't trust me with the information about the people he shielded. I have tried so hard to eradicate all the poison created by my Uncle's downfall, but I have barely scratched the surface of twisted Urahara greed. Am I really so helpless a leader, that all this can go on behind my back?

"Taichou?"

A tentative knock at the door drew the Captain back to the present, and he raised his voice to call the visitor in. The divide slid back to reveal the Sixth Seat, Kamitani Jun, still bandaged but much recovered from his prior encounter with Aki, and Nagesu pushed the documents aside, casting his subordinate a harried, weary smile.

"Kamitani. What news?"

"Fukutaichou and Yunosuke-dono have returned from the Real World, sir, via the Gate at Twelfth, and sent a man on ahead to report that they managed to retrieve all three corpses successfully. Also, Fourth Division have finished examining the exile's body. They sent a messenger asking what your plans are for the corpse now. Apparently you requested Keitarou's body be brought to Third when all investigation was at an end?"

“Ah, I see. Thank you,” Nagesu got to his feet, adjusting his spectacles. “I did indeed, and I will come directly and give the relevant instructions.”

“Sir...” Kamitani paused, then, “may I ask, why is he being brought back here? With all respect, sir, he betrayed us more than he betrayed anyone.”

“He did,” Nagesu rubbed his brow wearily. “He did, but he was also one of us, and in the first instance, I think the fault was ours. I haven’t forgiven Keitarou for all the things done to us or to Seireitei, but I want to lay this business to rest. Keitarou has a surviving son who has proven himself sympathetic to Seireitei. I think the first step in healing that breach is to give his father a proper Urahara burial, even if he isn’t deserving of that respect. He was still a kinsman and he lost his way. I feel it should be done like this — his body should be returned to my uncle’s former land-holdings and buried there, with his ancestors. Unfortunately, Uncle is not there... but it seems the right thing to do, regardless. I will not perpetuate the hate my Father insisted on. I am tired of it, and so we will make the first move. Ojisama would want it that way — and perhaps, at last, his ghost can also be at rest.”

“I suppose that’s true, sir,” Kamitani looked abashed. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to question. Everyone is talking about Keitarou’s son, though, sir... and I suppose that makes sense.”

“I hope so, but time will tell what kind of a man Kohaku turns out to be,” Nagesu offered a weak smile. “I trust more and more each day that I am unlike my father, so perhaps Kohaku will prove to be the same. We shall see. I am sick of fighting my family, so I hope and pray it will be so.”

“There’s one more thing, sir,” Kamitani admitted. “A young man is here to see you. He won’t give his name, sir, but he says he’s come from Endou-taichou. He’s dressed in Seventh Division *shihakushou*, but I know you’re busy, so I had him wait outside. I don’t know who he is, but he said that you would understand the missive, if you spoke to him direct.”

“From Hirata-dono?” Nagesu faltered, looking momentarily thrown, then he pressed his lips together, contemplating. “Very well. Can you send him in to speak to me, then, please? I will see him. Advise Yunosuke and Shiketsu that I will be a little delayed, but will join them shortly — and then go to Fourth and tell them that nothing is to be done about moving or preparing Keitarou’s corpse until I have been there and given direct instructions on the correct procedures. I will be

there within the hour — I do not anticipate this meeting will detain me long, and I have other things to attend to this afternoon.”

“Yes, sir,” Kamitani saluted, wincing slightly as he jarred his injuries, then disappeared, and Nagesu began to tidy together the mess on his desk, his mind racing as he contemplated the cryptic message.

He did not have long to wait, however, for the door slid open once more to reveal a young man of about the age of Hirata’s dead son, robed in neat black and white. He was slender and tall, lean and rangy rather than heavily built, but it was the shock of silvery hair pulled back in a casual tail with black ribbon, and the argentine eyes that told Nagesu that his visitor was not simply a member of Seventh coming to bring a message. He let out an exclamation of disbelief, and at his reaction, the stranger bowed his head sombrely in greeting.

“Please, forgive my intrusion,” he said softly, “and, also, my deception in coming here. I am not a member of the Seventh, though it is true that I come from Hirata-sama and with his knowledge.”

“Your hair...” Nagesu faltered, struggling to get a grip on his composure, and the young man raised his gaze, inclining his head slightly to confirm the Captain’s unspoken suspicions.

“I am Ichimaru Joumei,” he said simply. “I am the current head of the exiles once known as *Keitsune no Uragimono*, and the grandson of Ichimaru Kokumei, the man your Lord Father and his court shunned more than a hundred years ago.”

“Ichimaru...” Nagesu sank down behind his desk hurriedly, gazing at the stranger as though seeing a ghost. “Then it is you, or your kind, who have been working in the shadows, providing scientific information to my comrades and aiding and abetting in the destruction of my cousin, Keitarou?”

“Yes, sir,” Joumei acknowledged gravely. “I realise the presumptiveness of such actions, and, also, the insolence you probably see in my presence here now. I know how hated my people are in District Three, and have lived with that knowledge my whole life. However, Souja-dono was my friend, and I could not protect him. If it cost my life, I was willing to do whatever necessary to repay that debt.”

He smiled faintly.

“Hirata-sama did not approve my coming here,” he admitted. “He knows I am here, but he counselled me against diving in like this. He

thought it might be dangerous, but my life is no longer something to be treated as precious and wrapped in cotton wool. My people are dead or dispersed, and only my sister and I remain. If you wish to seize me, as Head of the Kitsune, and satisfy an ancient grievance by taking my life, so be it. All I ask in return is that you allow my sister to live her life in peace and safety, in whatever way she sees fit.”

Nagesu gazed at the newcomer for a moment, then he sighed, burying his head in his hands.

“My family are far from perfect,” he said wearily, “and I am not my father, Joumei-dono. I have spent most of my life trying to repair the damage his paranoia and severity created, yet whenever I close one hole, another crack opens up. I did not know that any of your family had survived, or I am sure I would have addressed this issue before. I know, of course, the events that culminated in your grandfather being exiled from the family, but I was powerless then. Well, who knows, perhaps I am as powerless now.”

He lowered his hands, meeting Joumei’s gaze thoughtfully.

“This sister...” he added, “Ukitake and Hirata-dono both mentioned that the scientific paperwork had come from a girl. That would be your sister?”

“Yes, sir. Her name is Izumi.”

“But you did not bring her with you today?”

“No, sir,” Joumei shook her head. “I mean no disrespect, but I did not seek to risk her life if I was risking my own by coming to speak to you directly.”

“You’re not risking anything by standing here and telling me the truth,” Nagesu reflected. “I have no grievance against you or your kin. The decisions made in the past were made by people now long dead, on both your side and mine. I want to repair this family, not spend my time persecuting branches of it. Keitarou’s death has just made me more determined in that regard... and if I am willing to forgive Keitarou’s son his genetic connections, I can’t possibly overlook justice for yours.”

Joumei’s features relaxed slightly at this, and he looked relieved.

“Juushirou-dono said you were a fair man, and would listen,” he admitted, causing Nagesu to redden in embarrassment at this blunt observation. “For that reason, I gambled my coming here. I would not have, only... I think Izumi has become attached to Inner Seireitei, and I... do not want to leave her here without knowing that she will be

safe.”

“You don’t plan on remaining here yourself?” Nagesu was startled. “You’re dressed as a shinigami, and Hirata-dono gave me the impression...”

“I’m not a shinigami, not a real one, and whilst I work for Hirata-sama, I don’t usually do so here,” Joumei shook his head. “I took this role temporarily to compensate for the incapacitation of a good officer who happily now seems to be recovering his health, but it is not my long-term plan to remain in Inner Seireitei. Keitarou killed members of my family and Izumi and I came here for protection, but now that danger is gone and, if you are no longer interested in hunting us, I feel I can leave and do my duty with a little more freedom. Izumi, though... she hasn’t said it directly, but I am certain she will want to remain here.”

“Very well,” Nagesu pursed his lips, contemplating. “I will permit that, but on one condition. I wish to meet your sister. Her science is extremely impressive and I should like to discuss with her one or two of her methods and conclusions.”

“That might be difficult,” Joumei admitted, and Nagesu arched an eyebrow.

“May I ask why?”

“Izumi doesn’t speak, sir,” Joumei explained earnestly. “I’m the only person left, now, who understands her sign language fluently. I’m scientific, but not in the same league as she is... I wonder if I will be able to translate effectively enough.”

“I see,” Nagesu’s face cleared, and he offered a smile. “Regardless, my thoughts are unchanged. Science is a language in its own right, Joumei-dono. I have seen Izumi-dono’s work, and I have understood her line of thought through her writings, even though we’ve never met. I am eager to make her acquaintance. A talent such as hers should be nurtured, not buried, and if it is in my power, I should like to encourage her to use that ability. Her methods are old-fashioned, and I’m sure, with more recent materials, she’d be able to make even more pertinent observations. Her work probably saved lives this time — maybe, in future, it could save more.”

“Then I will ask her if she will come with me, and I will call on you again, when you are less busy,” Joumei suggested. “I merely wanted to confirm her safety with you, today... and, perhaps, my own, should I choose to visit her in the future.”

“If Izumi-dono is staying at Seventh, when I go speak to Hirata-dono, I shall surely see her then,” Nagesu pointed out, and Joumei shook his head.

“My sister is not at Seventh. She is a recruit at Thirteenth Division,” he said honestly, and Nagesu’s eyes widened at this tid-bit of information.

“Ukitake,” he murmured. “So that’s how he had the data at his disposal... the girl was working under his auspices all the time.”

“Juushirou-dono has been very good to my sister and I,” Joumei agreed. “Thirteenth’s members have accepted Izumi and I would sooner she was there than hiding in places that threaten her health. Up till now nothing has been ideal for her, and she has had little opportunity to mix with anyone other than myself and a close ally and friend who, I’m afraid, fell victim to Keitarou’s assault on our home. I have been surprised and encouraged by the bonds she has begun to build with her new peers, and I would like her to live in the sun and the fresh air from now on, if it is at all possible. You said her methods were old-fashioned, and indeed they are, but she is still very young in many ways. If she were here, I could cease to worry about protecting her, and I would know she was learning to protect herself. Juushirou-dono has made it clear that she is welcome to remain with his squad and that he would very much like to keep her, so if you have no objections, I feel I can leave her there in confidence when I return to my other duties outside of Inner Seireitei.”

“You have my word,” Nagesu said solemnly, holding out his hand, and Joumei took it, shaking it firmly. “If you can trust an Urahara’s word — and I wish I could say that I was certain of its integrity. I assure you, though, that *I* mean what I say, whatever prior generations might have done. I want peace for my family, and I want it for all parts of the Clan. Whether they are still in Third District or not — it’s time the killing stopped.”

“We are of a similar mind,” Joumei admitted. “Ukitake-dono was right. You are exactly as I hoped you’d be, Nagesu-sama... and, if I may be so impertinent, I believe that a man with that outlook is the leader the Urahara family has needed for a very long time. If anyone can mend the rifts, I am sure it is you.”

“I wish I had that confidence, but I appreciate hearing it,” Nagesu owned. ‘Joumei-dono, before you go,’ as the Kitsune began to make his obeisance before leaving, “I wonder, do you know anything about a branch of the family called Kusakawa?”

“Should I?” Joumei looked surprised, and Nagesu shrugged.

“I have recently discovered untoward activities on their behalf, and I wondered if, in your time working for Hirata-dono, you had ever heard of them,” he admitted, and Joumei shook his head.

“I’m afraid I keep a wide berth where legitimate Urahara are concerned, if possible,” he confessed. “It’s not a family I know... I have never met anyone by that name.”

“Well, they died out twenty five years ago, but there’s no statute of limitations on the effects of treasonous science,” Nagesu said heavily. “It doesn’t matter. If you can’t help, then I won’t trouble you any more.”

“I wasn’t born, then,” Joumei reflected, “but I must go back to my family’s shelter, to properly pay my respects to those Keitarou killed, and bury them in the proper way. When I do, providing Keitarou didn’t unearth them when he was there, I’ll look through my Grandfather and Father’s records. Maybe I will find something.”

“I had no idea you were so young,” Nagesu remarked. “You look young, but... your manner is one much older, even than my own son.”

“Our sins have led us to a lifestyle where we grow up quickly, and die young,” Joumei reflected.

“Then Izumi-dono must indeed be very young.”

“Barely an adult in years,” Joumei admitted. “I hope, though, that leaving the hideout now might at least give Izumi a proper chance at a long life, whatever it does to me. We spent a long time living around Sekkiseki and it’s generally thought that the reason Izumi’s vocal chords didn’t develop properly relates to the conditions of her birth. I don’t know if it has had any other long term effects on her physical health, but I pray she’s left the mine soon enough that she might move beyond it.”

“Your family did not reject her, because she had an imperfection that was unexpected,” Nagesu murmured, and Joumei looked surprised.

“Why would we have done?”

“Ah, yes, why indeed,” Nagesu sighed, shaking his head. “I’m sorry. I discovered that one of my former ministers had done that exact thing with a son of his because the boy was born with some kind of impairment. The child was sold into a terrible situation that resulted in unspeakable things being done to his soul. He was a man from the

heart of the Clan — it struck me that perhaps exile is good for the Urahara, if it makes them realise the value of the people they have around them.”

“I see,” Joumei looked solemn. “Izumi is the dearest thing in the world to me and I’ve never seen her lack of speech as an impairment. Nobody among the Kitsune did, we just learned to understand her sign language and it became part of normal life. As I said, though, I’m the only living individual who is fluent in those signs... so maybe, now she’s here, Izumi will have to begin over again in making herself understood.”

“I’m sure that, if she’s with Ukitake’s Division, that won’t take long,” Nagesu observed, and Joumei nodded.

“I cannot repay Juushirou-dono his kindness to us,” he acknowledged. “There is a lot to be said for Seireitei’s shinigami — a lot of good things, and a lot of good people in *shihakushou*. The longer I’ve been here the more I’ve realised it. Even if Clans make mistakes, or shinigami do, overall, what happens here is important for the stability of everywhere else in Soul Society. If Izumi can be a part of that, then so much to the good. She’s not a child any more, and besides, she’s begun to move on already. She’s ready to embrace the challenge of being here, and lonely as it is for me, I am willing to let her go.”

He smiled sadly.

“Father would’ve been happy to see us make peace with the Mother Clan,” he added. “He always hoped for such a day, which is why he was so willing to forge alliances with people like the Endou and take risks. He was a far wiser leader than I am, and I wish he could’ve lived to see this himself, but at least I feel something has been accomplished. Although most Kitsune have scattered and begun lives of their own, they need no longer look over their shoulders if the Urahara are no longer pursuing them.”

“I haven’t actively pursued anyone except Keitarou for a long time,” Nagesu promised. “He was an exception, and it grieved me to do it. Hunting family is not in my nature. I do not have my father’s ruthlessness, which sometimes is a weakness.”

“Or a strength,” Joumei ruminated. “But I am overstaying my welcome and overstepping the boundaries of rank with my impertinence. My sincere apologies, Nagesu-sama — thank you for finding the time to meet with me.”

“I trust it will be the first of many conversations,” Nagesu

remarked. "It would be difficult, if not impossible, to reinstate the Ichimaru family at their previous degree of rank, and I am glad you have not asked me to attempt it. Land has changed hands and the politics of returning to an ancient age would likely create further ructions in my already fragmented court. I can, however, clear your names and pardon your ancestor his crimes, such as they may or may not have been. I was fond of my uncle, and have always believed there are two sides to each story. Go in peace, Ichimaru Joumei, and convey my respects to your sister. I will indeed make time to meet her — but I must make preparations to leave myself. I have messages to receive and a corpse to inspect, among other unsavoury duties... and this afternoon I must meet Keitarou's son, and hope I see the same sincerity in his eyes as I believe I see in yours."

"You are meeting with Kohaku-dono?" Joumei paused, clearly taken aback, and Nagesu's eyes narrowed thoughtfully.

"Ah, so you don't know the Kusakawa family, but you do know Kohaku?" he asked, and Joumei nodded his head.

"He saved my life," he explained grimly. "I have his sister's blood on my hands, Nagesu-sama — I was the agent of Hirata-sama who tracked down and slew the killer of my friend, Souja-dono. Keitarou put his hex on me... but even though he knew I killed his sister, Kohaku-dono chose to free me. I had come back to Seireitei intending to expose his true identity... but in that moment, I knew he was not my enemy. I truly believe the chimera that those of us here in Seireitei witnessed was done for the sake of releasing others under Chudokuga's curse, and more, that the strategy worked. I had understood the boy was in poor health, though... was I wrong?"

"According to a message from Ukitake last night, he has declared himself well enough to stand before the Council, and so today, he will," Nagesu answered. "Your words reassure me that our decision not to kill him is sound. I want to believe Keitarou's son can step away from his father's path of destruction — but with the difficulties I have leaving my own father's shadow, I can't help but have doubts. As Father killed Uncle, so I have plotted to kill Keitarou, a man who was once like a younger brother to me... and so it goes on."

"But you have forgiven my people, and you intend to meet Kohaku-dono, not simply judge him in absentia," Joumei observed. "I believe Kohaku is different from Keitarou. In the moments he freed me, I felt his will to help. We've all made hard decisions during this battle, but ultimately, they were all made for the greater good. Keitarou is dead and now, at last, the world can move on."

“You know, you don’t have to do this today.”

Juushirou pushed open the door of the small sick room, casting its sole occupant a pensive glance. “It’s soon and you’re still recovering — though I have to admit, you certainly look a lot fitter than I expected you to be.”

“I’m all right, at least enough to go and talk to people,” Kohaku turned from where he had been examining his reflection in the mirror, offering his companion a rueful smile. “Kirio-san said that I couldn’t go looking like a vagabond, even if it would get me the sympathy vote... do you think I look all right? I’ve never been summoned before Clan Leaders before... and I’m not sure what I should expect. Especially considering the damage I did to Third Division’s *Senkaimon*.”

“Yes, well, in the circumstances, I think that will be overlooked,” Juushirou grinned despite himself, crossing the *tatami* mat floor to stand at the young man’s side. He met Kohaku’s reflected gaze in the mirror, giving an approving nod at what he saw. “And you look fine. Neat and presentable and not about to faint, thank goodness. Though where did the clothing come from? You can’t wear *shihakushou* before the Council when you’re not a registered shinigami, not considering the circumstances, but I hadn’t realised...”

“Ketsui-dono let me borrow them,” Kohaku admitted, fingering the sleeve of the simple beige *hakamashita* with a shrug. “I don’t have my own clothes, they were ruined even before I got here, and Kirio-san said I couldn’t go prancing around Seireitei in my nightclothes again, not if I didn’t want the Council to think I was crazy, so she asked Ketsui-dono for help and he found me these. I’m thinner than he is, but they fit all right and I promised him I wouldn’t ruin them.”

“Since you’re not going to blow up anything today, I should hope you can keep that promise,” Juushirou looked amused. ‘I see. I hadn’t realised it was a group conspiracy. I know Kirio told Mitsuki that she was going to do something about your hair, which she has... but I didn’t know it was a Thirteenth Division collective effort. I’m glad, though,’ he added thoughtfully. “I want you to feel that this place is somewhere you can belong, Koku. We haven’t spoken about it, not specifically, but since you raised Kyouka Raigen, it makes your future a little bit more complicated. If you’re here, with shinigami, it should be all right, but I don’t imagine the Council, given your levels of spirit power, would want you running riot around Seireitei under your own auspices. I don’t want you to think you’re a prisoner — I assure you, nothing is further from my mind — but at the same time, if you

wanted to leave here... it might be difficult to arrange.”

“It’s all right,” Kohaku fingered the ends of his tail of dark brown hair absently. “I don’t want to go run riot anywhere. I want to stay here. No... I *need* to. I need to stay here, so if that’s what you think too, I will.”

“As simple as that, huh?” Juushirou looked surprised, and Kohaku smiled sadly.

“My family are gone, but Kirio-san believes I can find a new one, here,” he said matter-of-factly. “She’s bossy and intrusive and overprotective but I like that she is, it makes me feel less alone, and more like what she said is true. Thirteenth has a nice atmosphere and I feel like I’m on the outside of it, but I don’t want to stay there. I admit, I don’t know how to take care of myself, and I’d be frightened of trying... but it’s not just because its easier that I want to stay.”

He released the lock of hair, allowing it to fall back against his shoulders.

“Kirio-san cut my hair and brushed it so hard my head is still tingling,” he admitted. “I’ve never seen myself quite like this, but though I don’t dislike it, I know it’s not right. It’s not really ‘Kohaku’. I’m starting to understand that more and more.”

“How do you mean?” Juushirou looked quizzical, and Kohaku frowned, trying to find the right words.

“It’s there, at the tip of my senses,” he mused. “I can’t quite see it, but it’s there all the same. Kyouka and I were meant to come here — we always were, going back to the time I was born. Maybe Kyouka even chose my soul because that was what was meant to happen. I’m supposed to die in Seireitei, but I was wrong when I thought that meant dying to stop my father killing everyone. I loved him and it hurts that he’s dead. I don’t want that to stop being true, because I betrayed him and I shouldn’t forgive myself too easily. Sacrificing people you love shouldn’t ever be taken lightly, right?”

“I agree,” Juushirou said gravely, “but I also admire the courage you found to make that decision.”

“It was made for me, a long time ago, because Father couldn’t let go,” Kohaku said simply, reaching out a hand towards his reflection and touching the tips to the mirror image’s. “Ukitake-dono, Kyouka’s true form is a mirror. A mirror deep within a castle, and in that mirror he reflects my soul. The first time, when I saw it, my soul was bloody and chained, because it was trapped by Father’s protection and will.

He and I were both wrong about our relationship. I wasn't born to be his secret weapon, but to be his nemesis. I was born because this world needs balance, and father threatened that balance. It's a hard thing for a son to accept, but I can't change it, so I'm going to try and accept it."

"If you're right, it's a heavy burden to bear," Juushirou's gaze softened. "I was very close to my father too. He died protecting me, and so I understand the sense of loss, and the sense of guilt."

"But because of it, you are who you are now, aren't you?" Kohaku turned earnest brown eyes on his companion. "If it hadn't happened that way, would you have done all the things you've done?"

"I imagine not," Juushirou acknowledged. "Every little event shapes the bigger ones, and every big one turns you onto a different path — that's what you're saying, isn't it?"

"Yes," Kohaku agreed. 'I want to make Father's death the same in my life. I want it to move me forward and make me do things that matter. Kyouka Raigen wants that from me, too. He's fed up of me sitting back and letting the world swim by when I have the power to get involved and help. And to do that,' he gestured around him, "it helps to be in a place where people make a difference every day. If I'm alive still, it's for a reason. That's why I want to see your Council today, even if I know that I'm still a little shaky and not fully fit. I have at least been eating since Kirio-san came to talk to me, so I trust I can manage this without passing out again. Either way, I don't want to wait to do this. I want to get their permission to stay here, and take the *shihakushou*, and work like you have to try and change the inequalities in this world. My parents may both have been born Clan, but the truth is that I'm from Rukongai, and that could change everything."

"Just like I was from the Districts," Juushirou murmured, then he laughed. "I see. Yes, your thought process makes sense. Not everything Keitarou believed in was bad, and there are things we can learn from from the mistakes surrounding his life and his actions, including those made by shinigami. You're right, something must be done about Rukongai — and having you here would certainly be a step towards it. It's a hard path, though, Koku-kun. You'll face a lot of people who'll challenge your right to do or decide anything. The world is changing and has already changed, but real change happens slowly. You won't save it in one day — maybe not even in one lifetime."

"I know," Kohaku nodded. "But I hoped that, if I told you how I

felt, you'd agree to support my staying here. Even if the rest of Seireitei isn't ready for a shinigami born in Rukongai, I felt like Thirteenth Division might be different, and so more than anything it matters to me to stay here. Not just in Inner Seireitei, but *here*, specifically, with you and Kirio-san and everyone else."

He shrugged, embarrassed.

"I'll probably be an awful shinigami, and I have no training or education to speak of," he admitted. "I don't like killing things, and I've never really learned to hold a sword. Even so, though, it matters to me to do this. I *came* here to do this. I'm sure that my brother knew it, and maybe he saw it in my memories of past visions before even I did. There are a lot of things I saw when I was very small which are muddled and mixed together, and my recollections of them are patchy, but Father often put bits of them together to form his own ideas and I think Katsu-nii must have done the same thing. That's why he asked Edogawa-san to make sure I was all right, and why he cut off communication between us. The more I look at my reflection here, the more I feel like the real Kohaku *ought* to be wearing a *shihakushou*, and that nothing can begin until he does."

"As far as I'm concerned, you're an honorary extension of this squad already," Juushirou reflected. 'Providing the Council don't object, you can be assured of my support. People already think I've adopted you,' he added sheepishly, "so I suppose it wouldn't be too much of a step further to make you my recruit. I have a reputation for being unconventional when it comes to recruitment decisions... and it usually pays off."

"I'm grateful to you for everything you've done for me," Kohaku said seriously. "You've been kinder to me than anyone, so I hoped you'd understand the way I felt. Everything in my life is different, now, and I know next to nothing about Seireitei, let alone how to live or work here, so I will need help to do that, properly. I know you're the only Captain and the only squad not based around one of the Clans, so I was sure that you of all people would know how it feels to be outside of your comfort zone."

"Sometimes that can work to your advantage," Juushirou rubbed his chin pensively, "but I grant you, there are times — and especially, when I was a student, many times when my ignorance of Clan intrigue put me in harm's way."

"It's because it's another world completely, not just another piece of Soul Society," Kohaku said earnestly. "There are birds and flowers in the books Kirio-san brought me that I've never even seen. Foods I've

never tasted. Customs I've never encountered and people I've never met. I'd never seen the sun or the moon till I came here, and to begin with, the light dazzled me. That kind of ignorance frightens me the more I think about it. Seeing the future or the past is worthless if you don't understand the present properly... and it's fine to want to preserve life, but how can you if you've never lived it?"

He shrugged again.

"In Rukongai, shinigami were just names and shadows in my thoughts and dreams, but now they're real people with hopes and wishes of their own," he concluded. "Sometimes they're good, sometimes not. Some make mistakes, others don't. That's kind of why I wanted to get up and see the Council as soon as I felt well enough, to be honest. I want to try and save Tenichi-dono from a charge of treason, if I possibly can, and taking action is actually preferable right now to lying in bed thinking about what I've lost."

"Kirio said you'd mentioned wanting to help him," Juushirou's eyes became serious. "I don't know what Tenichi's fate will be, but I do know he's deeply distressed by all that's happened. He was a recruit of mine, once, but when I spoke to him, he was like a stranger and it was upsetting to see. I don't know if there's anything you can really do for him, Koku, but I'm grateful and glad you want to try."

"Ketsui-dono said that, too," Kohaku remembered. "He said that the last time he saw Tenichi-dono, they were like strangers, but he felt sure that, with my testimony, his brother would at least be spared his life. I think Ketsui-dono and I have a lot in common, right now, but I can't do anything to protect Katsu-nii. The things he's done are much worse than what Tenichi-dono is imprisoned for. Even if Katsu-nii was arrested, and I did everything I could and sacrificed everything I had, I don't think I have the power to save him. I might be able to help Ketsui-dono's brother, though. I do know what happened to him in Rukongai, and I can testify about it. I know Tenichi-dono wasn't Father's agent. He called himself my ally, but he was never really Father's, even if they were kin and Father made him confused."

He smiled.

"If I'm really his ally, it's my duty to stick by him now and try to help," he decided. "And if I want the people in Thirteenth to let me be one of them, I should begin by proving I'm not like my father and I want to help. It might not do any good, but at least I can say I've tried."

"Then I won't try to stop you," Juushirou assured him. "Right now,

though, we should leave. I'm coming with you — I think it's best I do — but the Council don't like latecomers and I'd rather keep them in a good mood from the start."

"Kirio-san said there's a rumour that you stormed them and threatened them with mutiny the last time you spoke to them," Kohaku eyed Juushirou curiously, noticing the red tint that touched the older man's cheeks and the sheepish smile that spread across his thin, pale features.

"I wouldn't go that far," he said cautiously, "but I may have overstepped the usual courtesy mark in getting my opinions across."

"Was that really on my behalf?" Kohaku's eyes became wide, and Juushirou shot him a crooked grin.

"You'll find soon enough that when I believe in something, I believe in it wholesale," he said frankly. "I told you before, I believe in you. You have to give trust to get it, and I've not seen anything that's suggested to me my judgement was wrong. On the contrary, a lot of people are alive now who might not have been if you hadn't acted."

"There were people I couldn't save," Kohaku's features became sombre. "Not only Father, but others, too. It feels as though I somehow killed them. When you know the consequences of your actions, it makes it harder to act, so I probably won't forget those people for a while yet. I knew, too, that if I destroyed the *Senkaimon*, the injured shinigami in the Real World would be at increased risk of dying. I was willing to take that risk — but it's that kind of judgement that I need help with. I don't want to be choosing who lives and who dies, even if I have the power to determine it."

"All the injured from the Real World are alive, and those who didn't make it back were killed quickly — getting them to the Gate would have made no difference at all," Juushirou assured him. "As for Anabomi and the Ninth, it's a terrible tragedy, but one that you couldn't have prevented."

"If I'd reached the Gate sooner, maybe I'd have been able to free Anabomi-dono from Father's spell in time."

"And maybe you could spend a life time thinking about past what-if scenarios, but that won't get the future saved," Juushirou reminded him gently. "Come on. It's not far to the Council Chambers, and though the whole atmosphere is imposing, I'm on your side. I won't let any of them hurt you — you have my word."

"I know," Kohaku admitted. "I know you'd never betray me. I lied

when we met, the first time. I knew who you were... I'd always known your name, but till I met you, I didn't understand why Father was so bothered by you. Maybe that's why I let my guard down and told you I was from Rukongai. I didn't want to trust Seireitei, but I knew when I first met you that I could trust in your word, Juushirou-dono. I think that's why Father wanted you to die. He thought you would be an obstacle to him and a threat to my using my powers the way he wanted. I wonder if he realised that it would be your kindness, not your sword, that would make that true."

"You called me Juushirou-dono," Juushirou blinked, and Kohaku reddened, looking stricken.

"I'm sorry! It just slipped..."

"It's all right," Juushirou assured him. "I don't mind. It just surprised me. You've preserved the formality between us till now so carefully."

"I know," Kohaku gazed at his feet, his cheeks still burning. "I am sorry. It came out without my even thinking about it. I don't know why. Maybe because Kyouraku-dono calls you Juushirou... I don't know. Perhaps because Father did. Maybe it's buzzing around in my thoughts, the need to make sure "Juushirou" doesn't die. I didn't mean to be rude."

"You weren't, and I really don't mind," Juushirou patted the young man on the shoulder. "If you stay here, you'll notice that there are times when other people drop their rank formality and refer to me in more familiar terms than you just have. My Vice Captain, my Third Seat and I were classmates at the Academy, and sometimes, those bonds are stronger than the ones of office. I like close bonds within my squad, so I don't mind. But, if you do recruit, at times when you're on duty, you will have to call me Captain. For a recruit to do anything else would be seen as impertinent — even if I didn't consider it to be."

"I promise," Kohaku recovered himself, offering an embarrassed smile. "I'll remember. Thank you for understanding."

"People have said before that I use kindness as a weapon," as the two men crossed the courtyard, ducking beneath the Division gate, Juushirou's expression became thoughtful. "If they're right, then I don't think I do it on purpose. But if being kind to people is useful, then I suppose it's not a bad trait to have. It doesn't mean I'm trying to replace your father's position in your life, nor will I ever. Just, as I'm sure Kirio has told you, Thirteenth Division is a family. A unique, hotch-potch family of folk from all over Seireitei, and all different

walks of life — but that's partly why it works."

He shot his companion a sidelong grin.

"I will be using up my entire quota of eccentricity, if I manage to secure your recruitment," he added. "I already took on one recruit outside of the normal channels, and, given her contributions in this affair, I very much hope to keep her, if it can be arranged."

"The silver fox?" Kohaku asked quizzically, and Juushirou looked amused.

"She has a name, you know. Just like you do."

"I know," Kohaku coloured again, "but I find it hard to see her in my mind as anything other than a silver fox. Her and her brother, both. I've met her brother, but I can't remember meeting her. All I have is that vague impression of the silver vixen that Tenichi-dono tried to kill."

"And, thankfully, he didn't succeed," Juushirou sighed heavily. "Her name is Izumi, Koku, and if I do manage to keep her, you will see a good deal of her. You will be recruits together, and with the four I already have, that will make six in total. Well, Thirteenth is already the smallest squad. It's not as though we don't have the requisite capacity to take on more, and I'd like to expand our numbers if I possibly can."

"You don't think that Izumi-dono might not like it, being close to the son of someone who hurt her family?" Kohaku was anxious, and Juushirou shook his head.

"Izumi knows, because Joumei told her, that you saved him from Keitarou's spell," he said frankly. "He is alive because of what you did, then, and now that your identity is no longer a secret, he felt safe in telling her. She also understands what it is to be treated badly because of sins committed by other kin. Like you, she's not familiar with the ways of a shinigami, but like you, I believe she has a purpose here in Seireitei and that she ought to fulfil it, if it's what she wants. Besides, I think she's become part of our 'family' of late."

His eyes twinkled, but he did not elaborate on what he meant, and Kohaku sighed, turning to gaze around him at the surrounding barracks.

The streets were still quiet, and though the odd officer stood on duty outside of certain buildings, they simply saluted Juushirou, a gesture he acknowledged with a nod of his head.

“A Captain can really walk through here without anyone blinking, can’t he?” Kohaku murmured, and Juushirou looked rueful.

“No, a Captain is answerable to the same things as anyone else,” he said thoughtfully. “If I was to overstep my position in a dangerous way, I could be arrested and tried. Probably, a Captain would not be allowed a light sentence if they did something untoward. We have a certain level of responsibility and duty to the officers in our command, and those around Seireitei, so a rogue Captain is too dangerous to be treated leniently. The more power you hold, the greater the burden you carry. At the same time, though, it gives you the opportunity to do more good. It’s a delicate balance — well, much like this world itself.”

“Being a shinigami is much more complicated than I ever realised, growing up,” Kohaku absorbed this with a thoughtful look on his face.

“We do make mistakes,” Juushirou agreed. “We’re not perfect, and sometimes, things happen that we can’t control. All we can do then is try and fix the damage as best as we can. Whether we’re worthy of our rank or not depends on whether we’re able to face that, rather than try to cover it with pride and ego. And, speaking of pride, this is where we’re going. The Council Chambers.”

He paused, gesturing the building that stood before them, and Koku let out a gasp, fear claspings its cold hand around his heart as he gazed up at the intimidating structure.

“I have to go... in there?” he whispered, and Juushirou nodded.

“Clan tradition demands pomp and circumstance,” he said dryly, “but they aren’t summoning you as a traitor to Soul Society. If that were the case, the Onmitsukidou would’ve called for you... and even if I called in favours from my friends there, I doubt I could prevent your arrest if the Council seriously wanted it. They don’t, thankfully — but they are curious to meet you. They have questions, and so do you. I will be with you, so don’t worry.”

“I suppose I asked for it,” Kohaku swallowed the bile that rose in his throat. “I asked to come here. I need to see it through now, else Kyouka will give me more hell for running away.”

“This was Kyouka’s idea?” Juushirou asked, but Kohaku shook his head.

“Mine, but Kyouka expects me to be proactive from now on, if possible,” he said ruefully. “I need to learn a lot more about my sword, but one thing I do know is that he’s nicer to me if he feels like

I'm doing everything I can. I'll sleep far better tonight if I do this now, so I'll do it. Kyouka in a bad mood is more frightening a prospect than the Council of Elders, even if they are all important people."

"Yes, we need to talk properly about your sword," Juushirou agreed, pushing open the main doors of the Council hall and leading his apprehensive charge inside and guiding him down the long, high-ceilinged hallway towards another, equally impressive door. Though there were points for guards to be stationed, there was nobody outside this time, and on reaching this point, the Thirteenth Division Captain paused.

"I'll write to my former Sensei at the Academy and we'll take his advice," he reflected. "He's lived a long time and knows a lot about *zanpakutou*. Though I looked in the archive here, I didn't find anything that related specifically to the things you'd told me. That was before you finalised your summoning, too — and now is a key time in your relationship with Kyouka Raigen. We can't send you to the Academy, not with the level of power you have and the stage you are in your sword summoning — but regardless, I think Sensei's input will be valuable and he ought to be consulted."

"Maybe your Sensei will know about Kyouka's lives before," Kohaku reflected, and Juushirou looked quizzical.

"Lives before? Kyouka's spirit is reincarnated?"

"He said so. He said he was very old, but that his nature changed each time he was born and bonded to a new soul, so so did the last part of his name," Kohaku agreed. "I'd like to know more about that, because I think it might help me know about him now. I decided I want to work with him, rather than against him — but I want to find out about him from other places than just what he tells me, so I can really understand."

"Then I'll mention that to Sensei, too, and see what he comes up with," Juushirou decided. "I'm glad you mentioned it to me. I've heard of swords being reborn before, but I don't know much about how or why that comes about. Sensei will, though — I've heard the sword he holds is one such weapon."

He grinned, raising his hand and curling it into a fist.

"Right now, though, your audience awaits," he said warmly. "You must bow when first you enter, it's tradition, but when they tell you to stand, hold your head up high. Also, listen carefully to what they ask you. They are eight very different individuals, and they will each treat you quite differently, I imagine — but they have all agreed not to

pursue charges against you, so don't let them frighten you. You have done nothing wrong. Remember it."

With that he rapped firmly on the substantial door, and, as Kohaku's heart began to pound in his chest, the heavy divide creaked open, revealing what looked like bleak darkness beyond. Reminded of the first time he had visited Kyouka's dream castle, Kohaku closed his eyes, taking a deep breath to compose himself. Then he turned to Juushirou, meeting his gaze.

"I'm ready," he said softly, nodding his head. Juushirou gave him an encouraging smile, then took him gently by the arm, leading him forward into the heart of the chamber. As they approached the midpoint, the Captain paused, dropping in his regulation bow, and Kohaku faltered, then followed his companion's example, sure that his pulse was loud enough that everyone in the room assembled would be able to hear it.

"Ukitake, you may stand," The voice was soft and gentle, yet Kohaku could hear the weariness that edged it, as though the speaker had undergone significant strain, and it was an effort to resist the urge to raise his gaze to see for himself. Ahead of him, Juushirou had obeyed the command, taking a step or two forward so that his feet were no longer in Kohaku's line of sight, but the older man's reiatsu presence comforted him that he was not alone, and nor would he ever be, not so long as he put his faith in this man. That understanding helped to calm his racing heart, and he focused on taking deep breaths, reminding himself of the reasons he had decided to come.

"You have brought the boy," it was not a question, and this speaker's tones were different, sharp and wary, as though he were not entirely convinced of the Council's decision of leniency.

"Yes sir. I have," Juushirou's own tones were calm and even. "Kohaku would like to address the Council, and has come to present himself before you all as evidence of his good intent towards Soul Society."

"You stand surety for this boy in all respects, Juushirou?" A woman's voice, and then, again, Juushirou's comforting answer.

"As I believe I stated previously, Midori-sama... I will vouch for Kohaku's innocence and will continue to do so."

"Then we should speak to him ourselves," the gentle voice was back. "Your companion may stand, Ukitake, and present himself to us as you say he wishes."

“Koku, its all right. The Council are ready to speak to you,” Juushirou’s tones were a low murmur, and Kohaku realised with a jolt that he had been focusing so much on the tones of voice of these strangers that he had almost missed his cue. He scrambled to his feet, knowing that his pale cheeks were probably flushing with awkward colour once more, but as he rose, he caught Juushirou’s reassuring gaze, and felt better once again. Offering the faintest of smiles, he turned to face the speakers who, he now saw, sat in an incomplete ring around his position. There were nine chairs, one of which was raised above the others as though signifying a position of greater duty, and, as he scanned his gaze around the others, Kohaku made out the Clan crests that adorned each of the other seats. One was empty, and Kohaku’s heart caught for a moment as he recognised the crest of the Urahara carved into the wood. Was the Urahara Clan Leader not present? But no, as he returned his attention to the most prominent of the seats, he realised that, from the man’s fair hair and pale eyes, this must be the Third District incumbent. This was his father’s cousin, Nagesu... the man who had occupied such an ambiguous role in Keitarou’s life.

“You are Aizen Kohaku?” This man spoke now, and Kohaku recognised the gentle voice that had first addressed Juushirou when they had entered. Sure enough, behind the stranger’s spectacles, he could see signs of weariness in the pale eyes, lines of consternation marring his brow. At the sight of these obviously human traits, Kohaku gathered his courage, lowering his head in a respectful bow.

“Yes, sir. I am.”

“You acknowledge that you are the son of Aizen Keitarou, the exile and an outlaw of Seireitei?”

“Yes, sir. He was my father,” Kohaku agreed again, though his own use of past tense made a fresh wave of sadness wash over his slender frame.

“Then you are the boy who brought my son Souja back from Rukongai?” Another man spoke now, and Kohaku turned, his eyes widening in stricken realisation as, for the first time, he laid eyes on his mother’s older brother, the Head of the Endou Clan, Hirata. Though he lacked Eiraki’s vivid sapphire eyes, there was no mistaking the resemblance between her and both this man and the young shinigami Vice Captain whose life he had not been able to save, and before he knew what he was doing, he had bowed low before Hirata’s seat.

“I’m sorry, sir,” he said softly. “I tried to help him, true enough, but

I failed. I was weak and I couldn't save him. I'm sorry."

"Raise your head," Hirata instructed, and warily Kohaku did so, startled at the glitter of emotion in the other man's eyes. "I would like to look at you, full in the face, and see this child my sister brought into the world for myself."

"Hirata-sama, this is not a family gathering," the acerbic tones came from the incumbent of the First Division seat, but to Kohaku's surprise, Hirata ignored the other man's words, instead getting to his feet and stepping, carefully, down from the small dais on which the Seventh District seat was positioned.

"Hirata-sama!" The First District representative was clearly put out at this flagrant disregard for normal protocol, but Kohaku saw Hirata exchange glances with Juushirou, who gave a little nod, as if confirming an unspoken question. The Endou Leader's eyes narrowed slightly, then he turned to Kohaku, resting his hands on the other's shoulders before the young man could react, and meeting his gaze head on. A faint whip of reiatsu told Kohaku that a predator slept deep within this man's soul, and it would be as well not to wake it, but there was nothing of the hunter in Hirata's current expression, and though the air around them had become thicker at Hirata's proximity, Kohaku found he was still able to breathe.

"I want to hear it from your own lips," Hirata spoke softly. "I know you brought back my son, and I share your regret that he did not survive. But I want to know... whether your father wished my son ill. I want to know the truth, and whether you tried to warn Souja because of Keitarou's actions, or because of something else."

"My father never ordered Souja-dono to die," Somehow Kohaku found his voice, though his throat was suddenly dry. "My sister murdered your son, Hirata-sama. My spirit power allows me, sometimes, to see glimpses of the future. Because of that, I alone knew that he was in danger before the time he arrived in Rukongai. When he came, I waited, and I tried to warn him, but he left via shunpo, and I cannot perform that skill. By the time I found him, my sister had already hurt him. I'm not a healer. I lack any useful skills, and I didn't even know how to open the Gate. Souja-dono asked my help to get back, and so I tried to do that. I came back with him from Rukongai, but I could not do more for him than that."

"Why would you put your sister and your family at risk on the bare chance that my son might return to Seireitei alive?" Hirata demanded. "Why would you try to warn Souja, when it would've been easier to let it lie?"

“Because I knew, if Souja-dono died, then there would be a war between my Father and your people, sir,” Kohaku wetted his lips, all too aware of the flickering energy at the edges of his companion’s aura. “I knew that if he died, everything would change and other people would die. Maybe lots of people. ..And, one more reason.”

“Which was?”

“I saw someone who was hurt and who wanted to go home,” Kohaku’s voice softened, and Hirata’s eyes widened at his words. “I knew that I would be attacked by the kestrel... I mean the shinigami with the kestrel sword — if I crossed into Seireitei, and I knew that I would never be able to go back. I knew that, but you can’t just walk by someone who needs your help, even if you can’t give it.”

Hirata’s hands slipped away from Kohaku’s body at this, and he let out a heavy sigh.

“I see,” he said at length. “Thank you. I wanted to hear it from you, rather than from Juushirou. You met my gaze when answering and I believe you told me the truth. I believe you truly wanted to save my son. He certainly believed in you — he begged us to protect you, and wouldn’t rest until we promised that we would. I see the reasons for it now, in your eyes. You truly aren’t an Endou — and I’m glad.”

He turned towards Nagesu, bowing his head in apology.

“I’m sorry, Nagesu-sama, for interrupting the Council’s session, but as a father, I had to know,” he said regretfully. “Even if it was unorthodox, since Juushirou hasn’t allowed me contact with the boy till now, I had to take this chance. I might not ever have had another.”

“Hirata, that’s harsh,” Juushirou spoke up himself now, and Kohaku stared at him in amazement, for the Thirteenth Division Captain had addressed this important Clan leader without even a single honorific, scolding him as though they were equals, not leagues apart in birth and standing. “You know the reasons why we kept you apart — and now you’ve had your chance to settle for yourself the kind of person Kohaku is. I promised Souja to protect him, too, and I’ve done so... even if that meant protecting him from you and the Wind Hawk.”

“Touche,” Hirata offered the white haired man a wry smile, clearly not at all affronted by Juushirou’s critical tones, “but you needn’t worry about it from now on. I don’t intend on causing Kohaku any harm, Juushirou. You have my word. He’s not my enemy. Although I can’t speak for my kin, which brings me to something else of imminent importance,”

He glanced at Kohaku again.

“I intend to denounce your parents’ marriage, because it was not authorised by the Clan. It took place after Keitarou abducted your mother and after he was already declared an outlaw by Seireitei,” he added. “I had already thought to do it, before, but because of your presence here, my Clan have now given me no alternative. Because she is my blood sister, and because of the circumstances of her disappearance from District Seven, my advisors will not accept Eiraki betrayed me of her own accord. Even though I know she did, her current mental state, I have been informed, has left her unable to speak her own mind and she is unlikely to be tried for the crimes she committed against the Kuchiki and against Seireitei. Only such a conviction would settle them that this was her will and not a forced matrimony on a gullible young woman — and so they will not disown her. That, unfortunately, puts you in a difficult position for us both. A girl cannot inherit the Clan, but there are ways that her son might. I have lost Souja, and it is unlikely I will ever have any more children — my wife’s health since his death has been far too frail and her grief too complete to contemplate such a thing, even if I was callous enough a man to think Souja could ever be replaced. This troubles the Clan, yet you cannot be seen as an heir in my son’s place, not even under the remotest of possibilities. If Eiraki’s marriage is not made invalid, your life will be in constant danger from militant Endou wanting to clear you from the succession. Your father is hated by people in District Seven, in a deeper and more twisted way than, probably, anywhere else in Seireitei, because of the large number of people whose lives he damaged, both peasantry and nobility alike. We are, by nature, a warrior people, and I can’t guarantee that, if this denouncement is not done, formalised and made public, even my own father might not try and have you killed.”

“*What?*” Juushirou’s eyes almost fell out of his head at this, and Hirata offered his friend a sad smile.

“After our meeting, I spoke to Kikyue, and she accepted the Council’s terms,” he responded. “I rode home early the next morning, called an emergency meeting, and spoke to Father and my Clan council of advisors. They were unanimous in their judgement. Katsura is already discarded as a felon and would face trial if ever he resurfaced, but Kohaku is not. If he is illegitimate, they aren’t interested in him. An illegitimate child can never inherit the Endou, not even through forced combat, because they are considered outside of Clan degrees and therefore, ineligible. Any attempt they make to challenge the leader results, normally, in them meeting a messy end long before they have their chance to try, and knowing they would

never win over the other Clansfolk, few attempt it. If Kohaku is Eiraki's legitimate heir, however, and a blood Endou, then I should kill him — or someone else almost certainly will. Father said explicitly that they didn't want to create more bloodshed, but they couldn't condone a potential figurehead for rebellion against my authority, not now my own heir is dead. It could create ructions and destabilise everything we've worked for in Seventh if that were to happen, and so he felt there wasn't much choice but to tackle the issue head on. Either I publically and formally denounce my sister's marriage to Keitarou, or... Kohaku might find himself in a dangerous position. And, if I protected him — so might I. Not from Father, but from others, waiting in the wings."

"But I don't *want* to inherit the Endou Clan!" Despite himself, Kohaku could not remain silent at this, his horror and dismay growing with every word spoken. "I'm not even an Endou, not really! Mother said she left your family — and I wasn't even born in Seireitei!"

"As I said, the only way of getting around it is to declare you and your siblings illegitimate," Hirata said simply. "I understand you are literate, so if you are willing to sign papers to that effect, Kohaku, my Clan will disown you and you will never be able to call on them in any regard. If they do that, though, then you won't be threatened by them. I had my kin promise they would not act until I had spoken to you directly and offered you my terms, but I also promised them that I'd make those terms clear the first opportunity I had to meet with you. Here we have sufficient reliable witnesses — and the Endou are not a patient family."

"Hirata..." Juushirou was clearly troubled, but Kohaku shook his head.

"I will sign whatever you need me to sign, Hirata-sama," he said at length. "I don't want your Clan. I don't want to be Clan. I don't care about any of those things, and I never have. I don't want to be an Endou, nor am I really one, deep down inside. My spirit power isn't like your family's. Mother used to tell us stories about Endou of the past, and I think she still held pride in that bloodline, but I'm not like them. If they want to kill me over something so silly, then I want it even less. I don't mind if I'm considered illegitimate by your people. It doesn't matter to me."

"Harsh judgement, Hirata-dono," the brown-haired man to Hirata's side commented, and Hirata nodded.

"It is not my will, but theirs, Tokutarou-sama," he said honestly.

“Now I’ve met Kohaku, I’m satisfied that we will never cross blades over my Clan. I don’t know whether we are kin — we are strangers, yet, but I believe he should be allowed to live his life free of the stigma from his parents and his siblings. I am not personally shunning him, but I am still the Endou Clan leader.. I have to abide by their opinions too, because I — and they — hold the lives of everyone in District Seven in their hands, and the periods of unrest in the past are still in living memory for too many people. If Kohaku will sign the declaration, he will be left to do as he pleases. It is a more... unforgiving judgement than I had hoped for, based on Kikyue’s positive response — but not all of the people at home understand how good a judge of character my son really was, and his loss has struck deep.”

“I will sign,” Kohaku repeated. “I don’t want to cause anyone’s death, and I haven’t given up on living my life and doing things with it to help repair what Father did. I want to stay here, with Ukitake-dono, and be of use to Seireitei in whatever way I can, to repay him for his kindness to me. I don’t need to be part of a Clan to do that. I’m not here right now because I belong to a Clan. I’m from Rukongai. I want... I want you to see me as from Rukongai. I want to do whatever I do from now on with people knowing that because I know Ukitake-dono is from the Districts, and because of the things he did, people started to let District folk have a voice in Seireitei. I know people in Rukongai are suffering because nobody knows they’re there. I... I want to speak for them, because I know they *are* there. My mother and father helped them and protected them, but now Mother is in custody and Father is dead. Those people still need support, but they’re scared, and so if it’s known that I’m from Rukongai, maybe...”

“Enough,” Nagesu held up his hand, and Kohaku trailed off, his eyes widening as he realised how much of a tangent he had been on. “We are getting ahead of ourselves and my aching head won’t permit us to skip through topics at express speed, not today. It is accepted by the Council that Aizen Kohaku has renounced any claim or link to the Endou Clan, in view of witnesses, and will sign documents to that effect. That matter is resolved, and so is the truth of Souja-dono’s murder, I feel. But there are other questions we have to ask — other things we need to know, before we can discuss the impact of the wishes you just raised, Kohaku.”

Kohaku reddened, lowering his gaze, and Juushirou let out a sigh.

“I had promised Kohaku that this would not be a traumatic event,” he said, somewhat reproachfully, though his words were polite. “He is still recovering from a bad injury, not to mention the shock of

exhausting so much spirit power and the loss of a kinsman he loved dearly. He wanted to come here today because he felt it was important you all heard him speak. This isn't simply about the Council making demands of him, but about laying to rest the divides of the past. Hirata's circumstances were things I wasn't aware of, and perhaps it's as well that was resolved now, but with respect, Nagesu-sama, Kohaku is not a suspect in a crime. He is a witness, but you are already all familiar with what happened in Seireitei in your absence. If you wish my charge to confirm the truth of what we said, then I'm sure he will — but I promised Edogawa-san that I would not overtax her patient, and I have no desire to break that promise."

"I agree with Ukitake-taichou," A tall, dark woman interjected at this juncture, and as Kohaku stared at her, he was aware that she was regarding him thoughtfully. "Kohaku-dono is not yet entirely fit, and I can sense the grief still lingering in his aura. He has been brave to come before us like this, and besides, we have discussed already the events that occurred. A repeat seems superfluous."

"Retsu-sama..." the man named Tokutarou began, but the woman, Retsu, held up her hand to stop him.

"We know enough of what happened, and we know the results of those actions," she chided. "We are now here to put back together the broken pieces. Kohaku-dono has made it very clear to all of us what his feelings and intentions are. We are not in a position to demand anything from a young man to whom we are heavily indebted. If anything, this meeting marks a truce — a first tentative peace between Seireitei and the family of Aizen Keitarou. It may be our only chance to do so, and we should not let the opportunity pass lightly."

"A... truce?" The First District representative was clearly once more put out. "Retsu-sama, I realise the Unohana Clan believe in peace and reconciliation, but your officers were also murdered in this incident!"

"But not by Kohaku-dono," Retsu's tones remained pleasant, but Kohaku shivered involuntarily at the sudden hint of ice in her eyes, and despite himself, the other Clansman subsided. "My officers were killed by Aizen Sakaki, who I believe is also dead, and Aizen Katsura, whose whereabouts remain unknown."

"Do you know where your brother is?" Midori cast Kohaku a quizzical look, and Kohaku shook his head.

"I don't," he said honestly. "He left me and he cut off all communication between us so I would not know. He wanted it that way, and I think it's better, too. I love my brother and I wouldn't give

him up, even if I did know where he was... because I know you would kill him, and even though I know he's done bad things, they were done because of Father's pressure and influence, not because Katsu-nii really understood all the implications of what was done. My sister, she was a killer. That's all she was, but Katsu-nii isn't the same. His actions were Father's fault, and he has to live with them."

"Seventh Division continue to search for him, but without success," Hirata said heavily. "We believe Keitarou spirited him away when he was injured... how he escaped otherwise isn't clear, but somehow he did. Whatever happened, though, it seems Kohaku was with Thirteenth Division at the time, because it was at this point he released my man from Keitarou's control spell. He wasn't involved in his brother's escape — and its unlikely he could know where Katsura now is."

The Council don't know what Edogawa-san did, in healing Katsu-nii.

Kohaku's eyes widened as he processed this.

Ukitake-dono has kept it from them. They let my brother go... for my sake, or for his?

He cast Juushirou a sidelong glance, but the Thirteenth Division Captain's expression was impassive, and gave nothing away.

"He could use all these magic powers of his to find out," The First Division shinigami suggested.

"That would not be in the spirit of a truce, Yuuichi-sama," Retsu reasoned, "and Kohaku has already expended much energy on our behalf. He is not in a fit state to do so again, nor will we ask him to. Katsura-dono will answer for his own crimes when Seireitei finds him, but we have already agreed not to impress those crimes on innocent men."

"If Retsu-sama can speak thus, then the matter of Katsura is inconsequential and we can tackle it when we have the suspect in custody," the representative from District Six spoke up at length now. "Justice cannot be done by proxy."

"I'm surprised to hear such a thing from you, Guren-sama," Midori admitted, and Guren shrugged.

"I am resigned," he admitted, and Kohaku's expression became one of concern as he realised that this was the man whose son his mother had murdered with poison so many years earlier. "With Eiraki-hime in her current condition, there is no hope of justice for my son, yet I find myself less angry about it than I thought I would. Even if she can

never be tried, and even if she remains in custody for her whole life, unconvicted, she's learned first-hand the same pain of loss I felt when she took Ribari from me. I am satisfied with that. Besides, I am beginning to agree with Retsu-sama's premise. The boy in front of us is not Eiraki, nor is he Katsura, nor is he Keitarou. I won't have it said that Kuchiki endorse indiscriminate killing. I would rather see for myself what kind of man Kohaku intends to be before I pass any kind of judgement on him."

"I believe we should listen to his concerns," Retsu nodded. "First and foremost, as regards Rukongai — Kohaku-dono is clearly aware of people requiring our support. These are people we have overlooked, but we can still help, and we need the knowledge of people like Kohaku-dono to put that wrong to right."

"I agree," The Fifth District representative spoke up gravely. "I said it before, but I won't allow a word against this lad, no matter *where* he comes from. He saved my children from killing each other when he broke Keitarou's spell. For me, that's a good enough statement of intent, and Juushirou and Shunsui's support of him just bolsters that conviction. He has my trust... and I agree with Retsu-sama. We should utilise Kohaku's knowledge and his willingness to help us, rather than suspect him of crimes and push him away. You make enemies that way, and we don't need those, not with so much still to resolve."

"Then we should talk about Rukongai," Nagesu acquiesced. "If Kohaku is willing, I believe we should learn all we can about the people who Keitarou was protecting, and the conditions in which they lived."

"You won't... punish them, will you?" Kohaku was anxious, and Nagesu cast him a startled look. "They aren't criminals. They're desperate people. They would've starved, if not for Father's help in smuggling in food. He was all they had... that and Mother. Mother really cared about them. She considered them an extension of her own family in a lot of ways. They helped deliver us children, and Mother would have sooner died than let any harm come to them."

"Nobody in Rukongai will be harmed for helping Keitarou," Retsu shook her head. "My Division have sovereignty over what occurs there, now, and you have my word. It is our oversight, and we will amend it. We will look at the Rukon in much greater detail, and, with your help, I trust nobody else will go hungry. That is simply a short term measure — but from it can, perhaps, grow a long term solution."

"It isn't that shinigami don't care about Rukongai," Tokutarou added, "but we've been acting on faulty information. We believed,

because official reports told us, that all the Rukon residents had been transferred to the Spiritless Zone. What happened to make that false, I don't know. Maybe we'll never get to the bottom of it, and maybe it's not important — but now we are aware, the Council will authorise shinigami patrols in Rukongai to encompass everyone equally."

"Then I will give you what information I can," Kohaku promised, his heart skipping a beat in his chest. "I want to help them too."

"Kohaku has expressed a desire to recruit as a shinigami, here in Seireitei," Juushirou interjected. "To do so, of course, would require your direct consent. He was not born in Seireitei, despite the fact his parents were. I think it would be the most sensible thing for him to recruit and remain under my auspices, where he can't cause offence or controversy among Clansfolk."

"Recruit? As a *shinigami*? From *Rukongai*?" Yuuichi blinked in disbelief, and Juushirou offered a benign smile.

"His exploits at the Senkai Gate resulted in him summoning a *zanpakutou*, Yuuichi-sama," he said composedly, "which I trust, at some point, he will be able to present before the Council of Elders for ratification. You have my word that, until that happens, he won't be allowed or able to use it — but I am strongly in favour of keeping an individual with that level of spirit power close to the heart of Seireitei's power base. It would be dangerous to him and to the ordinary residents of District villages if he were to be sent away, and if you returned him to Rukongai, there is no doubt in my mind now that his untrained *reiryoku* could cause infinite dangers to the residents there. As the Council has already judged him innocent of a crime, he cannot be locked away simply because we lack a mechanism to deal with this situation, and so flexibility seems the obvious answer. The only sensible and safe solution is that I keep him. I am more than willing to do that — and to continue to take responsibility for him as I would any of my squad. It relies on the word of this Council, though — because I am bound by its laws as much as any other citizen."

"You seem to bounce up and down on those rules enough to make a veritable trampoline out of them, Juushirou," Midori observed dryly, and Juushirou offered her an unrepentant smile.

"I don't think I'm taking much of a gamble, trusting someone who's already proven himself my ally," he said. "I'm like any Captain. I see a powerful potential addition to my squad and I want to capitalise on that opportunity before it slips away. Koku's made it clear that he wants to be acknowledged for his Rukon birth. That would make his

recruitment to any Clan division unlikely, surely? But the Thirteenth doesn't have the strict requirements that Clan squads often have in terms of their recruitment. It would cause no scandal in my quarter of Seireitei. He would be fine with me, and it would mean the Council knew where he was and that he was properly being looked after. Thirteenth Division have an open recruitment policy. This would just extend that to a new, potential member base."

"Hold on," Yuuichi put up his hands. "Are you suggesting that we open the floodgates and start letting tainted Pluses come into Seireitei? Train? Recruit? You understand what kind of a precedent you want to set, Ukitake? If it begins here, where will it end?"

"With the absolute equality of citizens in Soul Society, if at all possible," Juushirou replied calmly, and Kohaku's eyes almost bugged out of his head, for the tension in the chamber was rising, yet Juushirou was somehow still cool as he had been before. "Of course, I'm not saying that's something that can be achieved right away. But, by rights, Kohaku should have been born in Seireitei. He was born in Rukongai because his parents were outlaws and chose to flee there. The Endou have discarded any connection to him, and if he is illegitimate, he is outside of the Clan degrees of both Endou *and* Urahara. Normally, that would make him District-born. Ordinary Plus Souls cannot have children, and babies ought not be born in Rukongai at all. The fact Kohaku was indicates he is *not* a Plus Soul and since my squad was set up to take in District shinigami, I think it obvious that Thirteenth is where he rightly belongs."

"There he goes again," Kyouki chuckled, and at her reaction, the atmosphere in the room began to dissipate. "He's got you there, Yuuichi-dono. I don't think we're in a position to have a free for all on Rukongai applications, not yet, and maybe not ever — but the very fact of Kohaku being born in the Rukon proves he's not a Plus Soul. He might want to be considered from Rukongai, and if that's his wish, that's his right — but in terms of our judgement, he is a District boy — an illegitimate Clan son outside of the Degrees of Clan."

"Even so, this is a boy who has had no formal training," Yuuichi objected. "I understand our own rules regarding District children, but Kyouki-sama, there isn't a single one who has joined any Seireitei squad who hasn't been trained by my kinsman at the Academy. Kohaku said himself he could not use shunpo. We know nothing of the sword he holds, or whether he would even be an asset to the Gotei. It's not normal for people, even in District Seireitei, to suddenly turn up at the door of a Division and ask to be let in."

“On the contrary, one such shinigami may have saved Mikihara Hyakken’s life,” Hirata interjected softly, and Yuuichi’s gaze slid over towards his fellow Clan leader in astonishment.

“Hirata-sama?”

“Seventh Division has one shinigami currently in *shihakushou* who has not been to the Academy, and who is not an Endou Clansman,” Hirata said evenly. “His position is, admittedly, of a trial nature, but his contributions important. Nagesu-sama, I believe you have met the man in question, this morning?”

“This morning?” Nagesu’s expression seemed to take on a look of sudden comprehension, and he nodded. “Yes, I believe so, though he failed to tell me that he was the hero of the hour at the Ninth during our meeting. I also understand that he has a sister... who is currently a registered recruit at Thirteenth, without having been through the Academy process?”

“Yes, sir,” Juushirou was slightly taken aback by this, Kohaku thought, but he recovered himself quickly, nodding his head. “Her paperwork *has* been finalised and I do not intend to give her up. She is a good, hard-working individual with unique talents and the rest will come with time. Clansfolk are not always required to have Academy training before they join a squad — I see no reason why they are any better placed, in modern society, to take up arms.”

“Juushirou, stop brutalising us,” Midori scolded. “You’ve made your point, and you don’t need to labour it. We all know, as Clansfolk, that there will need to be changes and regulations and new rules will probably come into place as a result of all these recent events. Until then, all bets are off.”

“I think it would be as well if Ukitake-taichou took the boy and trained him,” Retsu said thoughtfully. “He clearly has formed a bond with Kohaku-dono, and that is important. Thirteenth is a different kind of squad to a Clan squad and nobody could confuse Kohaku’s status if he were there. I believe it best he stay and be made a formal member of Thirteenth Division. I will ratify the papers myself, if need be, to bring this matter to a close.”

“I second it,” Kyouki raised her hand casually, offering Yuuichi a playful smile. “I think its a good match, and it will keep Juushirou suitably occupied.”

“You make me sound like a naughty child, Kyouki-sama,” Juushirou objected, and Kyouki laughed.

“I remember the impetuous stripling who waved his swords around without knowing what they were for,” she said comfortably, and to Kohaku’s astonishment, Juushirou’s cheeks flushed red. “You’ll knock it into this one, I’m sure, what a sword is and isn’t to be used for. I told you, I’m rooting for the kid to do well. And besides, I think we could spend all day here arguing about it, but I know you won’t give up and go home until you get what you want. In this case, we ought to give it... because otherwise, the Council will have to find other provision for the boy, and probably nothing so suitable.”

“Then we are accepting the idea of Kohaku recruiting with the Thirteenth?” Nagesu asked.

“A probationary recruitment,” Guren tempered cautiously. “I said I wouldn’t prejudice the boy, and I won’t, but I want to see his sword, his motivation and his suitability in uniform before we decide something permanent we can’t later take back. I vote we continue to monitor this new Rukon recruit. And, also, that if the other District recruit — the young girl you seem to know about, Nagesu-dono — wishes to remain in uniform, she too should be called upon to prove herself before the Council at some point. We ask for all new shinigami to come to ratify their *zanpakutou*. I vote that we also require proof of their training and education as shinigami at the same time.”

“Meaning...?” Midori frowned, and Guren shrugged.

“Those who recruit from the Academy pass examinations to do so,” he said simply. “I think it as well that all new recruits prove they can do the same, in the basic arts of a shinigami, before their probation be lifted.”

“Whilst Clan sons enter their Divisions without needing anything, not even a proper sword?” Juushirou demanded. “With respect, Guren-sama, do you think that to be a fair judgement?”

“You forget yourself, Ukitake,” Guren offered a flinty smile. “I am intending my suggestion to cover *all* shinigami who do not attend the Academy. My Vice Captain has already raised with me, since our return from the Real World, the large gaps in knowledge and experience suffered by recruits who do not undertake Genryuusai-sama’s training regimen. I intend to make it law in District Six that all Kuchiki outside of the central line will be enrolled and properly trained — and those that are not will have to be rigorously proven to be suitable before they can enter my squad, let alone accept high rank there. You will remember that I have imposed such rules before — when Shirogane was your *shishou*, and why he was selected for that task.”

“I’m sorry, sir,” Juushirou looked abashed. “I had forgotten, but you’re right.”

“I cannot impose the same rules on all Clans,” Guren added. “but if at least we demand some kind of proof of usefulness before this court in future, for all recruits — whether from Genryuusai-sama or from our own houses — then we will be much better equipped. And there must be no exceptions — which means that, until Kohaku can prove himself educated and competent in these arts, his status as your recruit can be revoked if he contravenes the standards we expect from our shinigami, without the normal, lengthy procedures of discipline taking place. Does that sound acceptable to you?”

“I suppose it does, but...”

“I accept the terms, Guren-sama,” Kohaku did not know he was going to speak until he had, and his cheeks flushed a deeper red than Juushirou’s at the sudden attention of the Kuchiki leader. “I know what my mother did to you, and I know that its something that can never be forgiven. Even despite that you’re treating me fairly, and I’m grateful. My father didn’t understand shinigami at all, and nor did I, not till I came here — but now I do. Being a shinigami means sacrificing the things you want to do for the things that are right to do, and that’s what I need to do now. I betrayed my father because I wanted to stop people from dying. That’s what I need to keep doing. So I accept your terms. If it means I can stay here and work and learn things from Ukitake-dono and the others, I accept. I will not be found wanting. You have my word.”

“I suppose that settles your doubts, then, Juushirou,” Kyouki observed. “The boy himself has spoken and he accepts. I think Guren-sama’s suggestion is a logical one. We still have to examine these issues more closely, but I will also second his proposal. I had intended a similar set of regulations within Fifth, having seen how Sora’s ability to withstand this attack put her in such a strong position. I am already filling in paperwork to send my eldest grandson to the Academy come the new academic year — Seikyou is sixteen and too young for squad life, and I am only glad that he didn’t have to witness his father’s death before I realised my foolishness in taking him to the Real World. Times are changing, we must too. Seikyou will go to study, and so will all young Shiba shinigami from now on, regardless of their position in the Clan.”

She cast Juushirou a smile.

“This whelp belongs to you now, though,” she added. “Make him into a shinigami Thirteenth can be proud of. I’m looking forward to

seeing what can be done with Seireitei's first Rukongai shinigami."

"In which case, Kyouki-sama, we have another matter we'd like to raise before the Council," Juushirou cast Kohaku a glance, then turned his attention back to the senior Clan figures, a grave look in his eye. "It concerns the fate of the Eighth Seat of the Seventh Division, Kotetsu Tenichi, and the Council's plans for his formal trial."

Author's Note: Kizashi and Moe

This doesn't make a lot of sense in English, but it does in Japanese.

Moe's name, as a Vaizard, was written in katakana, detaching him from his real identity and, in some ways, "dehumanising" him. However, this chapter revealed his true name. As Haruya mentioned in an earlier chapter, Moe was not illegitimate, but was discarded by his father due to his imperfections. The name, "Kizashi", is read with the kanji,

萌. The alternative reading of this character is "Moe". Hence, Urahara Kizashi = Moe.

Daigo chose this tag-name for him, to conceal the truth of the deal he had made with the boy's father. For all his other problems, Moe had significant spirit power and was intelligent — as I hope his fight with Kyouki illustrated. What he became — the animal, rather than the man — reflected his treatment and the cruelty of his upbringing, rather than necessarily his nature. Kyouki may have been "prey", but Haruya and Aki were "family", and, as mentioned before, Haruya was the only one who could control Moe's actions.

IMO, the real monster was not Moe, but his father, and it illustrates the compounded problems that the Urahara, despite all of Nagesu's hard work, are still battling to overcome. I don't know whether in canon, Kisuke's family ever really were Great Nobility, but his involvement with Midori and the apparent absence of any of his own family makes me suspect he might well be the lone survivor of a family who, ultimately, was so fractured it ended up destroying itself almost completely.

Nagesu is a Clan leader that bucks this trend, and, although he is a calm and peaceable man, has the strength to stick to his convictions, even if the truth hurts him. At least for now, the family is likely to be set at some level of peace, whatever it will eventually face.

76. Witness For The Defence

Chapter Seventy Four: Witness For The Defence

The courtroom was busier than he had expected it to be.

As Tenichi was led up and along the narrow walkway by one of the Onmitsukidou's lesser officers, he cast his gaze apprehensively around at his surroundings in an attempt to take in exactly where he was and what he was facing. This was not the Council Chamber, but nor was it a place which was usually open to crowds, and as he took his place in the centre of the chamber, he squinted into the darkness, trying to make out more than just the faint blurry outlines of heads and shoulders in the gloom beyond.

The Onmitsukidou's courtroom had been built initially by Midori when she had been establishing herself as Head of Second District, and had initially been intended to be used as a neutral location to deal with Clan related matters. When Kai had taken charge of the Second's secret forces, however, the necessity of a place to try criminals before sentencing them to the lower reaches of what was, had Tenichi but known it, a fast expanding Maggot's Nest program, had meant that it had been turned over almost entirely to the Onmitsukidou's care. Gone were the days when all criminals were simply hauled up before the Council of Elders to plead their case — for in less than thirty years, the Onmitsukidou had established itself as the Gotei's unofficial police force, and, in some cases, judge and jury. Despite his distant origins, Tenichi was not Clan, therefore he had had no Clan kinsman to put in a word for him, to pay a fine or to take him off to the family's own court for a lighter and more sympathetic hearing. Instead, he would be tried here, and his justice would be delivered by the Onmitsukidou's overall official leader and guardian, the Second Division Captain herself.

Kai might be Head of the Onmitsukidou in all other respects, but he was still only Midori's Vice Captain, and, as he saw the lithe figure of the Second District Clan leader make her way to take the seat across the chamber from him, Tenichi felt every tendon and ligament in his body tighten up with sudden tension. Midori was known for her fairness, but also her vigilante ruthlessness against those who had crossed the system, and there was no reading anything into the young woman's golden eyes as she took her place, settling herself with impeccable, solemn calm as she waited for the proceedings to begin.

Her personal appearance in this case was not lost on Tenichi. It was a case in which there were still questions of overall treason, and in which his life was very much still on the line. Kai had interrogated him, and therefore Kai's judgement was not objective enough for him to pass judgement, not when the life of a Vice Captain had been lost. Despite his resolve, Tenichi felt a flicker of rear lurch in his stomach. The next moment a bright light shone down around him, momentarily dazzling him, and with a thud and a clunk, four wooden fences shot up from the floor beneath his feet to surround him on all sides, locking him firmly into his position to prevent him from running. Though he ought to have been further frightened by this sudden enclosure, Tenichi felt somehow relieved, as for a moment he had felt certain his legs would become too unsteady for him to stand on his own, and he reached trembling fingers out to grasp the wood rail in front of him, trusting his weight to it instead of to his own failing limbs.

The audience benches were hidden from his view by the darkness that pervaded most of the chamber, but Tenichi knew there were eyes on him. Were they judging him? Were they sympathetic? The cuffs at his wrists meant that Tenichi was unable to discern individual reiatsu, and he did not know whether the spectators were friends or foes. Along the edges of the central dais, where he stood, he could make out black uniformed Onmitsukidou officers, each armed with an *asauchi* sword, and he knew that if the verdict was a bad one, or he displeased the court, he could probably be cut down there and then in full view of everyone.

His heart lurched in his throat at this horrific thought, and his grip on the wooden beam tightened.

I don't want to die.

Tears glittered on his lashes as this realisation began to take hold of his frightened body.

I don't want to die. Whatever I've done, whatever they think of me... I don't want to die. I'm not ready... I'm not brave enough to die. I'm not ready. I don't... I don't...

“Kotetsu Tenichi,”

The sound of his name broke through his hysteria, and he turned almost blindly, making out the familiar figure of the Onmitsukidou leader as he stepped between his officers and paused a foot or so from where Tenichi was imprisoned. “You have been arrested by the Onmitsukidou on suspicion of assault against a recruit of the Thirteenth Division, Ichimaru Izumi. You are also suspected of

collusion with an enemy of Seireitei, Aizen Keitarou. These charges have been discussed with you, and you have been adjudged of sound mind to answer to them. Here, now, before the Shadow Court, the evidence will be weighed and you will be judged. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," Somehow Tenichi managed words. "I understand."

"Do you plead guilty or not guilty to the crimes you have been charged with?"

A moment of hesitation, and Tenichi felt as though the entire chamber was holding its breath along with him, although he could not see the expressions on the faces of those who surrounded him. Initially at a loss, Tenichi caught Kai's sombre golden gaze, and something in its depths reminded him of the unsympathetic yet somehow reassuring instructions this man had given him when he had first fallen into Onmitsukidou hands. He took a breath, settling himself, then, in more composed tones, he spoke.

"In the case of the assault on Ichimaru-san, I admit my guilt," he said frankly. "In the case of the other, I plead not guilty. I am not a traitor to Seireitei."

There was the faintest glimmer of approval in Kai's eyes at his response, before the older man turned away, moving to face his sister, and bowing his head before her as though they did not share a close sibling bond.

"Midori-sama, the accused has stated his position," he said softly. "In the case of the assault against Ichimaru Izumi, he has pleaded guilty. Do you wish to hear evidence relating to this case?"

"Only if it explains the logic of a man launching an unprovoked attack on an unarmed young woman in the safety of her own Division grounds," Midori's words were cutting, and all the courage Tenichi thought he had mustered was swept aside by just one glance from her amber eyes. "Kotetsu, speak up for yourself. You admit the assault, and so I would like to hear your rationale. Be aware, I will not accept momentarily lapses in sanity. If you are sound to stand trial, you are sound to judge right from wrong and you will get no sympathy from me if you try to use that argument."

"No, ma'am," Tenichi's palms were sweating so much now that they were slipping against the wood of the beam, but somehow he held himself together, bowing his head. "I realise my conduct was irrational and reckless and I take full responsibility for it. I had mistakenly believed Ichimaru-san to be a spy for the enemy, Aizen

Keitarou, and instead of reporting to my superior officer, I took it upon myself to address the situation personally.”

“Is there a reason why you did not approach your Captain with your suspicions — or even Ichimaru-san’s Captain?” Midori demanded, and Tenichi hesitated, before shaking his head.

“I was foolish and I took the judgement upon myself,” he said simply. “I realise now that I was mistaken and that Ichimaru-san and her brother were associates of my Captain who I should have been able to trust. I deeply regret the choice I made, and am willing to be punished for it.”

“Well, in that respect, you are fortunate that the girl escaped with her life,” Midori did not sound in the least sympathetic, and Tenichi realised that he had done himself no favours by attacking an unarmed woman. Midori had a fearsome reputation for martial and military skill, and was a strong believer in the increase of female participation in the Gotei. Attacking a female recruit would have been an immediate black mark on his case, he realised dully, even if it had not been accompanied by everything else.

“Midori-sama, Ichimaru-san agrees that the attack was made in error, and that there was misunderstanding over her position in the Gotei,” Kai spoke now, his words still carefully deferential. “Ukitake-taichou and Kyouraku-taichou and I had been investigating the possibility of a spy within the Gotei, and it seems clear that Kotetsu believed that Ichimaru-san was this spy. It has been proven that she was not, and Kotetsu has expressed regret for his actions since this has been proven to him. Ichimaru-san does not speak, but via her brother, she has requested that Kotetsu be treated with some mercy in this case as a result.”

The girl had done what?

Tenichi’s eyes widened in disbelief at this, and Midori’s lips thinned, but she nodded.

“Then I will bear that in mind,” she said with a sigh. “In the meantime, we have a more serious charge to address. On which you claim innocence of, Kotetsu. You have already mentioned that you believed there was a spy in the Gotei? Tell me, how did you come by this information?”

“From Suzuki Naoto, Midori-sama.”

“Suzuki...” Midori’s eyes became slits. “I see. Tell me how you came to be acquainted with a man who the rest of Soul Society

believed to have died ten years ago?"

"He was the man who took me hostage in Inner Seireitei, and dragged me to Rukongai, ma'am." Tenichi said honestly.

"And he chose to tell you sensitive information about Keitarou's activity as a light story to pass the time?" There was sarcasm in the young woman's voice, and Tenichi flinched at the sound of it, shaking his head.

"No, ma'am. He used it as a threat against me and my brother. He said that Keitarou had someone watching us, and that if I didn't keep my mouth shut, then it would be trouble for both of us."

He swallowed hard, then,

"He came to my quarters, once, the night that Souja-dono disappeared," he whispered. "I didn't know anything about my Vice Captain's disappearance then, but he told me that Souja-dono had gone to Rukongai. And that he would be killed there, because Keitarou wouldn't allow him to come back alive. He said I should be glad, because if Souja-dono found out I'd been in Keitarou's company, Ketsui and I would be in danger. And then, at Seventh, when he and I fought, he made the same threats again — towards Ketsui and towards me."

"Kai, have you spoken to Ketsui-dono?" Midori's gaze flitted to her brother, and Kai nodded.

"Yes, but on the agreement he would not be called before this court today," he said matter-of-factly. "I am satisfied that he was ignorant of everything that Tenichi-dono describes, and that his only knowledge of his brother's situation came when he interrupted the attack on Ichimaru-san's life. As a result, Ukitake-taichou requested he not be asked to testify against his own brother, and I gave authorisation. It seems clear that Kotetsu Ketsui can add nothing to this story that we do not already know."

"Soft," Midori clicked her tongue against her teeth disapprovingly, turning her attention back to Tenichi.

"Very well. In that case, I will simply have to probe you further. You said that Suzuki used your time in Rukongai as a threat against you, and yet you claim you were taken hostage. If you were genuinely a hostage, why would you have concerns about a report reaching our ears? You were not the first hostage taken. Why would this concern you to such a degree that you would choose to act in a reckless, violent manner?"

Tenichi swallowed hard, then,

“Because I wasn’t a prisoner in Rukongai, Midori-sama,” he admitted unwillingly, and a collective gasp went up from the shadowy stalls. “I mean, I was taken there against my will, but when I was there, Keitarou did not confine me. He let me walk around among his people and see them for myself. And I understood that... because I had been treated that way, it would look... bad. Keitarou is my kinsman. He and my father were first cousins, and Keitarou came after me specifically for that reason. He wanted my help to feed the starving people in Rukongai. He promised to take me to my Father’s grave, and he told me what happened when Father died. Everything he told me was confirmed by someone else that was present when Father was buried. He tried to treat me as a friend and an ally, and so when I heard Souja-dono had gone to Rukongai, I really believed that he... had got the wrong idea about why I was there. I thought he’d think that I was complicit in the murders in Rukongai.”

“But your Vice Captain was killed,” Midori cut ruthlessly across his explanation, her gold eyes icy. “And Suzuki told you you should be glad. Souja-dono never did give a full statement about what he discovered in Rukongai. You are the only witness to these events... and we only have your story to claim that you were never part of Keitarou’s operations. Your behaviour on your return is suspicious, Kotetsu. I know that you were apprehensive in the search for Souja-dono, although you participated in it, and that your actions since his death have been more and more erratic. You confessed to my brother that you felt responsible for his death — correct?”

Tenichi wilted under the intensity of the Clan leader’s stare, nodding mutely, and Midori’s expression became predatory.

“I also know you claimed amnesia for the time in Rukongai, which we now know was a lie,” she said softly. “Lying is a defence mechanism to protect one from something unpleasant or untoward. An innocent man has no reason to lie. Moreover, I have no reason to believe your brother needed or wanted your protection in this manner. He is an upstanding member of Seireitei’s community... did you think how much this action would hurt and shame him more than anyone else? Seeing you here like this, answering questions in such a way that makes your conduct and predicament sound like his fault... that is not the mark of an honourable man.”

“I beg pardon, Midori-sama, but that’s not the case,” Tenichi scabbled together the last vestiges of his courage, though he could feel the tears welling once more in his eyes at the harshness in her

words. "I don't consider it Ketsui's fault. The fault is mine. All of it is mine. I'm not trying to push the blame on anyone else."

"Yet you're pleading not guilty," Midori did not relent for a moment. "You are either complicit or you are not, surely?"

"Midori-sama," before Tenichi could find a response, Kai raised his hand, approaching the Clan Leader and gesturing that he had something he wanted to tell her. He lowered his voice so that Tenichi could not hear him, but at whatever he said, Midori looked thoughtful, then she nodded her head, almost in resignation. Kai looked relieved, then stepped away, gesturing to the guard that stood nearest a little side door that flanked the main hall. The guard saluted, then moved to open the door, and Tenichi's heart almost froze in his chest as he saw a slim figure step out from behind it, robed in plain beige and brown and with his dark hair tied in a neat tail behind his head.

Koku?

He did not meet Tenichi's gaze, but nor did he avoid it, instead moving to stand between the accused and the judge and bowing his head low before her.

"Midori-sama, I would like to speak in this matter, with your permission," he spoke quietly and politely, and Tenichi could barely hear him over the sound of his own palpitating heartbeat.

"You may speak," Midori gave a gesture of permission, and the young man raised his head, turning to glance at Tenichi almost apologetically for a moment, before returning his attention to the judge.

"I am aware of your name and identity," Midori continued. "But not everyone here present has made your acquaintance. For their sake, state your name and your reason for wanting to speak in this case. It is unusual for a witness to volunteer themselves before the Shadow Court, and your reasons for doing so must be made clear to all."

"Yes, ma'am," The young man bowed again, and Tenichi was aware of him taking a deep breath, as though gathering his courage.

"My name is Aizen Kohaku," he said, flooring Tenichi once and for all by this honest admission. "I am Keitarou's second son, and I was assigned to watch Tenichi-dono during his time in Rukongai. I am aware both of his mindset then and since he returned to Soul Society, and I can prove that he was not complicit in my father's schemes to attack Seireitei."

Aizen... Kohaku.

Tenichi's eyes had almost bugged out of their sockets, as the air around him became thicker and harder to breathe.

The monster in the hut? The demon you wouldn't tell me about? Oh, but I said such harsh things... I talked of it so negatively. Why did I not consider that possibility? Why didn't I think that you might be Kohaku... and why did I say those things before you? No wonder you looked so sad when I did... and yet you're here, in the open, in front of everyone? Something must have happened since I was imprisoned, something nobody's told me about. Keitarou is dead, that much at least filtered down — but that you had turned to the Gotei's side... and that you were planning on doing even this... why didn't I know?

As though he had sensed Tenichi's confusion, Kohaku turned to face him, offering him a faint, reassuring smile. As he did so, Tenichi was reminded of another conversation.

"I just thought you should know... since we're allies, albeit in silence."

His own words echoed through his mind, and then, like a splash of cold water, Kohaku's own reluctant response.

"I wish you hadn't ever called us that, but since it's true, I have to honour it as well."

Is that why you're doing this? You still think of us as allies, even though I knew nothing at all about you, and you're standing defending a man who didn't listen to a single piece of advice you gave? More, who tried to kill you... will you tell them that, too?

"You seem surprised, Kotetsu," Midori's acerbic tones broke through his thoughts once more. "Kohaku has requested to speak on your behalf, yet am I to assume you were not aware of his true identity?"

"No, ma'am," Tenichi spoke numbly. "I was not."

"Well, then a lot of interesting information is coming out in this hearing," Midori settled herself more comfortably. "Kohaku, I would like you to tell the court what you told the Council, in as much detail as you can. This is a proper trial and whilst your own situation here in Seireitei is stable, I want you to remember that treason is frowned upon at the greatest level. If you lie to protect Kotetsu, the protection offered to you might easily be rescinded. Do you understand?"

"Yes, ma'am, but I have no intention of lying, so I think it's all right," Kohaku replied simply. "It's as I said. The man you call Suzuki Naoto kidnapped Tenichi-dono by force from Inner Seireitei and

brought him unconscious back to Rukongai. He cuffed him so that he wasn't able to sense spiritual auras, and Father assigned me to watch over him. Tenichi-dono did not choose to come to Rukongai, nor was he particularly happy about staying there. He was suspicious of Father's attentions. At this time, my brother and sister were dispatched to murder the people in the Spiritless Zone. I didn't know about this event until it was underway, through my particular spirit power, and so there was no way for Tenichi to know about it at all and Father never told him about it. My sister saw him as an enemy and tried on one occasion to kill him, but I prevented it because I knew Father wanted him to stay alive. The only thing Father asked of Tenichi-dono was help to feed the Rukongai strays who were starving, but Tenichi-dono made no further contact with Rukongai or Father regarding this after he was released. Father took Tenichi-dono, put him in a situation that resembled his own memories of being a refugee, and appealed to his sense of justice. But he did not involve Tenichi-dono in any of his other schemes."

He paused, pursing his lips thoughtfully.

"I have come to review many things since Father died," he admitted unevenly. "One of them is his belief that Tenichi-dono would become his ally. I sometimes have visions of things that have not happened yet, and these can be easy to interpret wrongly. For this reason, I think maybe I mistakenly led him to believe Tenichi would join his side. Tenichi's kidnap may have inadvertently been my fault, for I realised, when I was here in Seireitei, that Tenichi-dono was going to be my ally. Not Father's."

"Can you explain what Kohaku means by that, Kotetsu?" Midori asked, and Tenichi jumped almost out of his skin as attention swung back his way once more. "How so were you 'allies'?"

"After Souja-dono was brought back to Seireitei, I saw him at Thirteenth," Tenichi spoke unsteadily. "After that, I went and spoke to Ko... *Kohaku*. He promised not to talk about my being in Rukongai and I promised not to reveal that he had come from there. In that respect, I wilfully deceived Soul Society and I admit it. But Kohaku had helped Souja-dono where I couldn't. And, more, he knew how Souja-dono died. He knew who attacked him, when and how... and he told me that it wasn't my doing or my fault. Keitarou didn't order it. It wasn't because of my being there, it was an opportunistic murder and even Keitarou didn't know it was going to happen. Only... Only Suzuki wouldn't let up on me, because he felt I knew too much."

"Suzuki Naoto also attempted to kill me, because he believed I'd

allied with Tenichi-dono over my Father, and had turned against Father's wishes," Kohaku added. "In the end, perhaps he was right. I didn't realise it, then, but I suppose that is, ultimately, what I did."

"Do you know where Suzuki is now, Kohaku?" Kai asked, and Kohaku shook his head.

"When he attacked me, I accidentally flared my spirit power and it broke the hold Father had over his spirit," he said gravely. "I realised then for the first time that I was capable of breaking Chudokuga's spell. I also knew that Suzuki had been one of Father's puppets and that he was not acting under his own will. When he left my chamber, he didn't know who I was or who Father was, either. My *reiryoku* overloaded and I blacked out after the attack. I don't know where he went. That's the truth."

"And in terms of Tenichi-dono?"

"I advised him to stay out of the whole business," Kohaku said frankly, and Tenichi went red. "He didn't listen. I know that when you love someone a lot, you'll do stupid things if you think it will keep them safe. It's hard, losing someone you love. I think Tenichi-dono acted because he thought Father would've hurt Ketsui-dono instead. And the truth is, Midori-sama, I think if Father had been able to pursue his ultimate ends, he would have done that. He intended to kill Thirteenth Division. All of them. Every last one. But I think he would've tried to take Ketsui-dono, and maybe he would have made a puppet of him, making him kill his fellows before letting him die. It's something Father has done before. I heard you say that Ketsui-dono didn't need protecting, and as a shinigami, I'm sure that's true. But as a person, it's harder when something you care about is in the equation. Father also killed Ichimaru-san's family. He didn't know about Ichimaru-san and nor did I until I came here — but he did hurt Ichimaru-san's brother. I think he might have used Ketsui-dono to try and kill Ichimaru-san. Tenichi-dono did stupid things and I won't pretend he didn't. But my father... unless you knew my father well, Midori-sama, you can't possibly understand how deep his thought processes ran. Every person was a piece on a chessboard to him. I was probably the person closest to him — closer in some ways than Mother was... but I don't know whether I was ever any more than just his pawn, either. I don't think Tenichi-dono did the right things, but I know he wouldn't have willingly joined with Father in destroying Seireitei. Or in killing Souja-dono. Tenichi-dono respected Souja-dono. And besides, the one who couldn't save Souja-dono wasn't Tenichi-dono, but me. I was there, but I couldn't shunpo and I reached the scene too late. I'm more guilty than Tenichi-dono, yet Hirata-sama

hasn't found me culpable. If I'm not, surely Tenichi-dono can't be, either? He was in the wrong place at the wrong time, and Father played on that and on his past. That's all."

Tenichi drew breath into his lungs, struggling to follow the thread of the conversation, but it was becoming something of a blur. Midori had responded to Kohaku's words, but he could not longer make sense of the syllables. He was losing his grip on his surroundings, he realised dully, struggling to maintain his hold on the wooden frame as though it were the only thing keeping him from dropping into a dead faint in the middle of the courtroom. All the shock and pressure that had piled up on him, all the self-accusation and blame had been swept away by Kohaku's simple, honest account, and yet the relief he ought to have felt was absent. Instead was a dark, yawning hollow... and the memory that he had raised his sword to his brother — the person he had most sought to protect.

"Kotetsu, are you listening?" Kai's words in his ear brought him sharply back into focus, and he started, staring at the Onmitsukidou leader blankly. Kai eyed him wryly, reaching out to thwap him across the back of the head. As he did so, he realised Kohaku was gone. Had he blacked out for a moment, or had he just been so lost in his own thoughts that he had not seen the young man depart? He was still fathoming this when Kai spoke again.

"Wake up," he instructed. "Midori-neesama is about to pass her judgement, and it's usual for the felon to be conscious for the verdict."

Immediately the tension crashed back over Tenichi's body, his every limb stiffening in anticipation and sudden fear, and Midori got to her feet, moving towards him with an unreadable expression on her face.

"If you were in my Division, I would probably have you removed for idiocy," she said disparagingly. "Or whipped, or both. Listening to all of this has been nauseating to say the least. Still, thanks to Kohaku's testimony and the evidence my brother has gleaned, at least I can dismiss the charges of treason. I agree with your appraisal, Kotetsu. You are not guilty of wilfully betraying Seireitei, nor are you culpable in the death of your Vice Captain. Although you are very guilty of being a complete nincompoop, sadly there's no sentence I can award that covers that particular sin. In terms of the accusations of treason and your withholding evidence, I have decided in the circumstances to dismiss the charges completely. You are clearly not intelligent enough to conspire with someone like Keitarou, and I am sure he was not a foolish enough man to select an associate like you."

Tenichi winced at the cutting criticism, but Midori was not finished.

“You have pled guilty on the other charge, and here I will sentence you,” she continued. “You will spend a minimum of five years in labour confinement, at the end of which you will be brought to a review before my brother and he will decide whether you are fit to be released. I have had enough of you, so I’ll pass that responsibility on to him instead. I understand that Seventh Division intend to keep you — though I can’t for one moment imagine why — and so when you are released, you will return to Hirata-dono’s care. Be warned... you might think that he’s been merciful, but I am quite certain that, if you cause him or his squad any further embarrassment, you will learn that being judged by a Shihouin court is relatively tame in comparison to upsetting an Endou one. Do you understand the sentence you have been given, and the restrictions placed upon you, Kotetsu?”

“Y... Yes... Midori-sama,” Somehow Tenichi managed to form words, for the strain of the whole situation had finally reached its limits and he knew that, if he dared to try and move in any direction, he would simply collapse in a heap on the ground.

“Then the case is settled. Kai, he’s all yours,” Midori dismissed the situation with a flick of her wrist, and, as the four wooden frames began to judder and pull back, Tenichi found that he was surrounded once more by Onmitsukidou officers. This time they took hold of him roughly in their arms, and though they more or less dragged him from the dock, Tenichi felt certain that Kai had given the order for them to do so in order to prevent him from humiliating himself further by physically fainting. His vision was a sea of dots and sparkles, nothing quite in focus, yet at the back of it all, dimly he understood that his life was not over.

He had been foolish, and his punishment was far from finished, but one day he would get a second chance. And, as Kai gave orders to have him taken to a particular cell in a particular cell block, Tenichi inwardly made a fierce promise with himself that, no matter what, he would not waste it.

Like Kai-dono said, the biggest challenge is living. I’ll live with the shame of what I’ve done my whole life, but I won’t let it destroy me. Even if nobody forgives me, if I don’t forgive myself, I’ll never heal. And if I don’t heal, I’m no use to Endou-taichou or anyone else. If Koku can make harsh decisions and stand before the Gotei for mercy, then I can pull myself together and not let anything like this happen again. I’ve changed, but it doesn’t have to be a bad change. So I’ll make it a good one. And, eventually, when I hold my sword again — it will be to defend people properly, not to run and

attack out of fear.

It was over.

Kohaku sank down onto the grass outside of the Second Division penal compound, letting out his breath in a rush as he attempted to calm his still pounding heart. It had not been easy, standing in the midst of all that suppressed reiatsu, and talking in such candid terms about events that had happened such a short time before. Though he had done it before the Council, bringing up his Father's name had reminded him all over again of how alone he now was in the world. When they had arrived, Juushirou had insisted on enquiring with Kai after Eiraki's health, but Kohaku had already known that there was little point. His mother was alive, but he had sensed the light going out in her soul the same moment she learned of Keitarou's death. Katsura was far away, Sakaki buried deep beneath Rukongai soil. Even the former Onmitsukidou had disappeared into the shadows from whence he had come, and the thought was a sobering one.

Kirio-san, Juushirou-dono, they're kind to me, but this isn't where I come from. I don't know anything, and in there, I know they were all looking at me and judging me. Standing before the Council was one thing, but Juushirou-dono was with me. Today, I was alone. Midori-sama is a frightening woman, and the kind who would kill a traitor rather than look at him. I felt it so clearly in there... even if her brother isn't that way, she is. And Tenichi-dono's reaction to my real name... I hadn't thought that he might not have been told. I hope he doesn't think what I did in there was intended as any kind of betrayal. I wanted to help and I think I did, but I might have put a wedge between us, too, now he knows how deeply I lied.

He sighed, running his fingers idly through the blades and watching as they nudged aside a clump to reveal small purple flowers beneath. Gently he touched them, a bittersweet expression on his face.

I don't even know what these flowers are called. I feel like an alien, stuck in an alien world. I've sacrificed everything and I did the right thing, but now I'm alone and afraid. When Juushirou-dono is there, it doesn't seem so bad... but now, when he's not...

"Kohaku!"

As he raised his gaze towards the blue sky, he was aware of someone calling his name, and he turned, his eyes widening in surprise as he registered the fair headed Ketsui hurrying across the grass towards him, a young woman in tow. Although he could not remember their meeting, Kohaku was sure that he had felt her reiatsu at some point before, but before he could reason it out and work out

where, Ketsui had reached his side, flopping down onto the grass beside him.

“Taichou is speaking to Midori-sama about Ten-nii, and he sent me to find you and make sure you didn’t get lost,” he explained, offering the bewildered stray a rueful smile. “He thought you’d have left the courtroom already, and he was right. You didn’t like it in there, huh?”

“It was stuffy and full of different spiritual auras,” Kohaku shook his head. “I found it hard to breathe. I wanted to help Tenichi-dono, but I was glad to get out.”

“I’m sure,” Ketsui pressed his lips together, then, to Kohaku’s surprise, he reached out his hand, grasping the younger man’s in his and giving it a firm, warm shake before releasing it. “What you did in there, I can never repay you for. My brother’s life was on the line, and there’s no doubt that what you had to say turned the scale. Ten-nii is alive because you were brave enough to go stand up and speak... and I appreciate it. I’m no wordsmith, so I don’t think I can be really eloquent about it — but I wanted you to know that I appreciate every word you said.”

“Ketsui-dono,” Kohaku’s eyes became huge, but before he could say anything else, the young woman had joined them, letting out an amused snort. To Kohaku’s astonishment, she grabbed hold of Ketsui’s tail of fluffy fair hair, giving it a speculative tug before dropping daintily down on the grass opposite Kohaku’s own position.

“You’re going to freak the guy out if you flap all over him like that, Ketsui,” she scolded, offering Kohaku a grin. “Hi Kohaku. I would say I’m pleased to meet you, only I already did — just I don’t suppose you remember me doing that, do you? I fell over your legs in the middle of Seireitei the day of the invasion... I’m glad to see you’re less dusty and in more or less one piece now.”

Kohaku’s cheeks flushed scarlet at this casual assessment, as suddenly he remembered where he had sensed the woman’s reiatsu before. It had been lingering around his body and his sword, when he had awoken in the chamber following Keitarou’s death, and more, it had been there, out in the ether, in the moments he had slipped out of consciousness.

“And you said I’m going to freak him out,” Ketsui scolded. “Kohaku, don’t let her embarrass you. If she hadn’t tripped over your legs, she’d have got herself into a messy battle situation and she’d be in even more trouble with her Captain than she already is, so she ought to be thanking you too.”

"I... see..." Kohaku gazed between the two shinigami, completely not seeing, and at his expression, the young woman let out a peal of laughter.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she said contritely. "Taichou did say that you weren't all that used to having lots of people around you. I guess we're a bit more than you were expecting after your little appearance — but since I came here with Ketsui for moral support today, I thought I ought to come out and help him keep tabs on you till Juushirou-dono is done inside. I know you more or less belong to Thirteenth now, but I didn't think you were sufficiently indoctrinated yet to discriminate against people from other squads."

Her eyes sparkled, and she held out a thin, dainty hand towards his.

"My name is Magaki Shizuka," she added. "I'm the Tenth Seat of the Eighth Division, and Ketsui and I are old school friends. I've known Tenichi-san a long time, too, so I'm glad you helped him, too. It's been a bad time, but hopefully, now, it will get better."

"Magaki-san," Slowly Kohaku closed his fingers around hers, shaking her hand tentatively before releasing his hold, and Shizuka beamed, nodding her head.

"There, now we're properly introduced, I feel less bad stumbling over you," she admitted, sitting back on her hands with a grin. "I saw you and your sword and clean thought you were a shinigami already — imagine my surprise when I found out who you really were... and what you'd been up to. Vandalising a *Senkaimon* is a pretty big deal. I'm sure Nagesu-sama had plenty to say about it."

"Nagesu-sama didn't say anything about it at all, really," Kohaku looked surprised. "About my father, yes, but not so much the *Senkaimon*. Besides, I had to do it. If I hadn't... if not..."

"I know," Shizuka's pretty features became grave. "You said it again in there — that Keitarou wanted to kill a lot of people, including Thirteenth. I'm sorry. I'm saying insensitive things, aren't I? You lost your father... it's not a celebration for you that Seireitei's finally at peace."

"Kohaku will stay with us now, though," Ketsui said firmly. "Kirio-nee has said it too, and so has Taichou. We'll look after him, Shizu. We're not going to just cast him out to fend for himself. He's done more for all of us than most of us have managed to do for each other and so we'll make sure that he's all right from this point on."

"So will I," Shizuka objected. "I told Taichou and Sora-dono that I

wanted to come and be involved in that, too. I think it would be horrible, to lose one's father in that way... and well, I..."

She faltered, looking awkward, and Kohaku's eyes widened as he read the deep concern in the dark brown eyes. Somewhere, he knew, he had seen those eyes before, and then, as he put the pieces together, he drew breath sharply, staring at her as though seeing her for the first time.

"Of the... *Eighth* Division?" he asked faintly, and Shizuka's expression became shadowed. Slowly she nodded.

"I'm afraid so," she said penitently. "I know that can't be your favourite number right about now. I know what my Captain did, Koku... I'm sorry that he had to. I know you understand why he did, probably better than I do, but I know how I would have felt if that fight had gone the other way. Taichou is... very important in my life. Probably as important as Keitarou was in yours."

Ketsui sent her a sidelong glance at this point, and Kohaku interpreted the shifts in both shinigami's auras, as though there was an unspoken communication between the two of them that he was not party to. He let out his breath in a heavy sigh, suddenly understanding. He shook his head.

"I asked Kyouraku-dono to act, and he acted," he said wearily. "It doesn't mean I like what he had to do, but it's not him that really did it. I did. If I hadn't told him the things I'd seen, he wouldn't have known. I know whose fault it is my father is dead, Magaki-san. You don't need to apologise to me for anything. It's just, when your father is someone like mine, it's hard to know what the right thing is to do. And I think that, if I had a father like Kyouraku-dono, it would be much easier to believe in them and to grieve for them when they were gone."

Shock reflected in Shizuka's dark eyes for a brief instant, then she smiled wryly, shaking her head slowly.

"I guess it is true what they say about you, then," she mused. "You can see things other people can't."

"Sometimes," Kohaku responded cautiously. "Sometimes that just blinds me to what's really there, though. Seireitei is a foreign world to me in a lot of ways."

"That's only because you don't know enough people in it, yet, to call it home," Ketsui said frankly, getting to his feet and reaching down to haul the startled Kohaku to his. "Come on. Shizu, you too."

Taichou said not to leave the Second, but it's all right. If we walk to the far fence, you can see out over some of District Two, and then you can see, Kohaku, just what it is we put on the uniform to protect. And, of course, what you sacrificed everything to protect, too."

"To..protect?" Kohaku echoed, confused, but Ketsui did not give him an opportunity to refuse. Though the older man was not thickly built, and was less muscular than his brother, he had plenty of strength and the young stray saw nothing for it than to allow himself to be dragged across the compound to the white wooden fence that divided the court grounds from the world beyond. At the sight of it, he let out a gasp, for, stretching out for miles below them was a yawning valley, a sea of green interspersed with lines of blue. The Second Division's court was within Inner Seireitei, but although the barrier between the Shinigami's hallowed land and the Districts was clearly visible, it seemed like an innocuous line in the sand when compared to what lay beyond. Settlements clustered here and there, disappearing into near dots in the far distance, and Kohaku's breath caught in his throat as he surveyed it.

"That's District Two," at his other side, it was Shizuka who spoke. 'Ketsui and I both grew up in District Eight, which is awash with flowers at this time of year. All of the Eight Districts are distinct in some ways and the same in others. Because we grew up in places like that, we understand from the moment we step through the doors of the Academy what it is we want to protect. Ketsui's family is here, now,' she added, casting her friend a smile, "but in my case, my guardian and my brother are both living in District Eight still, and they could easily come into danger from Hollows at any time. My brother is married and when he writes to me, he often reminds me not to forget about them, since he has no way to defend himself against the monsters and he's worried for his children if they come near his home."

She tapped the hilt of her sword.

"That's why I trained to get this," she added. "Inner Seireitei feels like home to me. Taichou is here, and I wouldn't want to be anywhere else. But I have people to protect out there, too. And knowing that is what makes me a shinigami."

"My brother always said Seireitei was more beautiful than he could ever make me see," Kohaku breathed. "I thought Inner Seireitei was amazing, but to see so much green, for miles and miles and miles, and to know that's just one part of this world..." he trailed off, and Ketsui clapped a reassuring hand down on his shoulder.

“If you’re serious about staying with us and recruiting, one day, you’ll be out there protecting the people first hand,” he said wisely. “When that happens, you’ll see all those places for yourself. Mountains. Rivers. Beaches. Forests. As many landscapes as you can ever imagine. Maybe even the land your Father and mine once lived in, before things went so terribly wrong. Maybe even there.”

“Have you ever been?” Kohaku asked curiously, and Ketsui shook his head.

“My memories of Father aren’t as vivid as my brother’s, and I’m more tied to here than there. District Eight is my home, and my mother was buried there,” he said honestly. “Father’s grave might have troubled Ten-nii, but I’ve not really given it much thought. He died and he was buried and that’s all I know, really. But I have been a refugee, and I do understand hardship. I was born in District Seven, because that’s where Father was exiled to when he met mother. The current Endou are fine, but the previous ones ravaged their land and killed anyone who had spirit power. Mother, Ten-nii and I, we had to flee.”

“Mm,” Kohaku became grave, and he nodded. “Tenichi-dono told me about that,” he admitted, “and I know that’s how Father played to get his attention. He knew Tenichi-dono had been a refugee, had seen real hardship and experienced it. He knew Tenichi-dono would understand the plight of the people in Rukongai better than most. I don’t know what plans he might have had if Souja-dono hadn’t died and I hadn’t ended up here... but I’m glad he wasn’t able to realise them. Tenichi-dono isn’t a bad person, and I’m glad he’ll get a second chance.”

“Well, minimum five years labour isn’t exactly a picnic, not if it’s being run by the Onmitsukidou,” Shizuka mused, “but it’s better than the other options on offer, so I guess it will have to do.”

“Taichou said that, if he’s not sentenced to the deep cells, he can have visitors every so often, too,” Ketsui added. “That made Kirio-nee happy. She intends to go as often as she can.”

“And you don’t?” Shizuka asked quizzically, and Ketsui frowned, shrugging his shoulders.

“When I’ve settled my feelings, I will,” he said at length. “Right now, I’m still swirling around inside about what happened. Guilty. Angry. Frightened. Lots of things. I have to make peace with myself first, but then I will. Don’t worry, Shizu. I’m not going to abandon him. He’s my brother and I love him — I just have to put everything

in perspective first.”

“We both have brothers who’ve done bad things,” Kohaku said wistfully. “At least Tenichi-dono’s actions can and will be forgiven. My brother is different. If he ever comes into range of the Gotei, he’ll be in big trouble. I know he’s not a bad person, but what he’s done can’t be taken back.”

“I guess you two have a lot in common, don’t you?” Shizuka realised, and Ketsui nodded.

“We do, which is why I’m going to make sure I help Kirio-nee make Kohaku feel at home in Thirteenth,” he said, casting the stray a grin. ‘Whether you like it or not, you’re stuck with me. And where I am, *she’s* usually somewhere behind,’ he jabbed his thumb in Shizuka’s direction, and she let out an exclamation of indignation at his casual aside, “so you’re probably stuck with her, too.”

“You’re so rude,” Shizuka poked out her tongue, twisting her features into a graphic grimace. “Besides, I’m here on my own account. Koku, Taichou wants to speak to you. I know he does, but right now, he can’t. What happened has upset him, and even though he isn’t really talking about it, I know. I know him better than most people. He’s spent a lot of time with Juushirou-dono, but I don’t know if even he can heal this wound. I think it has to heal on its own. You understand, I think, what he’s feeling right now. He wants to come, and he needs to... and when he does, I don’t want you to turn him away. So I’m... I’m the advance party. I don’t want you to be at odds with him over anything, or with me.”

Kohaku was silent for a moment, then he shook his head, turning to offer Shizuka a sad smile.

“I told you. I’m not cross, and I won’t turn him away, if and when he wants to speak to me,” he said softly. ‘This,’ he gestured out in front of him, “is why we both made the decisions we did and they were the right ones. And you don’t have to lay the groundwork. You don’t have to put yourself out on my account, Magaki-san. Really.”

“Well, say I want to, then,” Shizuka amended. “In that case, will you let me? I go to Thirteenth all the time, and Ketsui and I often train and spar together. I figure, if he’s helping you, I might be able to, too. And that would be fun. I don’t get to train with recruits, much. There are other, better officers, and even though Taichou can be soft on me, he doesn’t ever give me preference when it comes to things like that. I’m buried down under a mountain of Sora-dono’s imaginative chores right now, and I only got to come today because of Ketsui, but when

that's finished, maybe... then I could come help, too?"

"Well, the Council want me to know all kinds of things before they accept me as a real shinigami," Kohaku gazed at his hands ruefully. "I think I'll need all the help I can get. I'm not used to people, Magaki-san, just like you said. But I'm in no position to refuse help from people who have been kind to me. If you want to come, I won't mind. Maybe I'll like it better that way. I've realised lately how much I'm starting to hate being alone."

"I don't think it's actually possible to be alone in Thirteenth Division, even if we do have the smallest squad," Ketsui considered. "Ah, but you'll see what I mean sooner rather than later. Taichou's on his way over, and so is Kirio-nee, so I guess we'll be on our way back to base soon. Edogawa-san said we weren't to over-tire you — you aren't over-tired, are you, Kohaku?"

"I'm fine," Kohaku assured him with a wry smile. "I promised Edogawa-san, too, and once I got out of that chamber, I felt much better. I won't faint or anything. Don't worry."

"Then I'd better scoot off back to Eighth and face Sora-dono's wrathful mop," Shizuka rolled her eyes. "I'll come by and see you soon, Koku-kun. I promise. And also, one more thing. Welcome to the Gotei. You're going to love it — trust me."

And with a wink she was gone, disappearing into a smooth shunpo that left Kohaku somewhat envious.

"Shizuka's the main reason I got through the Academy and graduated," Ketsui's voice broke through his reverie, and he felt his companion take him by the arm, steering him back towards where Juushirou and Kirio were approaching. "It's definitely not possible to be lonely if she's around, and that's a fact. Or depressed. She doesn't allow it."

"You've really known each other a long time, haven't you?" Kohaku asked quizzically, and Ketsui nodded.

"We have," he agreed, rubbing his chin. "And she does spend a lot of time at Thirteenth because of it. It's probably good you met her now, when it's just us, because half of both of our squads are convinced we're romantically involved, and I don't want you to get the wrong impression. We're not like that — but I do trust her one hundred percent, and if she says she'll come help, then she will. She keeps her word."

"Then I guess I'll see plenty of her, too," Kohaku murmured, his

eyes drifting in the direction where tendrils of Shizuka's residual reiatsu were beginning to fragment on the breeze. "When I'm finally allowed to become a proper shinigami."

The walk from the Eleventh Division to the Fourth was not a long one as a normal rule, yet somehow that day, Atsushi did not feel inclined to hurry. As he made his way along the dusty thoroughfare, he paused to glance at the front entrances of his neighbours, absorbing the damage suffered by each one in the cold light of day. There were officers flurrying around the damaged fronts of Eighth and Ninth Division, and as he hesitated for a moment on the corner between the two barracks, Atsushi recognised the Sixth Division's Third Seated officer, waving his arms and giving instructions to an anxious, jittery group of junior officers. Though the blood and corpses had gone, there were dark shadows against the cobbles that Atsushi's battle experience told him were not simply shadows of clouds overhead, and his gaze darkened as he turned away.

He did not want to think about the death of Anabomi that morning. He had another item on his agenda, and it would not do to approach it with anything less than a settled mind.

"Good Morning, Atsushi-dono," As he reached the gate of the Fourth, he was greeted by Eriko, the healing squad's busy and efficient Vice Captain, who cast him a harried smile, inclining her head in acknowledgement. "Retsu-sama said that you would be coming at some point to speak to Sekime-taichou. I'm sorry, I can't take you there myself — I'm in the middle of seeing to a treatment for the Fifth Division's Vice Captain, but I trust you will be able to find your own way? Grab a recruit if you can't, but she's resting in the wing at the back, away from any of the serious cases."

"I'll find her," Atsushi said gruffly. "I'm not here to get in your way, Eriko-dono. I'm here to follow orders given me by the Council, and that's all."

"Well, I'm glad you are," Eriko admitted. "Sekime-taichou is not physically ill, Atsushi-dono. She was shaken and in shock when you brought her here, not to mention she had a bruise from where you brought her down — but there's nothing else really wrong. It's her emotional state that's the real concern. She won't leave her room, or see any of her Division as visitors, and has barely spoken to any of us. I hope that perhaps you can set her mind at some ease. She's not to blame for what happened to her, and in the circumstances, Twelfth Division need her back on duty."

“Michihashi’s been here, has he?” Atsushi asked sharply, and Eriko nodded.

“More than once, but she’s turned him away every time,” she agreed with a sigh. “Aoi-dono is concerned by it. He’s always had a close rapport with his Captain, and she’s never treated him like this before. He’s worried she’s blaming herself overly hard for what happened at the Twelfth.”

“I’ll settle that, don’t you worry,” Atsushi spoke grimly. “I’ll go see her now. You get back to your patient, Eriko-dono. Leave Sekime Mareiko to me.”

“Thank you,” despite the roughness of his words, Eriko offered him another smile, and Atsushi was sure there was relief in her eyes. “Retsu-sama said that, if anyone could bring her round, she felt sure that it would be you.”

And with this surprising and disconcerting statement she hurried off across the courtyard towards the set of chambers which housed the badly wounded Ryuusei and Hyakken.

Atsushi gritted his teeth, turning in the other direction and making his way purposefully towards where he could sense, oh so faintly, his old friend’s familiar reiatsu.

I don’t know what on earth would make Retsu-sama say something like that, but I don’t pretend to understand healers. More importantly is that I carry out my duty properly, no matter how unpleasant it might be. I brought this on myself, and on Mareiko, too. Well, we’re going to settle it... once and for all.

Mareiko was sitting up in bed as he reached her chamber, a robe draped across her shoulders, and her gaze, distant and unfocused, staring out of the window of the small chamber. She did not react at Atsushi’s approach and, as he stepped into the room proper, he felt certain that her mind was far from the present.

For a moment he eyed her, regret stirring in his heart, then, summoning his nerve, he spoke.

“Mareiko.”

It was just one word, spoken softly and without any of his usual military edge, but at the sound of it, Mareiko stirred, aware for the first time that she had company. At the sight of him her eyes widened, first with shock, then clear dismay, and instinctively she raised her left arm, as though intending to use Kidou to push him back the way he had come. Before she could release any spell, however, she appeared

to remember where she was, and she sighed, tension seeping out of her as she sank back against her pillows. There were tears in the pale eyes, and she turned her head away, so that Atsushi could no longer see her face.

“There’s no reason for you to be here.”

“On the contrary, I have orders.”

Atsushi steeled his nerves, moving to the edge of the bed and standing a foot away from the edge, leaning up against the wall and folding his arms across his chest, more to hide his own discomfort than anything else. “The Council of Elders has commanded me to come and report to you in full the events of the Rukon. They said it should come from me, not any other.”

“So you want to make me relive it a second time?” Mareiko turned to face him now, her gaze so hopeless and melancholy that it almost broke Atsushi’s determination there and then. “Don’t lie to me, Atushikun. You’ve come to arrest me, haven’t you? My health is stable enough, now, to be interrogated... I have been waiting for someone to come.”

A sad smile touched her lips, but it did not reach her eyes.

“I suppose it is poetic justice, if that person is you,” she whispered. “Just don’t lie to me. Do what you need to do, but don’t try and make it easier... or harder... by pretending you’re here for some other reason.”

“I’m not lying to you,” Atsushi shook his head, meeting her gaze with a serious one of his own. “Why would I be arresting you, Mareiko?”

“You know why.”

“Because you threatened my life?” Atsushi demanded. “Don’t be foolish. We both know that, if I had chosen to fight you, I would’ve disarmed you. Whatever training you might have done with your left arm, you can’t truly use it without proper combat experience, against someone of rank. You and I, we were battle partners, once, and training equals — but things are different now.”

Mareiko flinched, as though pained by his words, and Atsushi hesitated, inwardly berating his bluntness. He shook his head.

“What I mean is that I chose not to fight you,” he said matter-of-factly. “And, as you see, I’m unhurt from the experience. You’re also unhurt. Your Division are worried, however — particularly by the fact

you've refused to see Michihashi, or leave the confines of this room. The Council did indeed order me to come here — whether you like it or I want to do it, my duty is to do as they command."

"And the rest?" Mareiko's tones held a bitter edge. "Did you tell the Captains of the Council how I invaded your division, sedated your members and put a sword to your throat?"

"Of course," Atsushi looked surprised. "I made a full report to them, inclusive of that information. I felt it better... since I had done enough lying."

"Then you must know that they will arrest me," Mareiko whispered. "There's no other option for someone like me... who turns against her allies, fails in her duties to her squad and Clan Leader and acts contrary to Seireitei's interests."

"There will be no arrest warrant," Atsushi shook his head. "I told you, I made a full report. I told them that you launched yourself at me and attacked me, but that, following the hallucination we all saw, your attack abated. The Council have no intention of pressing charges against you. A similar incident occurred at Eighth, with the Tenth Division Captain Shiba Hakubei, and at Ninth, resulting in the death of Anabomi Seizuku. These men were clearly under the manipulative control of an invader. You are no different. Nobody will blame you for what happened."

"I am completely different," Mareiko's head had shot up at this. "Atsushi-kun, someone died? Anabomi-taichou... died?"

"He turned Hollow, and Endou-taichou dispatched him in the same way I was forced to dispatch Sakanoue, twenty five years ago," Atsushi's voice tightened slightly at this, though somehow he kept his words casual. "He had ingested poison of some kind, left, it is believed, by the same man who mutated Heiji and who would have killed all of us, in Rukongai, had he had the chance."

"No..." Mareiko's skin was ash pale, and she shook her head. "No, but then... but you don't... you don't unders... I wasn't... it wasn't like that. I didn't know... Anabomi-taichou... anyone..."

She buried her head in her hands.

"No, I knew," she admitted, her words tinged with grief. "I knew, but I didn't understand. I didn't care. I could only think of... of..."

"Of killing me?" Atsushi moved to sit on the end of the bed, and at his closeness, Mareiko flinched back, staring at him warily. "Yes, I know you weren't under Keitarou's control. Like it or not, Mareiko, I

know you. Or maybe, I *knew* you, as more than just the distracted scientist people see you as today. I know there was real emotion and intent in your movements and your actions. You intended to kill me, and you used the chaos going on around you to do it. I understood that when you attacked me. I understood that you knew... and that this was what you wanted to do.”

“Then why do the Council...”

“Because I told them so,” Atsushi said matter-of-factly.

“Why?” Mareiko’s eyes almost fell out of her head, and Atsushi snorted.

“Fool,” he said disparagingly. “The attack on me was entirely my own fault. I concealed important evidence. True, I hoped it would be easier on you and everyone if I did... and it hasn’t been easy on me, carrying that burden all these years without facing a tribunal and receiving whatever judgement due me. But when I saw your face, I knew you’d known the whole time. I’d created that suffering inside of you... and so I deserved your hate. You were not wrong to try and kill me. If I had been you, believing what you believed in, I would’ve acted the same.”

“Atsushi-kun...” Now Mareiko’s tears fell, and she shook her head. “But I can’t... it can’t... it’s not true. Atsushi-kun, I didn’t just take advantage. I drugged my division, instead of letting them go on duty, so that Third Division remained unprotected. I gave Taichou’s information to his enemy... our enemy... to *that man*, all because I’d given up on justice and I wanted... I wanted to settle the score. I felt my life was over, except for this one thing... avenging my Captain, no matter what it took. And then, in that image... but it doesn’t change anything. You can’t lie and tell them I did it because Keitarou made me. I didn’t. I helped Keitarou... in order to give me a chance to kill you when everyone’s guard was down.”

Atsushi gazed at her for a moment, digesting this. Then, at length he said,

“It’s too late. I already have.”

“Then I’ll just have to tell them...”

Before Mareiko could finish her sentence, Atsushi had pressed his fingers to her lips, shaking his head.

“It’s over, so let it stay over,” he said softly.

“Atsushi-kun!” Mareiko thrust his arm away, staring at him in

confusion. “I just told you I was a spy for the enemy! I leaked information on shinigami movements, I abandoned my duty to protect Third Division...”

“As I understand it, the fact you did worked in our favour,” Atsushi reflected. “I don’t fully understand the hallucination we both saw, nor did the Council seem inclined to give me a lot of additional information to explain it — but one thing it did do was break Keitarou’s hold over all those he had been controlling in Seireitei. It also blew up Third Division’s *Senkaimon*, preventing the Council Captains from returning prematurely and falling additionally under Keitarou’s spell. From what we can gather, he intended to control Captains and make them kill other Captains — wiping out the whole of the Gotei from start to finish.”

Mareiko chewed on her lip, shaking her head.

“I never asked him how he intended to achieve the changes he wanted to achieve,” she whispered. “I never did anything... here... on his behalf, never killed anyone, never arranged for anyone to die. But by helping him, I know I’m still guilty. It doesn’t matter if he didn’t tell me things. I suppose, subconsciously, I understood that he was going to kill people. Maybe I even wanted it, for a while. Perhaps I didn’t think it mattered... I don’t even know. I just wanted... I just...”

“Kusakawa didn’t deserve you to care about him as much as that,” Atsushi said gravely. “Because of that man, people are dead. Anabomi may be among them. We don’t know yet, but I wouldn’t be at all surprised if the scientific evidence proves that potion he drank to be connected in some way. Because of that man, you lost the use of your right arm in combat, and I lost my Vice Captain. He was never worthy of your loyalty, Mareiko. I just wish you didn’t have to know of it... and the fact that you do, I take as my failing. Everything that happened since is my responsibility and my fault... whatever you said, whatever you did to help Keitarou, it was all with the aim of avenging yourself on me. If I had been honest, you would never have followed that path. If I had submitted myself and my evidence when we returned from Rukongai, and allowed the truth to come out then... maybe it would’ve been better. I thought I was the only one who had to live with it, and I knew that I could, so long as I had a duty to do and I was of use to the Gotei as a whole. Your seeing anything of the fight between us was an oversight on my part. I didn’t know... and so I misjudged. Because of that...”

“You didn’t do anything wrong,” Mareiko reached up to wipe away her tears. “If you had told the truth, whatever you had said, I wouldn’t

have believed it. But... seeing those images... I knew they were true. You don't have to report to me, Atsushi-kun, I know. Every thought, every word... was real. And I didn't see you kill my Captain. Not exactly. I sensed you fighting, and struggled to the scene... I saw you crossing blades, and releasing your swords. I must have then lost consciousness, because the next thing I saw was you bent over his body, and there was so much blood. Maybe if I'd seen everything, I'd have understood... but I didn't. I remember staggering away... I don't even know how far I walked before I collapsed, or where I went to. I don't know where they found me... I just had to get away, far away from you. My memories are blurry, but the bits I have tally with that dream-like vision that invaded our minds and shook me back to sanity. My knowledge was flawed and incomplete — my behaviour isn't justifiable. I am guilty of treason and ought to be tried for it. Nothing else will suffice.”

“And then, what will Twelfth do?” Atsushi demanded, a sharp edge to his tones, and Mareiko stared at him in dismay. “They’re already reeling with the knowledge that their first and former Captain was a traitor to his Clan and his Division, and responsible for the deaths of everyone who ever succumbed to Hollow-creatures in Rukongai. They already have that to deal with — and now you want to take their second Captain from them in the same shameful way?”

“But I...”

“Your responsibility is to those men and women who serve under you, Sekime Mareiko,” Atsushi snapped, grabbing her by the shoulders and giving her a little shake. “The fighter I used to train with and the friend I used to have was always positive, always believing, always dedicated to every part of the job at hand. Who was it who would drive me crazy, stopping to talk to every insignificant Plus soul you saw who was frightened? How many times did you scold me or my impatience? You’d waste time making stones spark and glitter for the orphaned children who used to stray near our campfires late at night, but even when they were in our way, you wouldn’t let me evict them and you were the only one who could bend my will that way. Your squad are like those children now, Mareiko. While some of them are obviously complete idiots, even the competent ones are lost without their leader to take command. They are loyal to you, and they miss you. Most of them aren’t Kusakawa’s men, and have come into Twelfth since you took the *haori*. Even if you feel you didn’t want or deserve to be a Captain, they’ve never known anything else. The entire hierarchy is built around your leadership and their belief in you. Michihashi is a sensible, clever adjutant, miles from the clod I have at my beck and call, and, despite the frequent explosions, he has

complete faith in you as his superior officer. I heard he testified on your behalf, telling the Council your behaviour that day was unlike you and as though you had been possessed. He had no doubts that you were acting under Keitarou's control — when I found him wandering drunkenly outside the Twelfth that day, it was the first thing he wanted to impress on me. I wasn't the only one giving them that impression — your Vice Captain has stuck by your side as well, and he's a good man. Right now, your emotions are raw, because you have learned what it is like to be betrayed by your Captain. Are you going to give Michihashi those same emotions, and impose more grief upon your squad?"

Mareiko's jaw could not drop any further, and Atsushi relinquished his grip on her shoulders, moving towards the window and glancing outside at the Fourth Division grounds.

"My punishment, on coming back to Seireitei twenty-five years ago, was to serve as a Captain of the Gotei," he said softly. "I don't make friends among my peers as a rule, nor do I socialise with them more than is necessary. As a man, I cared little for Kusakawa's death... his crimes were not forgivable, and he had no remorse for what he had done. He deserved his fate. But in that incident, because of what happened, I lost two people who I considered valuable beyond the limits of my duty. I lost Heiji, who was always like a son to me. And I lost my best friend."

He turned to glance at her, a faintly sheepish expression touching his severe features.

"I broke the ties between us because I felt it was better that way. I couldn't continue how we had before, knowing that I had taken your Captain's life," he added. "Because I did, I never realised how much you knew, and that is also my failing. I'm resigned to your hatred of me, Mareiko. I can live with it, as I've lived with everything else. It doesn't change my duty to my Division, though. I work with a Vice Captain I despise, and I do the things expected of me. So I'll act until I die, or am no longer fit for active service. It's not for me to decide I am useless to the Gotei. It's for the Gotei to rid themselves of me."

"Even if you say that, you didn't act as a traitor," Mareiko's tears continued to fall. "What I did... however you put it, it doesn't change it. The Gotei would not want someone like me to serve as a Captain, if they understood."

"But it is over, now," Atsushi said matter-of-factly. "The Council have no intention of removing your *haori*. I will tell you now that if you go to the Council and tell them any of this, run away from your

duties and your squad and betray the Gotei all over again, I will not forgive you. More, I will not *allow* it to go any further. If you go to the Council and claim to have been working with Keitarou, I will simply go there and claim that it was my actions, not yours, and you are trying to protect me. I will tell them that you came to kill me because you had discovered I was spying, and that I said Keitarou was controlling you to cover my back.”

“But... I...” Horror flooded Mareiko’s features, and Atsushi nodded.

“Your Captain’s life, Heiji’s life, they are on my conscience,” he said bluntly. “My life isn’t precious enough to me to see another person’s sacrificed because of things I’ve done. You know I wouldn’t say such a thing unless I meant it. The choice is yours. You can put this behind you, go back to your squad and to Nagesu-sama and do your penance on duty, killing Hollows and helping put things to rights, or you can see me executed for your sins, and live with the aftermath. Nobody will ever believe you a traitor... especially not considering your faulty sword arm and frequent fits of public absentmindedness. As for me, I’ve already lied, and concealed two deaths. They know we used to be friends, and that you have a reputation for kindness that I’ve never had. Of course you would try to shield me... it would be an easy choice for them to make.”

Mareiko gazed at him for a moment, then she sighed, a faint, resigned smile touching her lips. There was a glitter of relief in her gaze, and Atsushi absorbed this with a lighter heart. Slowly she held up her hands in indication of defeat.

“You are as mean and ruthless now as you ever were when we hunted Hollows together,” she murmured. “And, like always, you know me better than I even know myself. I thought I hated you. I thought I wanted you dead... but the thought of letting you die for my crimes gives me no joy or pleasure. I realised that the person I thought I hated is like the person I thought I respected above all others. They’re myths created by my misconceptions. I just... wanted to believe in my Captain. I never suspected him of anything... even now, I find it hard.”

“I wish that I had been quicker to the draw,” Atsushi admitted. “I might have saved Sakanoue’s life, and that does haunt me. I am sorry, too, that you had to live so long not understanding all the facts. I thought it was for the best, and it was a mistake of judgement. I wanted to protect you, but I forgot that you were a shinigami, not a damsel in distress. I let my personal views overtake my duty in a lot of ways. Well, I suppose you know that, now. You’ve seen it all for

yourself. Everything, good and bad.”

Mareiko was silent for a moment, toying with her bedcovers.

“Taichou said things, about me... and you,” she murmured, and a stricken expression entered Atsushi’s gaze. “It’s all right, I won’t... I’m not going to bring them up, or discuss them in any detail. I’m not going to ask you any questions, Atsushi-kun. Just that I think... when he said it, and I saw your face, I knew. I knew that what I was seeing was true, and that I’d had it all wrong. You were my friend, even when I doubted you. You still are my friend, now. I don’t hate you. I don’t expect you to forgive me, and I can’t say yet that I’m glad you acted how you did. But I will... try to work out what really happened and accept it in my own mind.”

She sighed, gazing at her chipped nails.

“The truth is, I would’ve done anything for that man. Even died for him,” she murmured. “I owed him everything, and when you owe someone that, it’s hard to see them objectively. It’s far more complicated than maybe even you realise it is. Kusakawa-taichou wasn’t just the Captain who promoted me. He... and his father... were far bigger in my life.”

“Meaning?” Atsushi eyed her quizzically, and Mareiko shrugged, letting out another heavy sigh. There was a long pause, then,

“I am an Urahara,” she said cautiously, “but then in some circles, I’m not.”

“I beg your pardon?” Now Atsushi was befuddled, and despite herself, Mareiko managed a feeble smile.

“My family are Fourth Degree Urahara, like yours are Fourth Degree Yamamoto,” she said frankly. “At least, the *Sekime* family are Fourth Degree Urahara. Technically I am... outside the degrees of Clan. Well, officially. So I have always been told.”

“I don’t understand what you’re getting at,” Atsushi admitted. “You just said that the *Sekime* family are Fourth Degree.”

“Yes, but I was adopted by them when I was four years old,” Mareiko responded earnestly. “My mother was a Fifth Degree Urahara, or in other words, outside of the Clan circle. I was also born illegitimate. Nobody knows who my father was. People speculated that it was someone from higher up within the Clan, and I have such Urahara features most people think it’s true — but there was never any firm proof. My mother would never tell anyone. She had no significant connections of her own, though, at the time I was born.

She didn't even have money to fall back on — her family cut her off because of me, and so she had to resort to other ways to feed us. She was arrested for stealing... and sent to prison."

Atsushi's eyes narrowed at this, but he did not comment, and encouraged, Mareiko continued.

"Daigo-sama was in charge of the prisons, then," she reflected. "Daigo-sama, Taichou's father. Mother was supposed to be put to death, but because of me, he arranged for her to be pardoned. I don't remember enough details of what happened next — but I left her custody the same day. Daigo-sama told me that Mother had asked him to help me, because she couldn't give me a proper life. Apparently he saw potential in me, and promised to do what he could. As a result, I was adopted by the Sekime family. The Sekime are quite peripheral to the Clan, and rarely become directly involved in politics. My adoptive father worked with Daigo-sama, which is how the whole business came about. He and my adoptive mother never had their own children. My mother miscarried four or five times, until a healer told her she wouldn't ever bear her own children. Because I was so visibly Urahara in my appearance, they felt that I would be a suitable substitute, and when it turned out that I had good spirit power, they decided to get me trained. Daigo-sama helped here, as well... and after he died, Shougo-dono continued to ensure that I completed my education, both as a scientist and as a shinigami."

She raised her gaze, meeting Atsushi's shocked one with an even one of her own.

"By birth, I am District, and illegitimate," she said simply. "I'm not kin to the Urahara, not formally, because Mother and I are both outside the degrees of Clan. If my father knew he had spawned me, he never came forward to claim me — so he's not family to me, either. I can't assume he was important or not important. To me he's not important, because he abandoned Mother and I... it makes him a deadbeat, no matter his bloodline."

She shrugged.

"For that reason, I can never ignore the plight of the people on the other side of the Clan divide," she owned. "I don't know what ultimately happened to my mother. I never saw her or heard from her again. Daigo-sama promised he'd take care of her, but she never wrote to me after I was adopted, so I think maybe she died. There was a lot of disease in District Three then, and I don't think she wanted to accept handouts from the Clan she'd given her daughter up to. I love my adoptive parents dearly, but I can't ever be their blood daughter.

When Shougo-sama... Taichou... when he was called upon to begin Twelfth Division, he selected me out of everyone to be his Vice Captain. It raised a lot of eyebrows, because there were rumours, and people started saying I was Daigo-sama's illegitimate daughter, which made me upset and ashamed. Taichou ignored it, though. He said that he wanted the best Vice Captain that the Urahara could provide, and that was me. He brought me here, gave me a purpose and a place and allowed me to continue my own work whilst helping run the Twelfth. He and his father built my whole world for me. When he died, I... I didn't know what to do any more. I had seen the person I believed in most in the world cut down by someone I thought was my friend."

She folded her hands absently in her lap.

"I promised my adoptive parents I wouldn't ever talk about this with anyone in the Gotei, because they felt I belonged to them. I wanted to preserve that, and I haven't," she added. "I don't know if Nagesu-sama knows all the details — or maybe he knows more than I do. I said before that I don't know who my blood father was, but I am quite sure it wasn't Daigo-sama, since Mother didn't know him when she was arrested. It's possible Nagesu-sama does know, but I've never asked him, and he's always treated me as a valid member of his Clan. I'm only telling you, now, because I wanted you to understand — not only how important Taichou was to me, but also... that if the things Taichou said to you were ever true, even if they are no longer... you ought to know who and what I really am. Taichou said we were a good match, but really, he was insulting you. He was comparing your good bloodline to my broken one, and..."

"Stop it," Atsushi could bear it no longer, and it was all he could do not to slap his companion, instead clamping his hand roughly around her jaw. "Stop it! You don't need to say anything to me. I didn't ask for an explanation, and you didn't need to break your promise to someone else to give one. What I think of the Districts is irrelevant, and largely coloured by that interfering busybody from the Thirteenth and the family club he calls his Division. I'm gratified to know that Kusakawa and his father did something commendable in their lives, but otherwise..."

He paused, then shrugged.

"Things are not as either of us thought or expected," he said simply. "The things you just told me are no business of mine, but nor do I find them troubling. Your affection for your Captain was what it was. Your background is what it is. I became friends with Sekime Mareiko. I believe that to be the person sitting in front of me now. That's all

that's important. Your parents are right. You are their child, now."

"True," Mareiko pushed his hand away a second time, "but that doesn't make me Clan."

"Perhaps not," Atsushi admitted reluctantly, "but I've been told the world is changing. Perhaps those stories are right, and maybe it is. I don't know. Keitarou was a pure-blooded Clansman, and so was Kusakawa. Yet both of them destroyed innocent lives and threatened the stability of our whole world for their own gain. I'm not sure how much I believe in anything any more, to be honest. Perhaps I have things to consider as well."

He cast her a sidelong glance.

"My opinion of you has never changed, even if my treatment of you has," he said frankly. "I don't intend on discussing it any further, but what you just told me alters nothing. Of course, if you were now to abandon your squad and your duties and run away from the people who need you, that might be a different matter. Maybe then I could say you were, truly, lacking in Clan integrity. So long as you intend to take up your duties again, however, I look forward to working with you once more."

"I will do as you say," Mareiko looked thoughtful. "You don't need to protect me any more. You're right — living with guilt for something is harder than facing justice. I didn't think of it before, but looking back, I can see it in myself. I changed — this changed me, and I think it will keep doing so. I'm not angry, yet. I was angry with you, but for Taichou I can only feel grief and frustration."

She flexed her left arm pensively.

"Maybe, when that anger comes, you'll help me learn to fight with it," she murmured. "I'm pretty sure that I'm more capable than you think of fighting left-handed — but I'm sure your sword could help me polish any rough edges in my style. If I'm going to stay Captain of Twelfth, well then I'm going to be a worthwhile one. I'm going to be useful to the Gotei until I die, just like you — as penance for the sins I've committed, just like you."

"Then there's no more to say on the matter," Atsushi offered her a smile, extending his hand to hers, and slowly Mareiko took it, shaking it firmly. "Shall I tell Michihashi that you feel well enough to see him?"

"If you don't mind," Mareiko nodded. "Nagesu-sama, also. Maybe there's something I can do, scientifically, to help with all of this. Who

knows? Perhaps I'll find my closure, if I see for myself all the evidence and how it slots together."

"You know, that young lad is really quite astonishing."

Mitsuki set a mug of green tea down on the low slung table, casting the room's other occupant a grin as she took her own seat against some cushions by the window, taking a sip. It was the evening after Tenichi's trial and, as the sun had begun to sink over Seireitei's horizon, the healer and the Captain had taken refuge from the chaos of changing Division patrols for a moment of peace within Ugendou. As time had passed, the world outside had grown more peaceful, and so Mitsuki had elected to go make tea, stating that it was deserved by both of them

"He's taken no permanent harm from this morning's endeavours," she continued now. "He's just a little tired, but stronger than I thought he might be after exerting himself in that way. All the symptoms I noticed getting worse in him have begun to improve since he summoned Kyouka Raigen — and his appetite has improved so much lately that I'm not too worried about him, now. He's turned a mental corner and it's improving his physical state... but I admit, he's surprised me."

"I think that he's realised the same thing that I did, after I lost Father," Juushirou mused pensively, scooping up the mug of tea and taking a sip. "Thank you, Mitsuki. I needed this, after such a busy day. I'm apt to be too protective of the lad, which Shunsui has called me out on — but I did think the trial today might be oppressive for him. Midori-sama is an imposing individual, but all went fairly smoothly, thank goodness. I begin to think — tentatively — that we're over the worst of the fallout where the invasion was concerned. Not that I think Koku's forgotten his grief or how he really feels about Keitarou's death, but, like me, he's realised how the only thing he can do now is live."

"Well, that suits me too. I like seeing my patients recover, though I'm not sure I had anything to do with the recovery," Mitsuki set her mug down on the sill beside her with a sigh. "I've gotten fond of the brat, but I don't pretend I understand his spirit power as much as I'd like. Are you going to be able to take that on? Kyouka Raigen is unusual beyond unusual."

"I've already written to Sensei, and he's going to come speak to Koku personally about it," Juushirou responded. "It's the only answer I have, so I'm relieved. Kyouka Raigen is outside of my comfort zone

— and it's already acted in a hostile way towards Koku. I don't want it to do so again, so that's my pre-emptive strike. Sensei said that, when the recess comes at the Academy, he'll travel into Inner Seireitei and see the boy personally. So some of my worries are allayed by that. I intend to do what I can for the lad, and this way, I think I can."

"I'm sure you can," Mitsuki admitted, "but you also need to pay attention to your *own* health. You ought to take some time off now that everything is moving more smoothly. Tenichi-dono's trial is over and his sentence is a light one, considering. Kohaku is acclimatising to life in Seireitei, and Keitarou is gone. Surely that means you can take a moment's breather? Take off your *haori* and just relax for once?"

"Technically I'm never fully off duty, but you're right, I don't have anything pressing," Juushirou mused, taking another sip of his drink. "It seems a little surreal, because everything's been so hectic. Even Shunsui's visits with sake have been political lately — which as you can imagine, is a poor mix at the best of times."

"Is Kyouraku-kun all right?" Mitsuki's gaze softened, and Juushirou sighed.

"I hope so," he admitted. "He says he will be. I'd rather he was up front about how he's feeling than pretending he's fine and nothing is bothering him, so I guess that will have to do. What he did was right and he knows that. Just accepting the reality of it is different. He's far more sensitive to things like that than he lets on... but he's older now than he was when we fought in Seventh District. I think he'll come through it — and while he is, I'll be here if he needs me. Even if I didn't fight the fight, I know we were in this together, so it's only right that I do."

"Mm," Mitsuki pressed her lips together thoughtfully, and Juushirou arched an eyebrow.

"What?"

"When you say things like that, I realise you haven't changed very much since we were students, and it comforts me," Mitsuki admitted. "You've grown up, too. You've your Division and you're a Captain and you have the *haori* and all those things, but you're still Juushirou in so many other ways. And something else, too. I can go away for millennia if I like, but it won't matter. When I come back, and see you, I'm going to still be in love with you. I'm resigning myself to it... you're Juushirou, *haori* or not, and there's no point me pretending otherwise."

"We really haven't had a chance to talk about anything like that

since you came back,” Juushirou’s cheeks reddened slightly at her forthrightness, but he nodded, sitting back against the wall of the chamber pensively. “I know what you mean, though. Shunsui teased me — he says I’m like Koku’s father, and since you’ve been playing mother hen, we ought to stop beating around the bush. I know he’s using distraction tactics because of his own feelings right now, but he isn’t wrong. I mean, we tried to not define ourselves all those years ago, because we each had our paths to follow — but honestly, did we even bother to listen to ourselves?”

“You mean, being just friends?” Mitsuki pursed her lips. “I don’t think we ever fooled anyone with that claim, did we? Maybe not even ourselves, not deep down. We settled for it because at the time, we both needed it. I needed to go to Rukongai. You needed to join the Gotei. Now, though, where does it leave us? You’re a Captain with a squad to flock around you. Retsu-sama has said she’ll rank me at the end of the month, but there’s still a likelihood I’ll be sent to Rukongai again, and I’m rather hoping for it now I’ve heard from Koku directly the situation some of the people there are dealing with. Hopefully I won’t be there as long this time, and it won’t prove so dangerous — but there’s a good likelihood that we’ll be apart again sooner rather than later. In the meantime, we’re flapping around pretending we’re just old school pals... and I don’t know that we’re doing anything but wasting time.”

“Going back to Rukongai?” Juushirou’s expression went through several different emotions, then he sighed, holding up his hands. “I know. It’s your job, just like this is mine, and I won’t try to stop you. It’ll be hard, though. I feel I just got you back. I hadn’t realised how much I was missing you until I thought you were dead, and now you’re here... well, is it wrong for me not to want to let you out of my sight again?”

“No, I rather like that you feel that way,” Mitsuki dimpled, her cheeks pinkening at his words. “Only we both know that my decision where Katsura was concerned shows how little I really understand about Inner Seireitei. It could’ve ended a lot worse, and Katsura’s future intentions are still unknown. I hope for the best, but I might have opened a whole future can of worms yet — it’s too soon to know. I don’t believe he’ll attack his brother, but I can’t read his mind. He, on the other hand, may well have read mine, and I can’t be certain of his motives.”

“I want to believe in him because Koku does,” Juushirou reflected. “We’ll cross that hurdle when we reach it. Right now, he’s gone, and that’s all that matters.”

“I still understand Rukongai better, though,” Mitsuki admitted. “I’m as far from a Clan *hime* now as you can get, Juushirou. I realised it when I went back to Sixth for that brief spell. I love Ryu and Shirogane-senpai dearly, and my father more than anything. I don’t belong in that world now, though. I’ve roughed it in Rukongai for too long to even pretend that I still have the slightest inkling of Clan inside of me. My bloodline is what it is, but in Inner Seireitei, I almost feel it’s irrelevant. I’m just another healer, here. Most people don’t know who I am. Everyone knows you, though. Our positions are reversed... you’re now the important person consorting with an unranked officer of a foreign Division, did you realise that?”

“Like I’d ever bothered to stop and think it out,” Juushirou scolded, shaking his head. He drained the last of his tea from his mug, setting it aside. “You’re Mitsuki, and that’s all. There have always been lots of barriers in our way, and some of those still exist... but it doesn’t stop you from being Mitsuki.”

He reddened again, then,

“I like to think of you as ‘my’ Mitsuki, even if it’s not true,” he confessed. “Clan or District, it’s always been that way for me and I don’t suppose a little bit of internal warfare and strife is going to change that.”

“I’m quite glad to hear it,” Mitsuki assured him. “In which case, I want to stop beating around the bush. Being apart, then almost losing my life, I realised that I didn’t want to die with us leaving things so open. It felt unfair, somehow, that I could’ve been ripped away permanently, and I didn’t want to break my promise and not come back. It heightens your priorities — and you’re one of those to me. Do you still feel the same as you did before, about my Clan background and your position? Because, if you asked me to marry you here and now...”

“Don’t,” Juushirou was at her side in an instant, a pale finger pressed against her lips as he shook his head. “Marriage is out of the question. Now, maybe always. Our lives have separate callings and it would become complicated along the line. I don’t want you to give up your position for my sake, Mitsuki, but I can’t give up mine for yours. You understand, I think, how important Thirteenth’s existence is, and now Koku is here, that just intensified. I have too many people relying on me — and you have too many people needing you for us to be that selfish.”

“Sometimes it’s hard not to be selfish,” Mitsuki sighed, pushing his hand aside. “I understand your rationale, but I don’t like it. In the

time we spend together, everything else comes between us and keeps us apart. We might only get to spend fleeting moments together in the future, too — I don't know, yet, where my Captain will send me."

"But you know you would go if she called, and that would be harder, in current society, if you were my wife," Juushirou pointed out softly. "I'm not a Clansman. I don't have a manor or an estate or anything to offer in that regard, nor, really, a home away from Seireitei. You couldn't come here, because if you did, it would make everything you believe in doing impossible. Much as I love you... no, *because* I love you, I know that you'd never be happy that way. It's not feasible. It can't happen. Not right now, and maybe not ever."

Mitsuki was silent for a moment, gazing at her hands. Then she raised her gaze, and Juushirou let out a gasp at the glitter of tears on her lashes. Slowly she shook her head.

"I'm not going to let smart rhetoric push me away again," she murmured, and there was a catch in her voice. "I understand what you're saying, and it's not wrong. We can't get married. You're right, we can't. But I'm not willing to let go again. I won't walk away and pretend we can carry on being just friends, when we've both admitted that we can't. Somewhere, we have to be a little selfish, Juushirou. If not, then both of us will be just as unhappy as you say I'd be if something forced me to give up my vocation — or you, yours. If we can't marry, then we can't... but I've moved beyond the realms of 'just friends'. I was hoping that you had, too... with everything we've been through."

Juushirou's eyes softened, and gently, he cupped her chin in his hands, tilting her face so that her grey eyes met his hazel ones directly.

"I never thought you'd come at me with that line of attack," he acknowledged. "I suppose one thing has changed, hasn't it? We both realise that the future isn't infinite. When I was younger, I knew my illness might kill me, but since it stabilised, I've become complacent and maybe, so were you. We assumed we'd meet again, but we didn't factor in the realities of doing our job. We both work in a dangerous field and our lives might be threatened again tomorrow, for all we know."

"They might," Mitsuki agreed softly. "So I want us to live more in the moment, Juushirou. Take advantage of the time we have, even if it's brief. If I go to Rukongai, I want to go knowing that there's nothing left unsaid between us. I'm not going to fall in love with anyone else, or be anybody's prize *hime*. That's not my life, and we

both know it all too well, now. I'm only ever going to let you this far into my heart, so even if we can't get married, I'm not just going to give up."

"Well, maybe we can negotiate a settlement," Juushirou's eyes became teasing despite himself, and Mitsuki pulled a face, her own gaze glittering with sudden affection. "I understand your terms, Edogawa-san. I shall take them on board for further careful review."

"Well, don't review them too carefully for too long, or I might have vanished again," Mitsuki warned him, and Juushirou shook his head.

"I'm definitely not letting that happen," he said firmly. "Not while I have you right in front of me like this."

"Then what do you intend to do about it, Ukitake-taichou?" Mitsuki demanded, and Juushirou offered her a faint, embarrassed smile, lifting his fingers to tuck a stray wisp of her dark hair behind her ear.

"I have one idea," he murmured, and then, before she could react, he kissed her.

77. Changing Seireitei

Chapter Seventy Five : Changing Seireitei

Dawn.

Mitsuki stood at the window, gazing out pensively over the glittering surface of the koi pond. The rays of light glinted off the fins of the fish as they splashed and dove deep beneath the ripples, and a faint smile touched her lips. Summer was in full bloom, now. It would be another warm, cloudless day, like those which had preceded it... and yet this was the first time she had ever seen the dawn from here.

She pulled the tie of her robe more tightly around her waist, turning back into the chamber. The room's only other occupant was still fast asleep, and her eyes softened as she watched him, his breathing deep and even. He had been under so much strain, she reflected, and yet, at last, some of that tension was starting to leave his thin frame. She did not have the heart to wake him, although she knew that, soon, Thirteenth Division would be a hive of activity, and Enishi's thudding steps and booming voice would make it hard for anyone to stay deep in slumber.

Carefully she knelt at Juushirou's side, reaching to adjust the soft white fabric of the *haori* that lay draped over his body. He did not stir, but his lips parted and an indistinct murmur dropped from them, making her pause, then smile once more. Though it had not been coherent, she had known it was her name. Even in his sleep, then, he had not forgotten her.

I was stupid to think he ever would, even if there are more people depending on him now than there ever were before.

Gently she pushed the stray wisps of hair back from his face, then sat back on her heels, hugging her arms around her body.

You protected me, you protected Koku, you kept your word to Souja and your former recruit isn't beyond salvation. Being a Captain is a heavier job than I could ever have imagined — but you still found time for me and I know you always would.

She got to her feet, letting out a little sigh of regret that she would not see him wake.

I should go. I need to get back to my own quarters and dress, before someone sees me here. It would be hard to explain, and I'm not good at telling lies. Juushirou and I might have decided to stop being ambiguous

about our friendship — and a lot has changed since we were students. It doesn't mean that I want it to be gossip around the Division, though. It's not their business — it's not anyone's business.

I don't know why we didn't realise that before — it's nobody's business but ours. I don't care if I'm Clan, or he's not, or anything else. I could've died before I saw him again. We might all have died. Regretting that would've been far more painful than regretting a moment of rebellion... and who knows? Maybe the world really is changing.

She cast Juushirou one last glance, resting her hand on the door of Ugendou with a measure of reluctance.

I'm not a Clan hime now, I'm a Fourth Division shinigami, and one who might soon hold Division rank. I may go back to Rukongai, I may not. I don't know, yet, but I meant it when I told Juushirou that my home is no longer Sixth District. My father and my family are still people I love, but my life has changed and, after meeting Katsura and his brother, I know I don't want it to change back. We have things to do, here. Juushirou and I both. Separately, and, maybe one day, together, when we finally bring down the barrier between Clan and District, and open up the barricades between Seireitei and Rukongai for good.

Softly she pushed open the door of the small wooden annexe, being careful not to make any additional sound as she slipped out onto the walkway, closing the door behind her with just as much meticulous care.

Sweet dreams, Juushirou-kun. People were wrong when they considered you beneath me. The truth is that it's always been the other way around... and I'm just glad you haven't figured that out yet. If you ever got tired of me, I don't know what I'd do... coming back here, to you..is what really saved me from myself this time.

“Mitsuki?!”

The sound of Naoko's voice made her jump, and she swung around guiltily, cheeks flooding scarlet as she met the incredulous green gaze of the Division's Third Seated officer. For a moment there was silence, then Mitsuki let out her breath in a rush, darting forward and grabbing her friend by the hand, dragging her back along the wooden walkway towards the main heart of the Division's barracks.

“Hey, what are you... I was going to...”

“Juushirou is sleeping, and I want him to stay that way,” Mitsuki said firmly, not making any attempt to either slow down or release her grip until they were safely out of earshot. “He's had a lot to do, lately,

and he needs his rest, too.”

“Fine, but there’s no reason to yank my arm out of its socket and drag me halfway across the world to tell me that!” Naoko wrenched her hand free, casting her friend a glare. “And don’t try and fool me by pretending you were there in a healing capacity. I’m pretty familiar with the Unohana — and I never saw *any* of them come and do house-calls in their nightwear.”

She paused, appraising her friend briskly, and her eyes narrowed.

“My mistake. It appears to be the *Captain’s* nightwear.”

“Shh!”

It was impossible for Mitsuki to go any redder now, but she flapped her hands furiously, glaring at Naoko in embarrassed indignation. “I don’t want to create a scene! This is exactly the kind of thing I was trying to avoid by slipping out so early — why are you here right now, anyway? You can’t be going to see Juushirou this early, surely?”

“Don’t turn your guilty conscience around on me. I live here, remember? I can walk where I choose, when I choose,” Naoko scolded, though obediently she lowered her voice, “and you needn’t worry, I’m not a gossip — though it’s lucky for you that it was me who stumbled on you and not someone else. I won’t tell anyone, but seriously, Mi-chan, don’t you think that you’re dancing a little close to the flame? What happened to all the hang-ups about Clan and District? Not to mention that Seireitei is still picking up pieces... and yet you’re calling on my Captain in the middle of the night?”

“It’s not like that,” Mitsuki recovered herself, taking Naoko by the hand and leading her down beside the koi pond, gesturing for her to sit down on the grass and following suit herself. “Nao-chan, a lot has happened in the last couple of months. You’re right, it’s a little crazy and it’s a little reckless... but I love him. I very nearly didn’t get to see him again — and I wasn’t going to leave him again without making sure that he knew it.”

“By invading his bed-chamber?” Naoko arched an eyebrow. “Mitsuki, I realise this might be a blunt assessment, but I hardly think that Ukitake-kun is the kind of man who expects you to compromise your honour in order to keep his attention. And if he *did* say anything like that to you, Captain or otherwise, I would take him to task on it — so trust me, you needn’t feel that...”

“It wasn’t like that,” Mitsuki put her finger to Naoko’s lips, shaking her head. “It was my decision, too. His and mine. We both know that

we're not just friends. We never really were, but at the time, it was all we were mature enough to settle things as. The world was different to us then — but with all we've been through, it's made us both realise that there are some important things we can't let go of so easily. I can't marry him. I know that — it would be unwise for both of us right now, because we both have things to do. I can't be the wife of the Thirteenth Division District Captain any more than he can be the husband of a Healer who may be drafted anywhere at a moment's notice. With or without my father's consent, it's an impossible proposition — at least at the moment. But even if that's true, we're not 'just friends'."

She smiled sadly, lowering her hand.

"It's a different kind of bond between us, now," she murmured. "Juushirou is honourable. Taking this step for him is as good as us being married in his eyes, even without the formality and official papers to prove it. For me too, I suppose. When I went to Rukongai, he made me promise that I would come back, even if I fell in love with someone else out there... and I told him that I would, even if he found someone and wanted to marry them. This time, though, we both know that isn't going to happen. Neither of us can say that any more. Letting go of each other without that certainty is hard... and I know there's a good chance I'll go back to Rukongai when things have begun to calm down. How long for, I don't know — it's hard to say, but I'm committed to this life now, so I'll go where my Captain sends me. I suppose you could say that Juushirou and I have sealed our bond forever... and I can go back with no regrets or doubts about where I stand."

Naoko was silent for a moment, then she sighed, shrugging her shoulders.

"You've grown up," she owned at last. "I'd rather you didn't cavort around Ugendou at ungodly hours while you're here, though, if you don't mind. I understand what you're saying, and you're my friend so I would never turn against you, but I have a Division that requires some discipline and secrets about their Captain's love life aren't really things I want to field. Houjou's a great Vice Captain but hopeless at tact and nuance. Doubtlessly he'd singlehandedly fan the flames of scandal without even knowing anything about it — so please, no more late night rendezvous on Thirteenth Division's turf."

"I don't suppose it will happen here again. It's too risky," Mitsuki rested her chin in her hands. "I also made up my mind that I wouldn't ever come between Juushirou and his vocation. I knew mine when I

left the Academy, but he was still looking for his. Now, I see it in his eyes each time he talks about Thirteenth. This role was made for him and I won't do anything to jeopardise it. I promise, Naoko. You have my word."

"Then I suppose I'll let it go," Naoko sat back on her hands, casting her gaze pensively across the surface of the koi pond. "I am glad you're here, and that you've recovered from your ordeal. I'm also glad that you've been able to see Thirteenth Division for yourself. Ukitake-kun might have been lost when you left, Mitsuki, but so was I. I wanted you to see that I'd done all right, too — and found my niche after graduation."

"I'm fairly certain Thirteenth wouldn't run half as smoothly without you," Mitsuki's eyes twinkled. "Juushirou did say that he was spoiled, having you and Houjou-kun to back him up. You and Sora have gone so far since I've been away... and I'm proud of you both. I might not ever match you, rank-wise, but I don't mind. We all took the things Sensei taught us and applied them in different ways... that's all."

"We did," Naoko nodded. "I always thought that nothing could be worse than being severed from the Clan world, but now I know how much it stifled me, and how much happier I am with the way things are now. I miss my family, but I write to them often, and they to me. They understand that I've made a choice, to be a warrior, not a healer, and so I suppose, now, if I wanted to go see them, they'd understand better if they saw blood on my blade. I haven't reached that point, yet... but maybe, one day, I will."

She pursed her lips.

"When I saw Keitarou, the other day, I was so angry I barely knew what I was doing," she admitted. "He came out of nowhere, and I knew I wanted to cut him down. All the emotions I had when Suzuno died, and after he used me like a rag doll... they all came flooding back. I thought I was over it — but I suppose it will take a little longer to heal than I had imagined."

"Some wounds don't heal," Mitsuki said thoughtfully. "They become scars, but those scars help to build us. Amai-san would approve of what you've done with your life. She'd be happy, I think, that you'd found your path."

"Yes," Naoko agreed, "but it doesn't change the fact terrible things have happened here once more because of that man. And even though he died... he's probably, somehow had the last laugh."

"Are you thinking about Kohaku?" Mitsuki asked curiously, and

Naoko shrugged.

“Taichou wants him to stay with Thirteenth, and Houjou-kun doesn’t mind,” she said with another sigh. “I... I can’t overrule the two of them. It’s not as though I have any real reason for my feelings, just that when Taichou told me that Koku was Keitarou’s son... I suppose... I couldn’t help but put them together in my mind. I couldn’t help but remember the First Division officers... being so frightened when I couldn’t control my own body and when I thought I was going to kill Sora-chan with my sword. Maybe it’s prejudice... but honestly, I think it’s just fear, curled up inside of me, that has never completely gone away.”

She put a hand to her chest, spreading her fingers pensively over her heart.

“Houshi-sama knows that I’ve never entirely opened up to him since that day,” she added. “We work well together and I trust him, but I’m not willing to push my power further than it’s already gone. I’m not interested in reaching Bankai... because if doing so means that I’d be capable of the things Keitarou made me do, and worse... I don’t want it.”

Mitsuki was silent for a moment, then she put a reassuring hand on Naoko’s arm.

“I wish I had been here longer to help you get over it,” she said regretfully. “I’m sorry I wasn’t, but you don’t have to be afraid of Koku or his intentions. I can read him, Nao-chan. He’s frightened too, but he’s trying to be brave. He’s lost his whole family, like you did, in one way or another. Keitarou’s actions put him in a horrific position too, and made him do things he finds it hard to forgive. He and you are alike... and nobody has judged you for the things that happened in the past. Koku is no more responsible for Keitarou than you were, then. You are both his victims, and Koku wants badly to move forward and do something to make amends in whatever way he can. He’s not an Endou, nor is he Keitarou’s heir in any regard. He’s a scared boy with a tremendous power that he wants to learn to use. You understand being thrust into an alien world better than many... so don’t be afraid of him. He doesn’t mean you harm... I doubt he even knows what Keitarou put you through.”

“Probably not,” Naoko acknowledged. “It’s all right. I intend to do as you say, if I can. I’m just glad I had someone to talk to about it. That past is something that never gets talked about — it never has been, because I wanted it that way. In Seventh District, we didn’t have time to sit and fuss over the past, anyway. It was too dangerous and

we had too much to do. We gelled as a team — Taichou, Houjou-kun and I — and they're neither of them men who harp back on things that are unnecessary. It's ironic,' she added ruefully, "but after chastising Houjou-kun for his casual manner for so long, I now find it refreshing and even reassuring. We are so different, and I do nag him — but he has no malice or spite to him, and I find it so much easier to work with. He says what he means, and so does the Captain... there's no Clan intrigue in Thirteenth, and I sure as hell don't miss that."

"It's funny, hearing you talk like that," Mitsuki admitted with a grin, "but you're happier now than you were then, so I have to believe you mean every word."

"I do," Naoko got to her feet, grasping Mitsuki by the fingers and pulling her upright, "but that's enough for this heart-to-heart. I'm going to meet Sora later and I have things to do before that. You need to get dressed and check on your patient before someone wonders if you've designed a new casual uniform for out of hours sessions... but if you want to come call by Eighth with me this afternoon, you'll be more than welcome. Sora already complains she hasn't seen enough of you — and I think the heavy workload is starting to wind up there, now that she and Souryou-kun have submitted their report on Ninth."

"I'll come," Mitsuki dimpled, nodding her head. "I'll go change and see Koku now, but I will come with you, later. Just, if you don't mind, let's not share with her last night's events? I love Sora to death, but in the circumstances..."

"Sora is the queen of gossip. I wasn't going to say a word," Naoko said wryly. "Come on. I'll walk you to your chamber. If anyone meets us I can tell them you were sleepwalking or something... it's almost the truth, anyway, considering what you're wearing."

"You'll keep it from Sora, but you're not going to hold off on teasing me, are you?" Mitsuki realised, and to her surprise, Naoko offered her a broad grin.

"Not a chance," she said matter-of-factly, linking her arm in her friend's. "Resign yourself to it, and let's go."

"Someone woke up on the right side of the futon this morning,"

At the sound of Shunsui's voice, Juushirou paused, shielding his gaze from the sun and casting his friend a rueful grin of acknowledgement, nodding his head. It was later the same morning and, having awoken, dressed and breakfasted far later than he normally would have, the Thirteenth Division Captain had finally

entered the main barracks to find Enishi bearing down on him, an eager expression in his dark eyes. At first, Juushirou had been concerned about what his good-hearted adjutant was going to say, well aware that tact and discretion were not among Enishi's many qualities, but to his relief the man's urgency was in an entirely different direction — the news that a Hell Butterfly had arrived from Third Division, announcing a meeting of all the Captains in the Captains' Hall within the hour.

He had not intended on speaking to Shunsui about his night with Mitsuki, but Juushirou knew that his friend was perceptive enough to pick up on the flicker of emotion still lingering in his aura. It had been a big step for both of them — a line crossed that could not be uncrossed, but in the cold light of day, he did not regret it. They were bonded now in a way that he knew wouldn't ever be broken — and even if that was as far as it ever went, Juushirou knew that somehow, it would be enough.

That did not mean he was about to start sharing deep, dark secrets in a public arena, however, so he ignored Shunsui's enquiring expression, gesturing instead to the hall ahead.

"What's with the summons?" he asked, and Shunsui pursed his lips, a rueful glint in his dark eyes.

"You're changing the subject, which means that there's something you don't want me to know," he surmised. "From the general glow in your aura, I'm going to surmise it has something to do with a certain pretty healer currently lodging at your establishment... but it's all right. I won't ask indiscreet questions in public. We can always talk about it later over some warm sake... because I *know* you're not going to keep me out of the loop."

"There's nothing to discuss," Juushirou tried to sound detached, but Shunsui snorted, shaking his head.

"I'm not fooled," he said categorically, 'and besides, you should take pity on me. You might be sleeping well and in good company... a-hah!' as Juushirou flinched, his eyes opening wide in consternation. "Yes, I thought so. Well, *you* might be all rosy and happy, but I'm not finding sleep so easy to come by without copious amounts of good alcohol. Since apparently I mess up the Division paperwork twice as badly when hungover, you ought to be a good friend and provide me with juicy stories to distract me from taking such desperate measures."

"You're still not sleeping?" Juushirou latched onto this last part, and Shunsui sighed.

“You’re not going to bite on my hints and spill the beans, are you?”

“Not here, not now,” Juushirou shook his head, “but I am concerned, if you really meant what you just said. Are you really not sleeping? You look a little tired, but we’ve all been busy, lately. I haven’t been by Eighth in a day or two — I’m sorry. If I’d realised...”

“It’s not for you to patch me up,” Shunsui held up his hands. “I’ll be all right, Juu. I will. But, all jokes aside, I doubt this meeting is going to be a particular party event. I’ve done a lot of soul searching and I’d really like to be able to talk about something other than Keitarou’s invasion, but I’m certain this summons is going to be more of the same. As for my sleeping, I’ve discovered that not sleeping is preferable to having nightmares, and whilst lots of sake does do the trick, it’s not an ideal mental state for the morning after the night before, if you know what I mean. Plus, Sora isn’t generally amused at having to weave her way through empty bottles to get into my study. I don’t want to sound pitiful, but there are only so many times you can wake up in a cold sweat. I swear I’ve checked Amaki’s blade seven or eight times in the middle of the same night, just to make sure it isn’t really still dripping with Keitarou’s blood.”

“I’m sorry,” Juushirou’s eyes softened, and he rested a hand on his friend’s arm. “You can come to Thirteenth, later, if you like. You can come whenever you like, and I’ll listen. You said you’d be all right after the last time we talked, and with everything with Koku and the Council, then Tenichi, I wasn’t paying as close attention as I ought to have been — but I’ll make up for it. You don’t need to bury yourself in drink or deflect things with humour — not with me.”

“Killing people isn’t really in my nature,” Shunsui reflected, as the two men approached the hall. “So I like to tell myself, but the truth is, Juu, it is. It’s right there and always has been. Knowing that I can kill someone if I have to isn’t a nice thing to come to terms with. I don’t regret it, and before the Council, I won’t say a word of this. I did my duty, and that’s all fine and good so far as everyone else is concerned. Just, I’ve decided that I need at least one person I’m not going to lie to, and unfortunately for you, you’re it.”

“I don’t mind,” Juushirou assured him. “You did the right thing and we both know you did. So does Koku. He isn’t angry with you for anything. But what about Sora? You haven’t talked to her about it?”

“A little, but not much,” Shunsui reflected. “She’s been busy, and I’ve been thinking of other things. I had to discipline Shizuka, too — which reminds me, the brat wants to go visit Koku, when she manages to unbury herself from all the chores Sora’s pushed her way as

punishment for staying behind without permission. She's in disgrace and she knows it — but they spoke after Tenichi's trial and she thinks that, since she fell over his legs, she ought to try and bridge a bond with him in some way. I think she's really doing it because she knows I'm not ready to... and since she knows what happened at Third Division, she feels it's her duty to go in my place."

"She's perceptive," Juushirou rubbed his chin. "Maybe she's right. Another olive branch, of a different kind? She's always welcome at Thirteenth, and besides, Koku will be recruiting formally when he's got a clean bill of health. The Council expect me to educate him, and so I will do, to the best of my ability, but in the meantime he can function as part of the squad. I think they'll give me a little time to bring both him and Izumi up to speed with the things they need to know — even if I have concerns over Izumi's sword skills, I expect she'll muddle through somehow."

"So the little vixen is staying, too?" Shunsui was surprised, and Juushirou nodded.

"She's become rather attached to Ketsui, shall we say," he responded, "and Joumei is happy with her being here, it suits him and is better for her. Yes, she'll stay. Her science will be useful, no doubt. I did ask if she'd rather transfer to a squad which focuses more on those things, but she turned the idea down. She wants to stay where she is — so I'll keep her and Koku both."

"New waifs and strays for the District Division, huh?" Shunsui offered a faint smile.

"Something like that," Juushirou agreed. "I was surprised that this summons was for Captains, though, not for the Council."

"It probably means they're going to rope the rest of us in to something," Shunsui said bleakly. "Maybe it has to do with the report from the Ninth, or what's going to happen there from now on. I don't know — but there's one way to find out. Push open the door of doom, Juu. I'm right behind you, I promise — I'm not going to run away."

Juushirou turned to give his friend a rueful grin, but did as he was bidden, and soon the two men were within the Captains' chamber, where other figures in neat white and black were already milling around. They were the last to arrive, and as they took their usual places, the spot normally occupied by the quiet, well-mannered Captain of the Ninth was noticeably vacant. Juushirou's eyes drifted to it, then to Shunsui, then to Hirata, and back to Anabomi's empty place, stifling a sigh under his breath.

I wonder if you're really happy with this, Keitarou — driving two of my closest friends to kill. Shunsui's more shaken by it than he's letting the world see, and Hirata's holding back the Wind Hawk because he has no choice. I wonder if you would have tried to make your son kill me himself, if it had gone according to your plan — or if you would've used Nagesu-sama or one of the others and put them through the same horror as poor Anabomi. I may not have known him well — I don't suppose any of us did — but losing a comrade is a deep blow.

His gaze flitted to Mareiko, taking in her demeanour thoughtfully. For once the Twelfth Division Captain was neatly turned out, her wild fair hair tamed in a long braid tied firmly with something that looked more like mooring rope than any kind of hair ribbon. She stood silently opposite him, raising a faint smile as she met his gaze, but there was preoccupation in her clouded pale eyes and Juushirou felt certain that Shunsui's deductions had been right. Mareiko had been the spy, and she had betrayed her comrades, yet Juushirou could see the shadows around her eyes and he could not feel angry. She was grieving too, he realised with a jolt, grieving and in shock at the betrayal of a man who had presented a false front to hide his evil, ambitious deeds. Despite himself he could not help stealing a glance at Atsushi — but he was as stiff and poe-faced as ever, not a single flicker of emotion in his thin features as he waited for the meeting to begin.

Juushirou let out a heavy sigh. Shunsui's fears were likely correct — it was going to be a dour, heavy gathering.

"We're all here, Nagesu-sama," it was Guren who spoke, a note of solemnity in his rich tones. "All of us who can be, at least."

"Indeed," Juushirou saw Nagesu glance towards the vacant position of Ninth Division Captain, then sigh. "Very well. I apologise for the hurried summons, but I felt that this ought to be handled here, in this sphere of politics, not within the halls of the Council. It has been correctly brought to our attention that the fight here was won by those of you who, for the most part, are not directly party to Council votes and decisions. That is undoubtedly the truth. For that reason, I would like to move that, for the foreseeable future, military decisions be passed here, and not in the Council Chamber. I have spoken with Tokutarou-dono, who has agreed to pass the Kyouraku vote to his brother in this respect — and so from this point on, we will seek to include the Captains of the five non-Council squads in decisions of Seireitei safety."

"Thanks, Niisama," Juushirou heard Shunsui mutter under his

breath, and he shot his friend a wry smile.

“I have some proposals to put before the Captains,” Nagesu was still speaking, glancing at each of his companions in turn. “Some of them have been formulated from the last few days of Council Meetings, and all of them will be put to a vote here in this session to be passed or rejected. It is clear to all of us that this attack took us off guard in a worse way than we could have imagined, and that in many regards, communication channels broke down. We should have been able to neutralise this threat in a more effective manner, and if not for the intervention of a young boy currently at Thirteenth, we might all be in a much worse state. Grateful as we are for Kohaku’s interference, I am sure none of us likes to think that we might only be alive because of a scrap of a boy from the Rukon Valley.”

“It certainly does paint a different view of Seireitei, doesn’t it?” Hakubei mused. “I’m the first to admit, Nagesu-sama, if I’d known who the person was who broke Keitarou’s hold over me, I’d have unashamedly run over to find him and hug the life out of him... and I probably still would, if given the chance. Sora told me that Keitarou had planned to do the same to other Captains and kill far more people. Knowing how I felt and how powerful the control spell was... its a terrifying proposition. If Keitarou was able to control Clan Captains...”

“It would not just have been Inner Seireitei which would have been doomed,” Hirata murmured. Out of the corner of his eye, Juushirou thought he saw Mareiko flinch, but she kept her head held high, her focus fully on her Clan leader as he held up his hand to speak again.

“That is why I want us to talk here,” he repeated. “We lost one Captain in the recent conflict, and three high ranked officers of the Ninth Division were also killed. We must also not forget the loss of the Seventh Division Vice Captain, nor the deaths of the healers in the Spiritless Zone, or the four officers of the Fifth who died in the Real World. I am aware there are other officers lost in battle whose deaths we have not been firmly able to put against Keitarou’s name, though it seems certain blame should be in his quarter. We have, overall, been hurt grievously, and we still have several wounded. Mikiyara Hyakken is in a stable but serious condition — whether he will return to Ninth or not will depend on how he heals from this point on... is that correct, Retsu-sama?”

“He is stable,” Retsu nodded, “but he is still in need of much reconstructive work on his hands and arms in particular. It will be a long process, but I intend to do my best. He has not yet regained

consciousness, though he is no longer sedated and I expect he will begin to wake soon. He has had a steady stream of well-wishers and visitors from both the Sixth and the Ninth Division in the meantime. I have sent word to his family in Sixth District, thanks to your Vice Captain's kindness in giving me the relevant information, Guren-sama — and I have heard that his daughter intends to come visit him in the not so distant future. I rather hope she might take him away with her and nurse him, once he is fit for convalescence, because I believe he will need some time away from the scene of battle to recover properly."

"Mikihara has a daughter? A wife? A family?" Shock registered on Mareiko's face all of a sudden, a stricken, guilt-ridden mask that confirmed once more for Juushirou that, spy or not, Mareiko had been more of a puppet than a true villain, and Guren nodded.

"He has one daughter," he agreed pensively. "His wife died in childbirth, I believe, and his daughter was mostly raised by his sister and her family. He confessed to me on one occasion that he had no idea what to do to raise a *hime* properly on his own, but he has always been very active in the girl's life. She married, not so long ago, and Anabomi and I agreed to give him three days leave to travel home to attend the wedding. He isn't the sort of man to ask or put his personal interests before his duty — a military man through and through. He is close to his daughter, though... I believe he will be happy she is coming to see him."

"I didn't know Mikihara had family," Shunsui's face was grave, and Juushirou knew that his friend was working out all the potential consequences of this revelation. "What about Anabomi? Does he have a family to mourn him back in Sixth, too?"

Now it was Hirata's turn to look troubled, but Guren shook his head.

"He never married, and he inherited his parents' manor when he was nineteen," he replied simply. "He had one much younger sister, who he largely provided for, but she was infirm and she died before reaching adulthood. He was a private man, even by Clan standards. I have not found any evidence in my papers that he had any other surviving immediate kin, only the wider ties of the overall Clan. His estate falls into my hands to manage as a result. I hope that I might make something useful of its existence within Sixth District, something that he would have approved of — but I must be certain there is nobody to inherit it first, so I have been researching old documents quite heavily these past few days."

“Poor Anabomi,” Hakubei murmured. “One tragedy after another.”

“He won’t be forgotten,” Midori said matter-of-factly. “He died in combat against a fierce and dangerous enemy. That is all that needs to be recorded. Our investigations and the reports surrounding them will be sealed. His honour will not be tarnished because he was a victim of Keitarou or that poison of Kusakawa’s.”

“It... was definitely Taichou... who created the poison Anabomi-taichou drank?” Mareiko asked hesitantly, and Nagesu nodded.

“All of our analyses indicate that the substance is not *reidoku*,” he agreed wearily. “I’m sorry, Mareiko. I kept you out of that test because I didn’t want you to have to deal with something so personally difficult, not after everything that had happened. The components of the formula match the notes we retrieved from the Real World. We have no surviving samples of the potion in its pure form from that laboratory, but notes recorded from the autopsies of mutated souls, both those in the Real World and those killed in Rukongai twenty five years ago show traces of that same formula in the blood. Whether Anabomi knew what he drank and whysoever Shougo-dono gave it to him, it was undoubtedly not Keitarou’s potion that turned Anabomi into a Hollow. It was Shougo-dono’s. And I believe, now, even without direct blood evidence from the corpse of Sakanoue Heiji, there is little to doubt that Shougo-dono was also responsible for his murder.”

“That is not exactly new information to me, Nagesu-sama,” Now, for the first time, Atsushi spoke, his voice tight and harsh as ever, and Nagesu inclined his head in acknowledgement.

“I realise that,” he agreed, “but now, at last, the scientific evidence backs up Kohaku’s vision and your story. I am sorry, Atsushi-dono. As the Head of the Urahara, I want to apologise to you for my kinman’s actions against you and your Division.”

Despite himself, Atsushi looked taken off guard for a moment, then he sighed, and Juushirou saw weariness and resignation in his colleague’s eyes.

“Heiji is dead. So is Kusakawa,” he said frankly. “Nothing can be done to change that, and so we move on. It is nice to have it acknowledged, but as I believe I told the Council — my lack of judgement was equally responsible for what happened that day. The truth is not pretty, but nothing can be achieved by clinging to it. Twelfth’s Captain was replaced, but now it is Ninth that needs our attention. I believe that was our subject of discussion, and we should return to it.”

“Atsushi-dono is right,” Yuuichi agreed. “We’ve heard enough of the past, but settling what really destroyed Anabomi won’t resolve the problem of what to do about the Division he left behind.”

“Ryu has kept me well abreast of Ninth, and they are all in shock at present, still,” Guren added gravely. “I have spoken seriously to him about whether he would consider leading them permanently if the need arose, but he feels strongly that he is not the right candidate and I cannot persuade him otherwise. There is nobody else within the Kuchiki whose name might be put forward, but Ryu is of the opinion that that doesn’t matter. He feels that it ought to be the right Captain, not necessarily one that comes from our Clan... because after the shock they’ve been through, Ninth need a particular kind of leader to pick them up and rebuild.”

“Twenty-five years ago we promoted Sekime to fill Kusakawa’s vacant position,” Kyouki pointed out. “Mikihara is not qualified to be Captain, if he recovers?” Guren shook his head.

“Hyakken is on the fringe of the Clan. He is skilled and very dedicated, but he would be the first to admit that he was far outshadowed by Anabomi,” he said grimly. “In his current condition of health, too, I wouldn’t like to put that pressure on him. If he heals, though, Ninth want him back as Vice Captain — Ryu has told me that not a day goes by when one of them fails to visit Fourth or asks after his condition. The patrols have all returned now, and it’s as Retsu-sama says... they’ve wanted to go see him, even if he’s not yet awake.”

“And the highest surviving officer in Ninth other than Mikihara..?” Kyouki asked.

“Sixth Seat,” It was Hirata who replied this time. “Takaoka Sakura, I believe her name is.”

“Takaoka has been very helpful to Ryu, and is apparently Hyakken’s most frequent visitor,” Guren agreed, “but she is not ready for that kind of promotion.”

“Takaoka...” Yuuichi looked surprised. “A Yamamoto? There’s a Yamamoto in the Ninth Division?”

“Anabomi believed in attracting recruits from outside of his Clan, apparently,” Shunsui interjected. “Sora and Kanshi have been producing a report about everything from Ninth, taking statements and I helped her compile bits of it the night before she submitted it to Hirata, Nagesu-sama and Guren-sama for review. Apparently he used to go to the Academy to speak to the students every few years, to try

and broaden Ninth's intake. I think he was trying to think progressively — though I admit, I never would've imagined it, not of a man who was always so conservative in meetings."

"Anabomi liked to keep himself to himself, but he cared about Ninth more than anything or anyone," Hakubei said sadly. "Maybe, if his family background was as tragic as it sounds, he saw it as his surrogate family. As his neighbour, I talked to him sometimes, and his dedication to the Division was obvious. It doesn't surprise me that he'd go to those lengths... and it rather shames me that we find it out now, when he's not here to commend for it. More of us ought to be taking that step. More of us ought to be going and reaching out to the next generation of shinigami, instead of just assuming that our Clan kinsfolk will come to us automatically."

"I think Anabomi would approve of a Captain that wasn't necessarily a Kuchiki, based on that assessment," Midori said thoughtfully, "so long as his successor could be said to have Ninth's interests at their heart. I don't think you need concern yourself, Guren-sama, about not being able to put forward a Clan candidate. We've all acknowledged there needs to be changes. Right now there are four Clan Divisions who are nominally associated with particular Clans, but there's no reason for that to continue if it isn't appropriate. Hakubei-dono is right — we all ought to be widening our sphere. My brother has — his Onmitsukidou are a very motly bunch, but trained up to the skies and disciplined to death in the secret arts of my people, regardless of their background. I think this business has convinced me to do the same with Second Division."

She cast Juushirou a grin.

"I rather envy Juushirou's ability to take on recruits as he wants them, rather than having to go through heavy protocol," she added. "We've been training District students long enough that we ought to see better benefit from it and they shouldn't all be going to one squad. It's greedy of Thirteenth to claim sovereignty over all of District Seireitei, if we're restricted to recruiting mostly our own people."

"Eighth has District shinigami on roll, Midori-sama," Shunsui raised his hand lazily. "Nagasata Kaoru and Nakamura Hanako, to name but two. And my Vice Captain is not a Kyouraku. At least, not at the moment."

"Not... at the moment?" Kyouki jumped on this immediately, and Juushirou sent his friend a startled glance. "What does that mean, Shunsui? Have you done something to my daughter? Because if you're thinking of discarding her..."

“On the contrary, Kyouki-sama, I find Sora invaluable to me and to Eighth,” Shunsui held up his hands, shaking his head calmly. “I value her incredibly and I understand that she is irreplaceable. However, I intend to replace her — at least, I may have to, in the not too distant future.”

“Why?” Hakubei shot Shunsui a suspicious look, and Shunsui returned it with a benign smile.

“Because, listening to you people talk, I think it’s obvious who the next Captain of the Ninth should be,” he said evenly. “I know her best, so I know that even if I can’t spare her, I have to put her forward. I promised Sora that I would give her the chance to follow her own path and be her own person, and she isn’t my property to hold back. Shiba Sora is the kind of officer who can reignite life and hope into a broken Division like Ninth, and she has the skills and the ingenuity to lead without restraint. More, since she’s been with me from the start, she’s had experience of building a Division from scratch — and with so many higher officers lost, Ninth may well need that touch. Finally, though, Sora is heart more than she is anything else. Midori-sama said that the new Ninth Captain would need to be able to put Ninth’s interests as their priority... and I know Sora has always put Eighth’s interests above anything and everything else, including the ties of blood.”

His smile widened, but Juushirou could see his friend’s eyes were sad.

“I expect you wise people to all agree with my judgement,” he added frankly, “so therefore I’m pondering the problem of replacing her, before you take a vote.”

“Sora? As a Captain?” Kyouki looked floored, and Shunsui cast her a quizzical glance.

“You find that odd?”

“Well... no, but I just...” Kyouki gathered her wits, staring at him in wonder. “I underestimated you, as ever. I didn’t think you were training my daughter to take over Divisions in her own right — Divisions of foreign Clansfolk, no less!”

“It would be a third Shiba Captain,” Yuuichi mooted. “Do we want that, when we’re talking about reducing Clan monopoly?”

“Sora wouldn’t be a Shiba Captain,” Shunsui shook his head. “She came with me after the Academy because she didn’t want to be associated with her Clan when she was in uniform. It was an

arrangement that suited us both — I got a very good Vice Captain out of the deal, which is why I was happy to go along with it for this long. But I have thought for a long time that to keep my word to her, I had to be ready to give her up when the time was right. I've done my best to give her all the chances possible to hone her leadership skills and her decision making is always first class. I think people forget,' he cast Kyouki a mischievous glance, "that she graduated fourth in our class at the Academy, behind Juushirou, Akira and I and Akira is only a Vice Captain because he chooses to stay in First Division, not because he couldn't be a Captain if the right position opened up. Sora obtained a higher final rank than Hirata, and nobody's questioning *his* right to wear the *haori*."

"I *am* the Head of the Endou, Shunsui. It comes with the territory," Hirata objected mildly, and Shunsui shrugged.

"But we're talking about a promotion on merit, this time," he said sensibly. "You and I were pushed into our posts by Clan obligation and we've done our best not to shame expectations. I'd like to think the both of us have succeeded, but we both knew we'd end up where we are now, one day. Juushirou had to earn his rank, but he's proven himself capable of running a Division and only a complete idiot would question his right to be among us, regardless of his birth. Why should Sora be any different? She has the skills. In terms of Clan bias, the ultimate test was this last uprising. I had to know she could follow my orders and fight for the Division she belonged to, even against her own Clan — and she did. She did her duty, and so I knew, then, that she was ready. Ninth's crisis is something unfortunate... but Sora is the solution to it, and I believe she is the best candidate for the job."

"I agree with Shunsui," Juushirou found his voice at length, offering Kyouki a smile. 'Sora's her own woman, and she's been that since I've known her. She's not judgemental, and she's good with people. I didn't know Shunsui intended to recommend her,' he shot his friend a glance, "but its a sensible recommendation to make, given the circumstances."

"You're not putting forward your own Vice Captain or Third Seat, Juushirou?" Midori asked quizzically. "If it comes to it, they're both experienced officers with the right skills and who have chosen duty over Clan. All the things Shunsui-dono has said about Sora-dono probably also apply to them, in particular the ability to put their Division first."

"Enishi isn't going to Ninth," Before Juushirou could say anything, Atsushi spoke up, a gruff note in his tones. "He's a Yamamoto, even if

he is, currently, working in a District Squad.”

“Enishi would be capable of captaining someone’s sock drawer, if he was ordered to.” Shunsui reflected, “and in other circumstances, I would consider him Sora’s equal in terms of this kind of promotion. Juushirou chose him as his Vice Captain because we all knew that he was capable of being a great leader figure and so he’s proved. But, thanks to the Council’s new rules about shinigami and probational measures, Juushirou just found himself dealing with two rather labour-intensive new recruits, and he’s going to need all the help he can get to lick them into shape. Thirteenth is already the smallest Division in the Gotei, and taking one of their members seems unfair when there is someone like Sora who is just as capable of the task. Selfish as I am in knowing I personally don’t want to spare her, I know Eighth will adjust... but I imagine Juushirou wants Enishi to help train Izumi and Koku to meet Guren-sama’s expectations, and he should be allowed to do that. Besides, Atsushi-dono, we’ve agreed this isn’t about Clan. It’s about the best candidate for the job.”

“I know what it’s about,” Atsushi snapped back. “And I’m making it clear that Enishi won’t go to Ninth. I don’t care what Thirteenth do with their recruits, so long as, for the time being, they keep Enishi with his nose to the grindstone and don’t waste his abilities. I want him for Eleventh, when I’m no longer of any use to it — and even if Ukitake managed to convince him to be his Vice Captain, he won’t be able to do the same when it comes to something like this.”

“Woah, wait a minute,” Hakubei blinked. “Atsushi-dono, you’re not retiring?”

“No, I’m not,” Atsushi said bitterly. “But people can die when they least expect it and my Vice Captain is an inelegant, inadequate clot. He can just about muddle through at his current level, but if anyone gave him a *haori* he’d probably bring the whole Eleventh Division crashing down within a week due to his complete incompetence at anything except waving a sword. That being the case, Enishi is the only other eligible candidate — and given his quick response in this recent crisis, I’m persuaded that he’d be a safer bet. Of course, it would have helped if he had been my Vice Captain from the start — but recent events have indicated that I was not wrong to single him out then, and I have no intention of relinquishing my claim on him as a member of his family when all is said and done.”

Juushirou was struck speechless, his eyes huge, and he stared at the Eleventh Division Captain as though he had grown an extra head.

“You want Enishi... to be... your successor?” he managed at length,

and Atsushi snorted, looking derisive.

“Your brain ought to move more quickly if you want people to give your squad the respect you think it deserves,” he said acerbically. “That is what I said.”

“And if Ukitake wanted him to be Thirteenth’s successor, what then?” Hakubei wondered. Atsushi snorted again.

“Thirteenth Division is a District Division,” he said matter-of-factly. “It would ruin the point of the exercise if a Clan member ever took it over — and besides, I’m fairly certain Ukitake is immortal. Irritating people, I’ve come to realise, often are.”

“I’m not sure if I should take that as a compliment to my officer or a slight against my squad,” Juushirou looked bemused. “I’m quite sure I’m not immortal, and I have no comment to make on being irritating, not if it gets my job done properly, but I hadn’t stopped and thought about Divisional succession in any regard. This has rather come up out of nowhere.”

“Perhaps to you,” Atsushi’s eyes narrowed to slits. “This whole business might be a ripple in your reality, but it isn’t the first time I’ve seen a Captain die unexpectedly, and I’ve learned it’s better to be prepared for what might lie ahead. I’m aware you were Enishi’s classmate, and that you appealed to his puppy loyalty to get him to join Thirteenth in the first instance, but the Gotei isn’t a school society, it’s a military operation and it requires long-term strategic thinking, irrespective of personal views. There are many things I’ve left unsaid for a very long time, but from this point, I’ve decided that I’ll say them and leave nobody in any doubt about my mind in these matters. Enishi’s actions during the crisis were commendable and it reminded me of the original reasons I sought him as Sakanoue’s successor.”

“If I remember right, you asked Akira first,” Yuuichi objected, and Atsushi shook his head.

“As a Yamamoto, not asking him would have been discourteous,” he said gruffly. “I knew he would not accept, and he was never my target. Akira-dono belongs in your squad, because he is a First Degree Yamamoto and anything else would be considered disrespectful to his status. I would not have expected a man like your brother to fall under the command of a lesser Clansman like myself. My real target was always Enishi. He had potential as a boy, and I knew he was the only other of his generation who could take Akira-dono’s sword, but in other ways he was too soft, too slow to adapt, too lacking in the

ruthless edge to be a proper warrior. Then he skewered that Shihouin boy to protect Guren-sama's nephew and I knew Genryuusai-sama had finally made a soldier out of him. Of course, if Sakanoue had lived, it would never have mattered — but when he died, I knew that there was only one Yamamoto I could pass Eleventh onto and that there was no telling when that might become necessary.”

He glanced at the bewildered Juushirou.

“I didn’t anticipate your squad coming to life, or you getting in my way,” he added bitterly, “but I’m gratified to see that being under your command has not ruined his potential, Ukitake. I worried you would be soft on him and ruin what Genryuusai-sama had drilled into him. Your reputation for being everyone’s best friend didn’t fill me with confidence, but it seems he’s managed to reach his true strengths as a leader anyway. As a result, I feel that, if we, as Captains, are now going to have the independent right of vote and veto in the succession of our Divisions and those of our neighbours, I ought to make my feelings plain from the start. Houjou Enishi is *not* a candidate for Ninth Division. In Sakanoue’s absence, he is the *only* person I would consider handing over my squad to, and so I will not support his candidacy for any other Division, now or in the future. His blood and his combat training prove he ultimately belongs to Eleventh — *wherever* he chooses to serve now. My claim exists from a time prior to Thirteenth Division’s inception and, as I recall the Council deciding that a District squad ought not be led by a Clansman, I consider it still valid.”

“I’m sure Enishi has an opinion in this, and it’s a spurious topic for now, given that you’re still very much with us, Atsushi-kun,” Shunsui interjected drolly. “If your judgement about irritating people is correct, I’m sure that means we won’t be discussing Eleventh’s succession for a long while to come, either.”

“Or Eighth, apparently,” Atsushi snapped back.

“And Atsushi-kun might not have been here today, Shunsui-dono,” Mareiko spoke up now, her face pale and her voice shaking as she joined the conversation. “I could have killed him. It could’ve been much much worse. Atsushi-kun is right. We don’t know when we’re going to die. It’s good to be prepared for anything. Atsushi-kun is simply saying that Houjou is someone he’d like to succeed him at Eleventh... and I don’t think there’s anything wrong with that.”

Juushirou saw Shunsui’s eyes dart from Mareiko to Atsushi and then back to Mareiko, his eyebrows arching slightly with interest at the way she had come to the surly Captain’s defence, and he sighed,

rubbing his temples.

“It’s an academic subject,” he said at length. ‘Atsushi-dono, right now Seireitei has a good Captain at Eleventh and a replacement is not needed. You said yourself that the priority now was Ninth and we’re getting distracted. As for Enishi’s current position, he chose to come to Thirteenth of his own accord, and if he chose to go to Eleventh — or anywhere else — in the future at any time, I would not stop him. However, I hardly think this level of discussion is relevant right now, since as Shunsui said, the duties currently put upon me mean I’m likely to need his skills in the near future. And, as for Naoko,’ he added, glancing at Midori, “she has no aspirations for that kind of promotion. There are reasons Naoko is in Thirteenth, and why she wants to stay there. She would not agree to her name being put forward for any of this, and at this time, I wouldn’t support it either. The subject has become diverted, but we were discussing Sora, and we should return to that line of thought.”

“Does anyone else have a candidate whose name they feel apt to raise for the candidacy of Ninth?” Nagesu fought to reassert his seniority into the discussion, and at the resultant silence, he sighed, removing his spectacles and rubbing his brow furiously before replacing them.

“Kyouki-dono, do you have any objections to your daughter being made a candidate for this Division?” he asked softly.

“Objection?” Kyouki snorted. “Not really. If Shunsui thinks she can do it, then all power to her. I am close to my daughter as a mother should be, Nagesu-kun, but I’m no longer her Clan overlord in the way I am to my sons. Sora has flown the Shiba nest and made her position quite clear as regards her duty and her family. It’s not for me to say she can or can’t do anything. She’s an adult and a good officer. Her Captain should have the last say on her candidacy, not me.”

“And Guren-sama? You would not object to a Shiba taking over a squad which, till now, has been in the hands of your family?”

“I have no objection to the candidate put forward,” Guren shook his head. “As I said, the only Kuchiki I have on hand with suitable experience is Ryuu, and my nephew is stubborn. He refuses to take a leading role and position because he is conscious of his other duties within the Kuchiki and therefore prefers to remain where he is. There is no rival candidate from my Clan to raise, and I have no issue with Shiba Sora, if her Captain does not.”

“We should take a formal vote,” Retsu suggested softly. “That is

what you wish to happen, is it not, Nagesu-sama? That the Captains decide their successors by a majority, like the Council vote on whether to accept the new head of a Clan?"

"That is my hope, yes," Nagesu agreed. "For now, in the absence of a better and more stringent method, a majority vote seems the most adequate. Shiba Sora's name has been raised by Shunsui-dono and Ukitake has seconded it. Kyouki-dono and Guren-sama have not objected. We should therefore vote on her nomination. Are there any who are against such a proposition?"

Again, silence, and Nagesu nodded.

"Then, Shunsui-dono, the Captains task you with informing Shiba Sora of their decision," he said quietly. "She has the right to refuse, of course, but I hope you will impress on her the things you said to us here today."

"Sora won't refuse," Shunsui said matter-of-factly. "I will speak to her this evening, Nagesu-sama. Thank you."

"Then that brings me to other matters of change I wanted to table here today," Nagesu sighed again, then turned his attention back to the hall as a whole. "First, however, Hirata-dono — I understand you have selected a new Vice Captain for Seventh Division?"

"Yes, sir," Hirata inclined his head. "I intend to nominate Kitabata Hajime as my adjutant. I have received both his consent and the support of my Third Seated officer, and so I would seek to make this position official as soon as possible. Seventh is in a state of disarray and there is much to do. My son's ghost would be unhappy if I tarried any longer."

"So it begins, huh," Kyouki murmured. "A Vice Captain who is not the child of a Clan leader in a central Clan Division... Kikyue-hime does not mind?"

"Kikyue understands best of all why I've done what I've done," Hirata said gravely. "It's as Atsushi-dono said in the Council meeting. We put those we care for in dangerous positions and we fail to use our judgement to protect them. We ought to be more militarily minded. Lives can be protected that way. Hajime is not as high born as my son or as Kikyue, but he is an effective, loyal officer without whom I would have been lost these last few weeks. I want someone I can trust at my side, and someone I don't feel I need to protect. Hajime is that person."

"I see," Kyouki looked pensive. "I have yet to decide what to do

when Ryuusei recovers his health. He is my eldest son and my Clan heir, but he has expressed to me his own uncertainty as to whether he can continue in his current role with the loss of his left arm. I haven't let him resign, not yet — but I am starting to think that perhaps it's time Clan and squad successions diversified... much in the way that Eighth already has."

"Whatever we decide, all candidates for Vice Captain must present themselves and prove their worthiness to take the post." Yuuichi said frankly. "I'm not saying that either Ryuusei-dono or Souja-dono have ever been lacking in their ability, but from this point on, we cannot afford familial bias. Originally, Akira was made Vice Captain of my squad because my son was still training, but his *reiryoku* will never make him a better Vice Captain than Akira, and one day, Akira has the capacity to be a Captain in the way my heir never will. These recent events have persuaded me that I would sooner have the stronger officer lead First, even if that means moving away from the Clan leader, than let a weak link destroy the whole chain."

"It's a harsh way to put it, Yuuichi-dono, but you are not wrong," Guren rubbed his chin. "Sixth Division relies very much on my two nephews, and I regret that that is the case. I think it unlikely the Kuchiki will welcome such a separation — but I do intend to make sure every Kuchiki is far more rigorously trained and disciplined before I let them near Sixth."

He glanced at Kyouki.

"Your daughter will take Ninth, and I will relinquish all control of its actions," he added, "on the understanding that the Shiba, the Urahara and the Yamamoto to do the same with their secondary squads, irrespective of who currently leads them. Ninth, Tenth, Eleventh and Twelfth are not Council Divisions. They should not be answerable to another Captain when in uniform, otherwise we are giving them less power to operate than we gave Ukitake when we allowed Thirteenth Division."

"Juushirou will do as he pleases whether we sanction it or not," Midori looked amused. "I think we can all learn from this particular uprising, though. Retsu-sama, I suggest that Fourth Division begin combat training with a more serious attitude. Atsushi-dono spoke harshly, but he was still right. We are a military organisation, and we have certain responsibilities to those we protect — both here under our command, and out in the Districts and Rukongai."

"I will speak to you on that subject," Retsu agreed. "Fourth Division must, as you say, learn to adapt to the changes as much as any other

squad.”

“Then, if we are severing the direct influence of the Council over the Captains in terms of military matters, what of the position Nagesu-sama currently holds?” Hakubei asked. “Currently, only the Clan leaders are allowed to hold the command post during the Council Leader session, and that excludes five squads. Ukitake is permanently excluded from it, and he doesn’t have a Clan leader he can ask nicely to help him out. Thus far, Shunsui has also been excluded on the grounds that he’s not Leader of his Clan, so cutting out the Kyouraku, too. If we’re changing that, then surely we should be making sure there’s a more stable system of authority in this chamber, too?”

“I was coming to that,” Nagesu agreed. “We are not in a position, yet, to elect an overall Captain Commander to permanently remain in sovereignty over us all without creating political unrest, but I agree that it should be a post that rotates equally between all Captains on an annual basis. We will continue as we always have until Hirata-sama’s tenure is concluded, at which point we will move to pass the duty to Shunsui-dono, and then the new Captain of Ninth, then yourself, Hakubei-dono, then Atsushi-dono, Mareiko and Ukitake, before returning to the First. It need not correlate with the Council changes in power. The Council and the Captains are no longer necessarily duplicates of the same authority... one day, it strikes me that we might well live in a world where Clan leaders are no longer automatically Captains of Divisions... nor squads divided based on their family allegiances. I can see the seeds of those changes already beginning now, with Sora-dono’s nomination and with Hirata-dono’s suggestion for his Vice Captain. We should be ready to allow such changes to happen, if they mean we can protect the people of Soul Society more effectively.”

“You have been doing a lot of thinking,” Kyouki let out a low whistle. “Nagesu-kun, have you had any time to sleep at all whilst dreaming all this up?”

Nagesu cast Kyouki a wry smile, then shrugged his shoulders.

“I will, now that I have unburdened my beliefs to you all,” he admitted. ‘As... as the first official “Captain Commander” and leader for this session, I feel particularly responsible for the harm caused — and therefore, particularly committed to ensuring it can’t happen in the same way again. We have mistakes we should learn from, and I’m determined that we will. As a result, I should like to go one step further, if I may.”

He gestured to Juushirou, who started, eying the Urahara leader in

confusion.

“Nagesu-sama?”

“Thirteenth Division is a District squad, but there has been too much talk of this for my liking,” Nagesu offered Juushirou a smile. “The way in which we separate it from ourselves could be interpreted as the grossest level of disrespect. I am aware that it was thanks to your judgement, Ukitake, that Keitarou’s son was persuaded to change sides and that your initiative helped pave the way for our victory. You were not wrong with the things you said before the Council, even if we did not wish to hear them. The Clan era is not over, but we must evolve if we are to keep pace with the changes that are happening all around us. This is no longer a Seireitei where we should consider ‘Clan’ and ‘District’ blood when it comes to Divisional membership. Anabomi went to the Academy, well, as Hakubei-dono suggested, so should we. Shunsui-dono has mentioned District recruits in Eighth, but after twenty five years, we ought to be doing more. The District population is far greater than that of all the Clans put together. Ultimately, if Genryuusai-sama keeps training at the rate he is, and the Academy keeps growing, we will have more District officers than Clan ones in our ranks. If we want the Gotei to survive the transition, we must stop drawing lines in the sand. My original fears regarding this related to underground Urahara looking to support Keitarou’s rebellion by entering squads and causing them harm, but it’s been brought to my attention that it was the pure-blooded, respectable Urahara who I really should have been wary of, not those who my father cast out. That judgement was forged from ingrained Clan bias, but it could have killed us. We need to open our eyes — and our Divisions.”

“Meaning?” Atsushi demanded.

“Meaning that all squads should be open to District and Clan applicants, and that new shinigami should have the right to choose where they apply to train,” Nagesu said frankly. “Just as Takaoka decided to go to Ninth, and Houjou and Shikibu chose Thirteenth, I should like to see more people have the freedom to leave their roots behind if they feel it appropriate they do so, without facing censure. Shiba Sora is proof that such a decision can work out in Seireitei’s favour. Let’s move on that momentum and make sure that there are no more barriers to opportunity among our Divisions.”

“If I may say so, Nagesu-sama, the people of the Districts often know first hand the pain of losing loved ones to Hollow raids,” Juushirou said gravely. “I’m one myself — I lost my father, because,

then, there were not enough shinigami to take care of every danger. Many of my squad are likewise — either orphans of Hollow attacks, or abandoned by family who feared the spirit power that drew the monsters near. I would welcome anyone to

oin Thirteenth, if they felt it was a place they could belong — and I would also welcome other squads doing the same. I don't consider Thirteenth to have a divine right to District individuals — which Shunsui and Hirata's recruitments have proven — and I would fully support this change, if the other Captains would give it their consideration."

"Then, if we are going to take this step — and I should also support it, if I may," Retsu interjected, "I should like to ask the support of all Divisions in the patrolling and policing of Rukongai from this point on. We act too much as separate squads, sometimes, and Midori-sama is right about the Fourth's lack of military will. I believe that our duties on the other side of the barrier will become considerable and will continue to grow as we improve the balance of the worlds, bringing more souls here. We must go to the Real World more often, not simply lurk in Seireitei. We must embrace all facets of a shinigami's duty, and it will take all of us to achieve. However, Nagesu-sama's suggestion may make it possible — because we will have an influx of members which we have not had before, allowing us to do more things we need to do."

"What are your proposals, Retsu-dono?" Guren asked curiously, and Retsu smiled sadly.

"The Fourth will retain their responsibility for Rukongai, and I will deploy patrols there for longer or shorter periods of time to ensure the needs are met," she said, "but I would like the support of other Divisions on a rota basis to provide military support and to help clear Hollows. I believe we have enough Divisions to divide up Rukongai and Real World patrol responsibilities in the way that, once, Eleventh and Twelfth covered — but without the pressure resting on one or two squads alone. If each squad provided officers to serve a month's tenure in each place in a calendar year, that should suffice. We all need to do everything, where we can — so that something like what happened with Kusakawa Shougo can never be allowed to happen again."

"I support this motion," Mareiko raised her hand, her face pale but her eyes determined. "I have such bad memories of Rukongai, but I will go back. I will go back and I will kill Hollows. I will go there, Retsu-sama, and try and regain the trust of the people that my Captain betrayed when he hurt them. I understand the depth of the sin that

hangs over Twelfth Division, and the fear he must have instilled into so many people there — but I will go and I will help try to change that.”

“Fine words, Sekime, but I thought you couldn’t fight any more?” Hakubei touched his right arm speculatively, casting Mareiko a quizzical glance, and Mareiko met Atsushi’s gaze. The Eleventh Division Captain nodded.

“I am working with Mareiko to improve her combat with her left arm, and there is nobody in Seireitei with a better grasp of Kidou,” he said evenly. “We don’t need any Captains who are simply here to make up the numbers, and Mareiko is capable of pulling her weight as much as any other.”

“Then we should vote on the proposals put forward, as they will mean big changes for many of us,” Hirata said grimly. “I and Seventh are in favour of all stated. Even if they are hard to implement at first, in the long run, they can only be beneficial. If we’re hating and fighting each other based on birthright, we aren’t going to see the real enemies — and now that Keitarou is dead, we ought to make sure that there’s little chance for anyone else to come take his place. We are at peace, and hopefully, soon, will have a full complement of Captains and Vice Captains once more. We should move to look forward... and if that means that Clan and District shinigami end up fighting side by side from this point on, well, so be it.”

The sun was beginning to dull behind clouds over District Two, as the two shinigami reached the Inner Seireitei gate, identifying themselves to the officers on duty before ducking through the barrier and out into the landscape beyond. The world seemed tranquil beyond the stone walls that divided them from Outer Seireitei, and Ketsui wondered absently if the people hereabouts had any idea that the stability of the whole world had almost come crashing down around them. In the distance, he was aware of the muffled sounds of a market in full swing in one of the local villages, and in the sky overhead, birds dove and wheeled, teaching young ones to leave the nest for the first time. It was like a different world, and gazing around at it, Ketsui found it hard to believe that, such a short time earlier, they had all been in such mortal danger.

A nudge in his back alerted him to the impatience of his companion, and he turned, casting her a rueful smile. Izumi was perfectly turned out in impeccably clean and neat shinigami uniform, her silvery hair braided back from her face with the exception of two

beaded strands that hung down over her right ear. Joumei had explained to Ketsui that it was a tradition of their family passed down over many generations, a symbol of the first-born *hime* of the noble line, yet the carved beads somehow only served to enhance Izumi's elfin prettiness, and remind Ketsui of how young she really was. Right now, however, there was nothing pretty or noble in her expression, for her brows were knitted together in a frustrated scrunch, lips pressed together in a thin line of irritation. She gave him another push in the back, putting her hands on her hips and glaring at him, and Ketsui could not help but smile, holding up his hands in mock surrender. She was younger than him, less experienced with a weapon and, he knew now, unable to use her one party trick to bring him down — but despite all of this, she was not afraid to be rude to him, and although she could not say the words, Ketsui was left in absolutely no doubt about what her expression meant.

“I’m really not sure that I’m ready to do this,” he admitted, looking sheepish. “I know I said I would, and I told Kohaku I would as well, but now we’ve left Seireitei... I’m not so sure. I’ve not walked through District Two before, and what if they aren’t willing to allow me in? It’s a difficult situation, and besides...”

Izumi let out a gusty sigh, shaking her head in obvious annoyance. Sliding delicate fingers into Ketsui’s own sword-calloused ones, she gave his arm a little tug, before setting off purposefully on the path ahead without bothering to see whether or not he was choosing to come along. Taken off guard, Ketsui found that if he did not follow his impetuous companion, he would likely fall flat on his face and be dragged there with his nose to the ground, for Izumi, despite her petite stature, was not the kind of person to back down when she had decided to do something.

“Okay, okay, I’m coming!” he protested, quickening his pace to keep up with her resolute steps. “I know that Midori-sama told Taichou that it would be all right, if I went, and that the guards would be expecting me. I know there’s no reason for me not to do this now, except that I’m not sure about how to... well... deal with it.”

Izumi stopped dead suddenly, causing Ketsui to almost overbalance once more, fixing him with obstinate silver eyes. Her fingers loosed from his, and she fluttered them together, the words mostly lost on her companion but the emotion behind them not. Although he was still mystified by most of Izumi’s gestures and signs, there were a couple which came up with enough regularity that he had learned them, and as he watched her fingers twitch into the sign for ‘idiot’, he let out a rueful sigh. Slowly he shook his head.

"I might be an idiot, but Ten-nii is my brother," he said softly. "I love him and I want to put things right between us, but the man who drew his sword on you is a man I never saw before. I am being a coward, I know I am, but I'm afraid. I've spent my whole life looking up to Ten-nii, only to see him fall apart in front of me. And whilst I don't regret standing forward to protect you — I'm worried about what happened to my brother."

Izumi's expression changed at this, and Ketsui saw a flicker of guilt surface in the girl's beautiful eyes. He shook his head.

"It's not your fault," he assured her, resting his hands on her shoulders, and though she flinched slightly at the contact, she did not pull away. "I did what I was ordered to do, and I did what was right. I wasn't going to let anything happen to you — we're allies, right? It's just a lot to get my head around. It's like if Joumei-dono was to attack you all of a sudden, or attack someone you wanted to protect. How would you feel about it — confused, right?"

Izumi pursed her lips pensively, and Ketsui could see her considering his words carefully. She let out another sigh, then, very gently, pulled free of his hold, sliding her arm into his instead. Unlike the grab-and-drag technique, Ketsui realised that this was more a gesture of support, and he cast her a grin.

"I know. You're here with me for moral support, and because if I don't go through with it, you won't let me hear the end of it," he said ruefully. "For someone who doesn't speak, you're frighteningly good at nagging. Joumei-dono warned me that you've never let not having a voice stop you from making yourself heard, and he's not wrong. I know you came with me just as much to make sure I settled with Ten-nii, and I won't go back. I just don't know how I feel about it. It's a lot to deal with. That's all."

Izumi's expression had become indignant, but at these last words, her eyes became grave and she nodded. Her fingers flickered slightly, and though Ketsui could only make out one or two words, he knew that she was telling him how much she felt to blame.

"I know you want me to make up with my brother, because you understand how important he's always been in my life," he reflected, as they began to walk along the long, narrow path that led to the labour encampment where Tenichi had now begun to serve his sentence. "You don't have a mother or a father to look out for you, either. It's always been Joumei-dono, hasn't it, who's kept you safe? And now, everything is changing for you too. You are sure about staying in Inner Seireitei, aren't you? You don't regret telling Taichou

that, when he spoke to you and your brother?"

Izumi pursed her lips thoughtfully, and Ketsui was surprised to see a faint flush of pink surge into the pale cheeks. Slowly she shook her head, but she studiously avoided his gaze, and the fingers which were so often active remained still. Ketsui eyed her for a moment, then a faint smile touched his lips.

"I see," he teased. "You didn't think I could cope, looking after myself, so you decided to stay and sort my life out for me. Is that it?"

Izumi's eyes shot up at this, embarrassment and anger flaring in their depths, then, as she saw his grin, a glimmer of a smile touched her own lips and she shrugged, an attempt at nonchalance that fooled Ketsui none at all. A sense of warmth flooded through him at this obvious proof of her true feelings, but he did not pursue the matter, instead turning his gaze to the path ahead.

"Well, I'll make sure to thank Joumei-dono for sparing you before he goes back to District Seven," he reflected. "In the meantime, I think we're almost there. Midori-sama told Taichou that the compound was outside of Inner Seireitei, but only a short walk across District Two. Judging by the roofs I can see beyond those trees, I guess that must be it. I don't know what kind of a place it is, Ichimaru-san, but I suppose it's better than wherever he was being held before. Kirio-nee spoke to him when he was in the deep cells... and apparently they were pretty bleak. This is a labour camp, true enough, but it looks as though the complex at least has windows."

Izumi did not reply, and as they rounded the copse, Ketsui could see the whole establishment for the first time, letting out a gasp at the sheer size of the undertaking. It was a huge stone structure, clearly built as a Clan run penal establishment in times gone by, and now reserved exclusively for those sentenced to lesser level crimes. If Tenichi had been found guilty of treason, he would've remained in the Maggot's Nest until an execution date had been set, but this place had lower level security, and though there were guards on every gate, the windows were only barred, not covered with heavy metal grills. Tenichi's fellow prisoners were not all shinigami, but Ketsui knew that every prisoner sentenced here with spiritual ability was forced to wear spirit cuffs day and night, and he rubbed absently at his own wrists, hating the thought of having his communication with his sword cut off for such a long period of time. Reihahen had been delivered into Hirata's custody until such time as Tenichi was entitled to return to service, and Ketsui realised that, in coming here, his brother had returned to being just another District individual who had crossed the

system in the wrong way.

“Ichimaru-san, I’m not sure they’ll let you come with me,” he said now, gazing up at the structure. “You’re the one Ten-nii attacked, and Taichou said Midori-sama would probably not approve of you playing visitor. Not even if you are here to support me — I think it’s part of the sentence protocol with assault. Even though I’m certain Ten-nii won’t hurt you again, and he acknowledged his own mistake in doing so in court, they wouldn’t want to risk it. You might have to wait outside — do you mind if you do?”

Izumi snorted, then shook her head, tugging slightly on his *hakamashita* sleeve as if to tell him not to be silly, and Ketsui offered her a grin.

“Okay. I suppose you wouldn’t have come this far if that were the case, so it was a stupid question,” he admitted. “With so many guards, you should be safe enough here. If anyone tries to hurt you, go to them. Don’t lay anyone out with your hypnosis if you can avoid it — because I’m pretty sure you’re not supposed to do that outside of Inner Seireitei until your probation is over and the Council accept your right to stay. I don’t want you thrown out, so be careful, all right?”

He turned to go, but Izumi had not released her hold on his sleeve, and he glanced back at her, confused.

“Ichimaru-san?”

Izumi’s cheeks were read, but she met his gaze defiantly, shaking her head. Ketsui stared at her in bewilderment, not understanding for a moment what she was trying to convey.

“Ichimaru-san, I’m going to see Ten-nii. You dragged me here, why are you...”

He trailed off, for Izumi had shaken her head again, grabbing more tightly onto his sleeve and giving it another tug. It was impossible for her to go any more red, but as Ketsui moved to detach her hold from his clothing, he saw her mouth something, and it made her pause.

Three syllables, silent, but unmistakably,
I-Zu-Mi.

His eyes widened, colour flooding his own cheeks as he realised what the girl had wanted to say.

“I..zumi?” he murmured, and Izumi dropped her gaze, her head jerking forward in an embarrassed nod.

“You want me to call you Izumi? Not Ichimaru-san, but Izumi? Is

that what you wanted to say?"

Another jerky nod, with Izumi's eyes still buried into the turf, and Ketsui hurriedly got a grip on himself, grasping her lightly by the shoulders and giving her a little shake.

"I got it, and I'm sorry. I'll call you Izumi, if that's what you want," he said firmly, hoping that his own cheeks were not blazing as hotly as hers still were. Gently he cupped his hand beneath her chin, raising her face to his, and though she slid her gaze away from him, she made no attempt to push him away. For a moment he glanced at her, then he laughed sheepishly.

"I'll call you Izumi, and you can call me Ketsui," he said at length. "Though you'll have to teach me how to say my name in your language... because I'd like to know when you're using it, just like you want to hear me say Izumi."

Izumi's expression could not become more mortified, but, as she seemed to realise that he was serious and not mocking her, she raised her hands, slowly and surely shaping out three clear, concise syllables of her own. As she did so, her lips mouthed Ke-tsu-i, and as she repeated the gestures, Ketsui grinned, grasping hold of her fingers and covering her tiny hands with his own.

"Right. I've got it," he said playfully. 'Now I know what my name looks like, I'll know when you're calling me properly. And remember, I already know how you sign idiot. So I'll know the difference. Bear it in mind, huh? I'm still your senpai and your trainer, even if we are friends outside of squad. No, maybe something other than friends,' as Izumi eyed him doubtfully. "I don't know. I'm not used to it, and I don't suppose you are, either. But that's fine. We don't really need to put it into words... I've learned that most of all from spending time with you. Not everything can be or should be said out loud. So for now, we won't say it. All right? I'll call you Izumi, you call me Ketsui, and we'll go from there."

He patted her gently on the shoulder, then,

"And now, I'm going to go see my brother, and I'm going to be honest with him about everything," he said frankly. "You, me, Thirteenth, and how I feel about what happened between us. I want to support him and be there for him when he's released, but I also want him to heal. He has to accept that you're not just my duty to protect, but someone I care about... and even if it's strange, I don't think that will change. I like that you're staying with Thirteenth Division, Izumi... and I'm going to make Nii-chan understand that too. He's not

the only person who's important in my life, and he doesn't need to take care of me any more."

He tilted his head on one side, considering.

"Do you think if I tell him that, he'll understand?" he wondered, and Izumi arched an eyebrow, her embarrassment gone as she fixed him with one of her looks. At the sight of it, Ketsui grinned.

"I know. He's my brother, so I ought to give him the opportunity to try," he admitted. "All right. This time, I really am going. Wait for me, Izumi, and don't get yourself into trouble. We've the whole afternoon free, so after I've seen Ten-nii, maybe we can walk into the local town and see the market. Since you spent so much time underground, I guess you haven't done that all that much — and it might be nice, after so much hiding and secrecy, to step out into the world for a change."

He eyed her mischievously.

"Well? Will your *hime* pride allow you to do something so ordinary?" he teased, and indignation flooded Izumi's features. She tossed her head, stalking off towards the trees, but just as she seemed likely to disappear back into them, she turned, meeting his gaze once more and this time Ketsui could see genuine warmth reflected back in the argentine eyes. Slowly she nodded, then was gone into the copse to wait, and Ketsui took a deep breath, turning his own attention back towards the penal building.

Okay, Nii-chan. Time for you and I to have a proper heart to heart about everything and anything. I hope we can put it behind us and rebuild, but my life isn't as simple as it might have been before, nor do I want it to be. Kirio-nee may be right about my attachment to Izumi. I certainly know that I don't want her anywhere but by my side, and that's probably a good sign that our connection is more than just a working relationship. I need you to understand that too, Ten-nii. Our future relationship probably depends on it. Like Midori-sama said in court, I don't need your protection. This time, I want to try and protect you — if I can — so here's hoping you open up and let me.

78. Reborn

Chapter Seventy Six: Reborn

It was a murky morning, with hazy grey clouds showing signs of an impending summer storm. Sora paused for a moment to glance up at the heavens, a rueful smile touching her lips as she realised how the undecided sky so perfectly reflected her own unsettled mental state. She took a deep breath into her lungs, striding purposefully under the distinctive banner of the Fourth Division triage, bowing her head to acknowledge the salute of the officer on duty and crossing the bustling courtyard towards the small wing of rooms which she knew housed the most seriously ill patients. It was the most secluded part of the Division's network of sickrooms, and she had never had cause to visit it before, but this time there was no avoiding it and, as she reached the door, she said a silent prayer under her breath before pushing it open and marching inside. Nobody had challenged her presence or questioned her sudden arrival, making her certain that rumours were already spreading around Seireitei, but though she disliked the sense that she was under silent scrutiny, she knew there was no running away. This was the first obligation of a whole itinerary of obligations, and she could not balk at the first hurdle.

Shunsui had gone back to Thirteenth after the Captain's meeting the previous day, leaving her with free reign over the Division, and in his absence she had managed to get a good deal of work done. All the dispatched patrols had trickled back through Inner Seireitei's main gates now, and she had therefore passed busy but otherwise average hours taking reports, assigning duties and bringing her members up to speed on the events that they had missed. It had seemed like another completely ordinary day in an Inner Seireitei that was slowly beginning to find its peacetime rhythm after the shock of Keitarou's coup, and the visit of Mitsuki and Naoko over lunch had made her observe jokingly that they ought to make more time to get together, just girls, in the way they had always used to do.

And then, Shunsui had come back, and the moment he had called her to his office, everything had been turned on its head.

His method of breaking the news had been characteristically casual. He had dropped down behind his desk, taking time to rearrange the papers she had piled so neatly back into their usual mingled mess before asking whether there had been any word from Tokutarou on

the fixing of his white *haori*. Then, in his next breath, it had come.

“By the way, I recommended you for the Ninth Division Captaincy.”

It had been so off-hand that to begin with, Sora had been convinced it was one of his jokes. In fact, she had been about to comment that he was starting to sound back on his usual form when she had met his gaze, and the seriousness she had seen lurking there had killed the riposte before it could leave her lips. Instead she had stared at him in mute disbelief, and Shunsui had nodded, gesturing for her to sit down.

“They approved my suggestion,” he had added, and this time there had been no mistaking the real intent in his words. “I hope you haven’t made long-term plans for the next few weeks, because I think they will want to move quickly, now they’ve come to a conclusion about what to do.”

At the memory, Sora closed her eyes, inwardly suppressing a groan.

It would have been nice, Shunsui, to have had some warning about what you were planning to do yesterday. Even if you’d just told me at breakfast before you left — that would’ve been something. To come home and tell me it’s a fait accompli and that I should be all prepared to move out and take up a post in a completely alien Division... not just that, one where half the senior officers just got murdered by a terrorist... that’s the kind of thing you want some time to think about. For their sake as well as mine... but then I suppose you didn’t want to give me that chance to find a way out.

She opened her eyes, letting out a heavy sigh.

You know I love Eighth. You know I love working with you, and that I wouldn’t choose to end our partnership, no matter how much I nag you. We’re more than siblings, more than friends... we’re a team that works well and I felt it especially when you trusted me to take charge of the Division when you went after Keitarou. I know you have always respected me in the way you promised that you would... and I know this is a part of it. You think that it would be easy for me to become complacent and cling to our friendship because it’s comfortable, but it’s not what you have in mind for me, and, if I’m honest, I’m a little flattered by that fact.

She ran her fingers along the patterned walls of the Fourth, a self-conscious expression crossing her features as she considered it.

“You’re the obvious choice,” Shunsui had told her simply. “I don’t want to get rid of you, so don’t glare at me like that. You’re the best Vice Captain I’ll probably ever have, but that’s why I can’t keep you. I’m not your kin and I told you that I wasn’t taking you as my Vice Captain because I intended to protect you or shield you from danger.

You wanted to forge your own path. This is that path. Ninth Division needs you more than I do. I have Tetsuya, and I have Kaoru, and I will be all right, even if my office won't ever be as tidy as it is under your regime. But it's all right — we'll still be neighbours, so if you want to come yell at me about my bad habits, you know you'll always be welcome."

I need to live up to that faith in me.

At last Sora reached her destination, resting both hands against the door of the final chamber.

You're right, Shunsui — I won't refuse the challenge that the Captains have laid down before me. I will do my utmost to put back together the shattered pieces of this division, using every trick and skill I've learned during our twenty five years together. But, before I do all of that, I need to come here. I have to talk to the one person whose opinion on this is more important than yours or anyone else in Seireitei's.

Gently she rapped on the door of the chamber, half expecting there to be no answer, but instead, a female voice called her in, and she faltered for a moment, then pushed back the door, stopping dead as she registered the scene before her.

An unfamiliar young woman stood by the window, replacing the wilting flowers in the vase on the sill for fresh ones. She was not a member of the Fourth, for she was dressed in unmistakeably Kuchiki robes, delicate yet simple, as though she were of Clan blood, but of modest background. Her dark hair was drawn back from her face in a neat style, and at her entrance, she turned, offering the shinigami a faint smile.

"I'm sorry," Sora bowed her head hurriedly, suddenly feeling out of place. "I didn't realise Mikihara had company... I was told that he had regained consciousness, and so I thought..."

"He's drowsing, but he has been awake and we've spoken," the girl set the fresh vase back in its original location. "My name is Mikihara Ariko. Are you a comrade of my father?"

"Your *father*?" Sora was thrown for a moment, then she nodded.

"Yes, I am," she agreed. "My name is Shiba Sora, and I'm the Vice Captain of the Eighth Division. Mikihara... I mean, *Hyakken-dono* is my neighbour, and I came to enquire after his health. I know he's been quite ill — but I had hoped to speak to him a while. I didn't mean to intrude, though. I can come back later."

"No... I should go and pay my respects to my Clan Leader," Ariko

dimpled, shaking her head. "Guren-sama was kind enough to allow me to be summoned here, and I shouldn't insult that generosity by ignoring my obligations. I have a message to convey from my uncle, in any case. My father is still quite weak, but I am sure you will not over-tax him, will you, Shiba-dono? I have heard how the shinigami have been so attentive to him since his injury, and I am glad he has such supportive comrades. He is fool enough to believe his life is somehow dispensible, but evidently his peers do not agree."

"On the contrary, he's a very brave man and we respect him a good deal," Sora said fervently, somehow flustered by this composed, elegant young woman who seemed so different and alien from the quiet, military Hyakken she had sat next to in Vice Captain meetings for so many years. And yet, despite the delicate prettiness that framed the girl's whole appearance, now she could see the resemblance in the distinctively dark grey eyes and the slight wave to the wisps of hair that had loosed themselves from the ties to frame her face. "If you don't mind, Ariko-dono, I would be obliged to you. I promise I won't tire him out — I understand how ill he still is, and I have no intention of making his healers cross with me."

"Then I shall leave him in your hands and return in an hour or so," Ariko bent to kiss her father gently on the brow, then turned and bowed very properly towards the uniformed shinigami before withdrawing from the chamber. The scent of flowers wafted out of the door behind her, and for a moment Sora simply stared in the direction the girl had gone, transfixed by this highly feminine apparition.

"Sora..dono?"

A soft voice from the bed brought her back to herself, and she swung around, her cheeks pinkening with embarrassment as she met the blurry gaze of her opposite number. "I thought I heard your voice... I had wondered if you might come to see me."

"Hyakken-dono," Sora knelt self-consciously at the bedside, trying to ignore the thick bandages that swathed her companion's arms and upper body beneath the thin fabric of the expensive Clan nightrobes. They were embroidered at the edges with delicate sakura blooms, and suddenly Sora was convinced that Ariko had brought them with her, for they looked so unlike something that Hyakken himself would ever choose. At her expression Hyakken managed a faint smile, moving his mummified right arm stiffly to brush against the edge of the cloth.

"My daughter insists on presenting a good Clan face in all situations," he murmured wryly. "Even, it seems, when you are at the whims of healers and defying death."

“I didn’t know you had a daughter,” Sora said unnecessarily, and Hyakken nodded.

“For all the good I’ve done as her father,” he said reflectively. “My wife died when she was born... she’s lived with my sister most of her life. My sister has daughters, and I know nothing about raising young Clan *hime*. Well, I’m sure you’re not surprised to hear that. I pay close attention to her life and we have a good relationship, but in some regards our world views do not even begin to touch. I am a soldier, she is a young Clan lady — and there is no changing either thing.”

He shifted his body slightly against his pillows, shooting Sora a grave look.

“Retsu-sama told me, last night, about Anabomi-taichou,” he said soberly. “She said that she wasn’t sure I was ready for the news, but I needed to hear it from her before I heard it through another source. She also told me what the Captains had suggested should happen from this point on. I wondered, then, if you would come here. I confess I’m glad that you have.”

“I didn’t think there was anything else to do but come,” Sora admitted, relief flickering in her green eyes. “I’m glad you know — about both things, because it makes my job easier. Shunsui didn’t give me any warning that he was going to nominate me, so I am still reeling from the idea myself — but last night, I thought it over every which way and I know that it’s something I ought to do. Just, I also knew that there was one person whose views mattered more than mine, and that was yours. When Mitsuki told me yesterday that she’d heard you were coming out of your coma, I didn’t realise how fortunate the timing was. I don’t think I can delay talking to the Captains about my decision for many days — but I did want the chance to talk to you first.”

“What is there to talk about?” Hyakken looked surprised. “You’ve been chosen to be my superior officer. I am a subordinate. It’s not my place to object — especially given the pitiful state in which you find me. On the contrary, I’d rather expect you to find me a significant disappointment — but I’ve been told that I’m not allowed to resign my post, and so it looks like you are stuck with me.”

“Resign? You dare and I’ll come trim your toes off myself,” Sora’s brows knitted together. “Do you have any idea how much that Division adore you? I spent the last few days compiling a report for the Council on what happened in Ninth, and all I got out of your surviving members were their shock and grief at losing their Captain and other officers and their complete fixation with the health of their

heroic Vice Captain. They all know you put your life in serious peril to protect them, and those that didn't know have been told so in no uncertain terms by Sakura-chan, whose ability to chat for Seireitei I know well. Your subordinates were constantly disappearing from the barracks to sneak off here, even when they weren't allowed in. Ryuu told me that he'd had to sanction a rota of officers to come and get news on your health, otherwise he'd be facing a mutiny. Do you think I'd be a popular Captain if I walked in there and told them that my first duty as leader was processing your retirement? Don't be stupid. I intend to keep you. I *need* to keep you. The war is over, so if it takes you time to recover enough to wave your sword, that's fine. I am capable of doing that for both of us for a bit if need be. It's your *brain* I need. Your knowledge of this squad, it's protocol and everything else I've discovered you apparently do to keep it running. I have no Third Seat, Fourth Seat, Fifth Seat, so there's no way I can spare you. Also, I need you to *want* to work with me, not simply take it as a Gotei order. I'm not used to working with a Captain who believes in strict military protocol, and I'm not a stiff-backed Kuchiki. I'm a Shiba, we don't work that way... so I need you to be willing to work with me... as... as my partner, not just my subordinate officer. There'll be plenty of others of them. A Vice Captain is different. At least, to me, it is. With Shunsui, it always has been. He trusts me with almost everything regarding the Division, and I would want to do the same with my Vice Captain, as much as I possibly could. It's not a case of 'knowing one's place'. I'm not formal. You already know I don't call Shunsui by any kind of honorific or title. I don't care about any of that, really — the ability to work together and trust each other matters more."

Hyakken's eyes widened slightly, his lips pressing together as he digested this.

"I see," he mused. "I have no experience of how other Divisions operate outside of Ninth. I would say that I had a... as you call it, a partnership with Anabomi-taichou. He was higher born than me, and there was a level of deference between us — but he trusted me and I did all I could not to betray that trust. I don't know if that is the kind of thing you mean?"

"Nor do I," Sora admitted. "This is new to me, just as it is to you. Anabomi was a heck of a Captain and pretty much a God in his own domain around the Ninth. Honestly, I've been terrified to go near the place since I heard what the Captains had decided. His aura is still there. He touched a lot of people within Ninth's marble walls, even if he kept himself to himself outside of it."

"Mm," Hyakken's expression became sad. "The Ninth Division was

his life's work, Sora-dono. He had no family left in Sixth District. I remember once he asked about my daughter, and expressed his regret about the fact there was nobody back home for him to write to with news. He was civil with your brother at the Tenth, and of course, deferential towards Guren-sama, but the only close friend I remember him keeping in Seireitei was Kusakawa Shougo-dono. When Shougo-dono died, my Captain became yet more fixed on making Ninth the Division he felt it ought to be. Shougo-dono had believed so strongly in establishing a Twelfth that had independance from its Clan, and so Anabomi-taichou decided to follow the same course of action with Ninth. He knew every member by name, and their circumstances and background. He went to the Academy at least once every three years, and tried to encourage applications from outside of the Kuchiki Clan. He was a phenomenal swordsman, and he took time to train with many of the members individually, offering them tips and encouragement to improve their technique. I am one of those members who had the fortune to work with him frequently in the training arena — but for that, I swear, I would probably not be alive to speak to you now. He was vastly out of my league as a warrior, but at the very least it seems I was enough to prevent him from hurting anyone else.”

“Anabomi didn’t want to hurt anyone,” Sora murmured, and Hyakken nodded.

“I know,” he agreed, and though his voice was even, there was genuine grief in the dark grey eyes. “The exile chose the most evil way possible to kill my Captain. He made him a weapon and used him to slay the people most precious in his life. My only comfort is that it spared him from ever knowing the depth of Shougo-dono’s deceit.”

“You know about that too, huh?”

“It was like a dream, half real and half not,” Hyakken agreed. “I asked Retsu-sama if that had been a hallucination, it seemed so vague and wisplike, but she said not. She explained what had happened. I wish that it had been in time to save the Captain’s life but... Sora-dono... I don’t think it would have saved *him*. He wouldn’t have ever forgiven himself for killing his men. A Kuchiki who takes his own life is shamed... but I believe he would not have wanted to live with that guilt. Perhaps it was all a mercy it ended how it did... though I would like him to have known, at least, that I was alive and that I — and Ninth — forgive him for what was not his fault.”

“He’s at peace, now,” Sora said honestly. “Hirata told me that his last words were to thank him... it was what he wanted, and he died at

peace. His soul will be reborn, Hyakken-dono. Only Ninth can't linger with his ghost forever. Even though I know how deeply you're all grieving... it can't. My oldest brother was hurt in the Real World, and my other brother, I almost had to bring down with my blade, so I won't say there aren't negative emotions for me in this too. Just... Anabomi would be the first person to say that Ninth needed to rally and rise again. I... am not from Ninth, and so I need you to help me make it my home and make your subordinates trust in me to take on that mantle. I am committed to do it, and do it properly. I just need to know you will have me... as your leader, for as long as time demands."

Hyakken offered her a sad smile.

"You already care about the Ninth, because you came here to speak to me in these terms," he said softly. "It would be a foolish Vice Captain who would refuse such genuine emotions. I am a Kuchiki. We are different in many ways from our neighbours in District Five and we, frequently, struggle to adequately express our emotions. I regret that fact, especially now there are men I trained with closely who I will never see again. However, it is as you say. Anabomi-taichou would want Ninth to come back strong. He would accept you as his successor, because you can do what he could not — finally break Ninth Division away from the overlordship of the Kuchiki and establish it in its own right. I know you are not a Shiba in your political views, whatever you are by blood and name. You have served in a foreign Division your entire career... I have no fear of your intentions in coming to mine."

He glanced at his bandaged hands.

"I would shake your hand, but I cannot," he added regretfully. "My left arm I can still barely move, but there is some improvement in my right. Retsu-sama believes she can do more work to improve the damage done to ligaments and tendons, but it will be a long road of physiotherapy before I can use my sword as I should like. Still, you have given me ample reason to persevere. I will be honoured to serve as your Vice Captain, Shiba-taichou. You have my word."

"Well, instead of shaking my hand, you can promise me never to call me that again," Sora flushed red. 'I'm still wearing my Vice Captain badge, and it's not like I've officially given my agreement to Nagesu-sama about this yet. Even when I do, though — my brother, my mother, they are 'Shiba-taichou'. Like you said, I'm not a Shiba Captain, and I don't intend on tying Ninth's loyalties to my Clan. I want to be my own Captain, just like Anabomi did. So you can call me

Sora-dono, if you must — and, of course, ‘Taichou’, but not “Shiba-taichou’. I can’t change my family name, but I don’t have to use it and neither do you.”

“If that’s what you want,” Hyakken smiled ruefully. “I shall try to remember, Sora-dono.”

“Then I should go and speak to Nagesu-sama, and give him my formal acceptance,” Sora got to her feet, letting out her breath in a rush. “I was told not to tire you out, so I’ll leave you to rest — but if you want to speak to me, send a message and I’ll come.”

“I will tell Takaoka, when she comes to visit me this afternoon, that she’s to be your guide in anything in the Division you need to know, and that you have my full backing as our future Captain,” Hyakken told her firmly. “You know her, I know, because she often visits a friend of hers in your Division. She’s also as you will be — someone not of Kuchiki birth who has made Ninth her home. She is a good, competent officer and I have faith that she will help you break the ice with the others. I imagine they will simply be happy to know that things are going to get better... and I will do what I can when I am able to help smooth the transition.”

“I’m glad of that,” Sora dimpled. “I’ll go, then. Ariko-dono was going to see Guren-sama, but she will be back within the hour. I’ll leave you to your peace and quiet and go to Third. Then, I suppose, I’ll go home... and try and get my head around what I’ve just made up my mind to do!”

“Well, I guess you’ll have to do,”

Kirio dropped back against the wall of the chamber with a sigh of resignation, setting the remaining ribbon down onto the unit and folding her arms across her chest as she eyed her companion critically. “You’re still miles too thin, too pale and the smallest size of *shihakushou* still looks baggy on you — but there’s not a lot I can do about that. Your *obi*’s long enough for you to hang yourself with if you don’t knot it firmly, and how you’ve managed to fray the thong of your sandal before you’ve even left this room is anyone’s guess... but you *do* have the sword, and I suppose, that at least makes you look the part.”

“Are you done taking me to pieces, Kirio-san?” Kohaku eyed his reflection in the mirror one last time, then turned to shoot the Sixth Seated officer a look of reproach. ‘Ukitake-dono told you to come help me get ready — not tell me everything that’s wrong with me. I’ve

never done this before. I can't help it if I don't know how things work! And as for these,' he kicked at the sandal resentfully, "I've never had to wear them. I didn't have anything on my feet in Rukongai. I didn't know how to properly put them on, and the *tabi* were making my feet itch. If Ketsui-dono hadn't stopped me, I'd have unlaced it completely... you just stood there and laughed."

"Well, you had such a look of bewilderment on your face I couldn't help it," Kirio admitted. 'Still, you'll do, and you're already late. You've a clean bill of health, and so you can't lurk around here getting any more special treatment, not if you really mean to recruit. Recruits don't get their own private chambers and they certainly don't get to sleep in till all hours,' she gave him a little poke in the arm, "so you'll have to get used to some routine discipline. Are you sure you're still eating like you say you are? I swear you haven't put on a single pound."

"He's eating fine, Kirio-nee," before Kohaku could respond in indignation, the door slid back to reveal Ketsui, an amused expression on his features. "When I lent him those robes for the Council meeting and Nii-chan's trial, the *obi* was shorter than this one, that's all — he's put on a bit, and he's strong enough to argue with you, so he's doing just fine. Taichou wouldn't let him do anything he wasn't ready for, anyway... and besides, I think he looks fine. The uniform suits you, Kohaku. Don't let her get to you. You're fine."

"Too many fines in one set of sentences makes you sound insincere, Ketsui-kun," Kirio retorted, but Ketsui just offered her a smile.

"I'm a shinigami, not a literary genius," he said calmly, "and besides, it's true. He is fine. Why use another word when fine is, well, fine?"

"I give up," Kirio rolled her eyes. "Besides, this is off the point."

"I've never been a recruit before," Kohaku adjusted the white sash slightly with a frown. "I guess I'm nervous. I don't really know what I'm supposed to do to officially be one. I know that Ukitake-dono... no, no I should say *Taichou* now, shouldn't I? I know he said he had some paperwork to complete, but other than that... I don't really know."

"Well, you'll soon find out," Ketsui dropped a hand down reassuringly on the young man's shoulders. "Come on. Kirio-nee, I told Taichou I'd take him down to his new accommodation and make sure I handed him over properly to one of his new peers to break in. I've got to find Izumi anyway, since we're doing some training of our own,

and apparently you're on Naoko-san's patrol this afternoon."

"I'm *what*?" Kirio paled, staring at her friend in consternation, and Ketsui nodded.

"Last minute change," he agreed cheerfully. "Kira-san hurt his ankle in the training gym, so Naoko-san said she'd take you instead... I think her exact words were, 'at least I can trust her not to kill herself before we even leave the barracks.'" That's why I came here — to tell you and take over supervising Kohaku in your place. She wants to leave soon, though, so you'd better hurry — I don't think she was in a good mood."

"You could have told me that sooner!" Kirio protested, but nevertheless she grabbed her own sword from where it stood propped against the chamber wall, shoving it through her *obi* with a sigh. "All right, I guess that's me gone. Good luck, Koku. Knock them dead — but I don't mean that literally, so make sure Kyouka Raigen knows it's not that kind of party. Ketsui, I'll leave him to you."

With that she was gone, scrambling up onto the window-sill and clambering out of the window, and Ketsui tut-tutted, shaking his head slowly.

"Things are always like that in Thirteenth," he said wryly. "You'll get used to it. At first it terrified me, all the manic comings and goings... but now I find it reassuring and, well, like a kind of home. You will too — even if it's nothing like what you've been through before."

"Well, I at least know that people here are kind," Kohaku offered a smile. "Kirio-san and U... Taichou, and you too... but it is very different. I've usually been on my own. I've never shared accommodation with anyone. I've never kept a strict regime. I've never done any kind of real physical training. Whatever I know I know on instinct — things that Kyouka taught me, rather than my working to learn myself. I don't know if I might be useless, Ketsui-dono... but I want to try at least. I want to be able to help people, like Taichou helped me. I think that's the only way I can repay him."

"That makes you no different from the most of us," Ketsui reflected, leading the way out of the small chamber into the hall beyond, then pausing. "Hey, do you have all your belongings? You won't come back to this room again. Technically it belongs to the Division's Fourth Seat, only ours died two years ago, and the position's been empty since. That's why you were able to use it — but as a recruit, you'll be sharing with the others. Izumi is different, she gets to share with

higher seated officers because she's the only girl recruit — but you won't have any special favours as regards accommodation."

"I don't want any special favours at all," Kohaku assured his companion firmly, moving to close the door behind him. 'And I... I don't have any belongings. Only Kyouka Raigen, who's here,' he patted his waist self-consciously. "Taichou said I wasn't allowed to draw it, and that he might not let me keep it in my new room with my roommates there, not until I can use it better... but today, he said I should have it, so really that's all that's mine. Even the books..." he looked wistful, then shrugged. "My books are still in Rukongai," he owned. "They're tatty and old, so nobody would steal them, but I can't go get them. All the ones here belong to the Thirteenth. I've nothing else to bring. Just me."

"Well, travelling light is a good military habit," Ketsui reflected. "One word of advice, though. Being a shinigami means that your room and board is essentially part of your stipend — but you will have your own money, too. Don't do as some do and go crazy the first time someone gives you coin, all right? There's not much you really need to buy if you live in Inner Seireitei, so it's a good idea to keep that for a rainy day. You never know when you might need it, especially as you have nobody else to rely on but yourself. It's not a fortune, and it can vanish really quickly if you're not careful in how you manage it."

"Money?" Kohaku stopped, looking blank, and Ketsui arched an eyebrow.

"You hadn't realised? Shinigami do get paid, you know — although our accommodation and food ration is deducted from what we actually get, it's a proper form of employment. A lot of shinigami send home money to their families in the Districts. I think Taichou is one, actually... and Ten-nii certainly paid for a lot of Mother's medicine when he was a recruit, which was a godsend when she was really sick. We'd never have managed otherwise, because I was still a student and Mother was too ill to work in the last year of her life."

"I hadn't thought about it," Kohaku admitted honestly. "There's no money in the part of the Rukon I was living in. I don't know if I've ever even seen any. Father may have had some — but he never needed to discuss it with me, and if he did, I don't know where he got it or how. I never left the village, not till I came here with Souja-dono. I had no need of it, so the subject never came up."

"In that case, really don't let it go to your head," Ketsui said firmly. "Talk to Taichou or Fukutaichou about it. They'll help you work out what to do with it while you decide what you need to buy."

“All right,” Kohaku agreed. “Thank you for the advice, Ketsui-dono. Although...”

“Although?”

“If I can, I might... like to buy a book,” Kohaku went red. “I know it sounds silly, but... I suppose they’re the only things I’ve ever really owned. Tatty and wrecked as my books are, they’re the one thing I really miss from Rukongai. The ones Kirio-san found for me in the Thirteenth archive were new and different and made reading something fresh and exciting. Before, I always used reading as a way to calm down when my spirit power was overloading — reading the same pages in the same order was reassuring and so I guess I made a habit of it. Reading here was different, though, and it made me want to know what other books people write. I realised there are probably lots of books I’ve never read, and so... well... if you can buy them, then maybe I’ll buy some of those.”

“Well, you can if you like,” Ketsui was amused. “Given the stipulations the Council put on Taichou regarding you and Izumi both, I think you’ll find you end up with more reading to do than you know what to do with. I’m sure I saw a couple of familiar Academy textbooks lying out on Taichou’s desk when I spoke to him last. Before you buy something, though, I suggest you get someone to take you to the Archive first. Both the Division’s and the main Archive... you’ll find more books there than you can read in three lifetimes, I guarantee it.”

Kohaku’s eyes became huge, and Ketsui laughed, patting him on the back.

“For now, though, we’re getting ahead of ourselves,” he said warmly. “I’m happy you’re staying, because it means I can repay the debt my brother owes you for the help you gave at his trial, but also because I think it will be interesting to have you here. Besides, your father and mine, they were close. Whatever I think about the politics of either, I don’t think it’s a bad thing if their children forge some kind of working relationship. I’m already helping Izumi with her sword, and she’s completely hopeless, although at least now she’s actually trying. Since you have Kyouka Raigen, I’m sure you can’t be as bad, and I’m willing to extend my help to you too in that regard. I’m not bad with a sword, so it occurred to me that’s one way I could. Izumi would like it too, to have someone else taking some of the heat off her, and well, I’m a Tenth Seat. Apparently that means I’m supposed to help recruits. It’s part of my job.”

He looked sheepish.

“You know, till recently I would have balked and run at the idea of that,” he admitted self-effacingly. “But, in light of all that we’ve been through lately, and the things you’ve overcome to get to this point, I guess I’ve been overly cautious. It’s my duty and I’m not going to run away from it, either. We should share our skills... doing that is how we get stronger. Though don’t ask me about kidou. More to the point, don’t ask Shizuka about my kidou, either, because she’ll tell you a list of humiliating horror stories from our time at the Academy. Tsunemori-san is the best kidou user in the Division after the Captain, but he’s often busy because of it, so keep that in mind.”

“I have a lot to remember,” Kohaku groaned, rubbing his brow, and Ketsui nodded.

“For now, though, the names of your fellows will suffice,” he said frankly, as they turned the next corner and he rapped sharply on the final door of the very end chamber. “Kayashima! If you’re there, get out here now! I know you were on midnight patrol last night, but Taichou says you’re to take charge of our newest recruit, so you’d better be dressed and ready!”

“Ketsui-san!” The door slid back to reveal a young man of about Kohaku’s own age, and suddenly Kohaku felt shy, fighting against the urge to withdraw into the safety of Ketsui’s slipstream at this stranger’s sudden curiosity. “I’m here, and I’m awake, I promise. I’m the only one who is now, though. Everyone else is on patrol with Atsudane-san or Shikibu-san. Atsudane-san left me behind because he said that Taichou had an errand for me — is this it?”

“This is it,” Ketsui agreed, grabbing Kohaku by the arm and hauling him forward. ‘Your errand. Aizen Kohaku, meet Kayashima Eiji. He’s your senpai and your fellow recruit — also one of your new roommates. You will spend a lot of time together, so resolve between the pair of you not to start any die-hard rivalries or feuds, all right? Kayashima’s been a recruit since the spring,’ he added, glancing at Kohaku. “He’s been here long enough to know the ropes, so I’ll leave him to initiate you.” He offered the bewildered youngster a smile, then turned his attention to the interested Kayashima. “Taichou wants to see the both of you in an hour, Kayashima, so make sure Kohaku’s seen everything he needs to by the time you take him to Ugendou. And don’t be late, because Fukutaichou wants you for late patrol again.”

“Yes, sir,” Kayashima nodded smartly. “I won’t be. I’ll do as you say.”

“Good. Then have you seen Izumi? I mean, Ichimaru-san?”

“No, but she might have gone to Seventh,” Kayashima scratched his head. “I think her brother is leaving, so Fukutaichou gave her permission to go see him off.”

“Great,” Ketsui grimaced, then nodded. “All right. I’ll take it up with him, then. Kohaku, stick with Kayashima. He’ll see you right. I have to go find my runaway recruit.” And with that he was gone, disappearing into a whoosh of reiatsu, and Kohaku sighed, shaking his head.

“I’ll never be able to do that,” he murmured, more than half to himself, but Kayashima overheard, and he let out a snort.

“Don’t be dumb,” he said disparagingly. “All shinigami worth their salt can shunpo. You’ll learn it. We all do.”

“Huh?” Kohaku started, staring at his companion disconcertedly, and Kayashima sighed, grasping him by the wrist and pulling him into the small chamber.

“Here,” he said matter of factly, gesturing around him. “This is home for you now till you get promoted and moved on out — which, judging by the fact everyone already knows your name and a ton of crazy stuff about you, will probably happen sooner than you think. When I signed up, they told me that right now Taichou likes to keep recruits unseated for a year or two, to build experience and harden off from the Academy. I’m the only from this year’s grad class — well, till Ichimaru-san came, but she’s a special case, like you. The others were all leftovers from last year’s class who didn’t get seated yet, and I’ll bet they don’t know more’n I do, because I can spar any of them just fine. Anyhow, for however long you remain unseated, this is where the recruits live, so this is where you will, too. It’s small and simple but cosy and it’s warmer when there’s a frost if there are more people in the room. Normally it can sleep six, but you’re the fifth male recruit, so you can choose whether you have *this* bunk or *that* one,” he pointed across the room, “which is closer to the window but, apparently, damn cold when the sun’s not out. This one is better, but it’s right by mine, so — you don’t snore, I hope?”

“I...” Kohaku blinked, and Kayashima grinned, pushing him down onto the aforementioned empty bunk and then sitting down on the one opposite, crossing his legs and leaning back against the wall.

“Blankets and stuff we can get from store,” he reflected. “I guess you don’t have any of your own stuff, but it’s all right, because I didn’t either, not that kind of thing, and there’s a whole room full of spares just in case. I’ll ask someone later, when Taichou’s done with us, I

guess. Fukutaichou should be able to sign some out for you, when I explain what it's for — or if not him, I think Atsudane-san has clearance, too. They're our best bet — they're less finicky about the rules and they're more likely to be easy on you and let you take more because you're new. I know you were in the Fourth Seat chamber before, but you'll need your own allocation of supplies now, so everything's on proper record if you need something replaced. One of the others managed to put his foot clean through a blanket the other week practicing what *he* claims were Hakuda moves on his bunk... it wasn't pretty, I'll tell you, watching him try to persuade the Powers That Be that he was entitled to a new one."

His grin widened at Kohaku's obvious bewilderment.

"It's all right, you know," he continued evenly. "We know, all of us, about your Pa. It'd be impossible not to. But it's not a big deal to me, and it won't be to the others, either. Taichou trusts you, and that's enough round these parts. Besides..." He shrugged. "We can't choose our family. Lord knows it would be a better world if sometimes we could, but there it is."

"What do you mean?" Despite himself, Kohaku stared, and Kayashima's expression became pensive.

"Well, let's just say the detailed version is a story for another day," he reflected, "but my old man was never much fun, either. Criminal record as long as both my arms and my legs, and partial to drunken brawls. Thirteenth's the first place I've been where it hasn't mattered, though. Even at the Academy, sometimes his reputation would get me hassle with the Clansfolk. Not here, though. Thirteenth is different. They accept people. Taichou makes sure of it. No matter who you were or where you came from, the moment you put on our uniform you're one of us. That's what Fukutaichou told me when I first came here, and now I'm telling you. Since I'm senpai, I figure I should make sure you know the important things from the off."

He scratched his head, looking rueful.

"Though, aside from Ichimaru-san, you're the first new recruit since me, and like I said, Ichimaru-san is different," he admitted. "She's a girl, to begin with, and I haven't spent much time with her, if I'm honest. I hope it'll be different with you, though. I mean, we're roommates now, and I hope we'll be friends. It's better that way — and you look like you need friends. You look scared of your own shadow, actually — but I've heard about that sword of yours, and so I'm pretty sure you'll settle and be fine once you realise nobody here hates you for things your Pa did."

“Kayashima-san...” Kohaku faltered, then a faint smile touched his features and he bowed his head. “Thank you. I appreciate that. Please, tell me everything Ketsui-dono asked you to, and I’ll try to remember. I want to be like everyone else, and I don’t want to do anything I shouldn’t.”

“No more formality!” Kayashima scolded, swiping his companion lightly across the head and making him jerk it up in dismay. “We’re both recruits. I’m senpai, but I’m sure I just told you I wanted us to be friends. None of this formal language nonsense, like I’m years older than you. I’m sure I’m not. I’m only twenty one, and you can’t be younger than that, surely?”

“I’m the same age,” Kohaku admitted, a little dazed, and Kayashima nodded approvingly.

“Good, then that settles it,” he said firmly, standing and dragging Kohaku to his feet. “We’ll be friends. The other guys are a year or two older than I am and have been here longer, so they rip on me sometimes for it, though they’re all right, really. You’re my age though, so we’ll stick together. I’ll teach you all the things you ought to know about the Division and Inner Seireitei — and the things that you need to know that only come with experience, too.’ His eyes twinkled with mischief. “Like the best places to spend free hours, and the Divisions with the prettiest girls, and how to get the best seat in the food-hall and the best rations. And... most important of all... how to escape being on Shikibu-san’s dawn patrol.”

He shivered.

“I don’t know if you’ve met her, but Shikibu-san is strict,” he added confidentially. “She’s a great shinigami, and a great trainer, but first thing in the morning she’s a holy terror and impatient as hell. Going on dawn patrol with her is about the same as taking a trip into the Gates of Hell before the sun’s properly up, and it’s not a great start to any day once you’ve been lashed by her tongue a few times for falling behind.”

Kohaku stared, then he began to laugh.

“What’s so funny?” Kayashima looked suspicious, and Kohaku shook his head, holding up his hands in apology.

“Ketsui-dono said things were always a little bit crazy here,” he explained. “He said it would take me time to get used to, and it will. But... well, I was just thinking that... maybe it won’t take as much time as I thought. Maybe I will enjoy it. All of it.”

“Well, it’s easier to do a good job if you’re having fun, right?” Kayashima’s face cleared and he grinned unrepentantly. “Come on. I’ll show you the baths and the rota, so you know when recruits are allowed to use it without being trampled by sweaty senior officers... by which I mean Fukutaichou. Then I’ll take you to the mess hall. We’ve only an hour, so I don’t know if I’ll have time to show you anything else before I take you to Taichou, but there’s always tomorrow, after drill. That is, so long as you can keep up with us.”

“I’m here to stay, now.” Kohaku nodded firmly. “Whatever it brings, this is where I ought to be. I saw myself in the *shihakushou* just now, and I realised that I was seeing *myself* for the first time. This is my future... now it’s just for me to figure out how best to live it.”

The forests of District Seven had changed little in the time since he had last been here, and, as Joumei picked his way through the thick foliage, he observed absently that even some of the most hidden signposts that had guided the Kitsune in this overgrown paradise had begun to disappear into the undergrowth, as though the trees and ferns were trying to reclaim the area for their own. Insects buzzed close to the ground, looking for the blooms that unfurled their petals only in the deepest gloom, and as he walked beneath the heavy canopy, a heavy feeling settled over Joumei’s heart.

This would be the last time he would come here. His fingers slipped to the sash of his robe, fingering the handle of the shovel he had borrowed from the Seventh Division before he had left Inner Seireitei to conduct his final act of respect towards the family he had loved and lost. There was no longer a need for the Kitsune to live underground, or, he mused regretfully, to call themselves by that name. The work that his father had begun had laid the groundwork and Joumei’s own policies of integration had allowed most of the fit and healthy lesser members of the conclave to branch out and mingle in Seireitei communities with other ordinary folk. Now that he had met Nagesu face to face, Joumei was confident that, even if they strayed into District Three, there would be no danger of retribution on their heads.

Leaping nimbly over a jutted out tree root, Joumei paused to sweep back a particularly heavy layer of leaves and grass, brushing the earth beneath it clear until he could make out the worn surface of the stone that, so many years earlier, Keitarou had carved the character for “friend” into. For a moment he hesitated, then he placed his palm against the stone, pressing his skin down against the character until he had completely covered it from view and closing his eyes.

Thank you, Daisuke-sama. I never got to meet you myself, nor speak to you about your motives, but I thank you for them all the same. Father told me that you believed we were all victims, and that there should be no separation of kin. We were all Urahara, and it seems, we still are. People like Keitarou strove to keep us all divided, but now I've met the head of the Urahara, I know that that fortune changes with each generation. Like you could not choose the era you lived in, nor can my people trust me to be the same solid leader my father was. I've made mistakes and people have paid for those with their lives. However, I don't think that I've made one in trusting my sister's life and happiness to your younger son.

A faint smile touched his lips, and he opened his eyes, gazing around him with fresh appreciation for the peaceful solitude of the glen.

Keitarou chose this place for you because he loved you, and wanted you to rest in a suitable location, in peace at last.

Slowly he got to his feet, dusting the leaf litter from his hands.

A proper Urahara burial, even though both you and he had walked far from that line. I told your son, Daisuke-sama, that if he ever wanted to come here, I'd happily help him to find the place. So would Izumi — but he's not ready yet. Keitarou's crimes are still too fresh, and so are his brother's actions — but in time, maybe, he'll come. I don't know if I believe that your spirit still lingers in this place — but if it's waiting for Ketsui-dono, I'm sure that, one day, he'll come. Just like Tenichi-dono did — to pay his respects to the father whose actions, ultimately, allowed my sister and I to live. I wonder if you could have known, then, that one day your son would fall in love with one of our people, and that the family would, bit by bit, begin to mend.

He nudged the ferns back over the stone with the toe of his sandal, his expression becoming bittersweet.

She won't admit it clearly yet, and nor will he — but I see it, between them. Like mother and father... there's only one way it will end. Letting go of Izumi was the hardest thing I had to do, but it's for her own sake, and sometimes, I'll come by and make sure she's doing well. In the meantime, my obligation is to Hirata-sama, to repay him the debts I've incurred on my own account. Souja-dono is no longer here, but I am, and I'll work twice as hard to ensure that District Seven remains at peace for as long as I'm able.

He turned his back on the grave, ducking beneath the heavy branches of a nearby tree and making his way carefully through the greenery to the concealed opening of the mine. He had not been back here since the night of his escape, and, even after Keitarou's death he had delayed coming, telling himself that there were still things in

Inner Seireitei for him to take care of. Now, though, he knew he could put it off no longer. It had been hard to say goodbye to Izumi, and, he realised, he had regretted his departure from Seventh Division, for he had come to understand why Souja had held the place in so much esteem. Still, that was not his path. His people were gone and, once he had seen to the final burial of his dead kin in the maze underground, his duty was to return to the heart of District Seven and the Clan manor. Misashi would be waiting for him, he knew, and, as his life was no longer in constant danger from Urahara reprisals, his journey there should be an uneventful one.

So long, of course, as he did not cross tracks with Keitarou's oldest son, whose whereabouts were still unknown. Their last encounter still made Joumei uneasy about what might happen the next time they met — for though it seemed that Katsura had wiped the shinigami off his hit list, the killer of his sister was another matter.

Well, and we all find justice for our crimes eventually, one way or another. If that's my path, I'll walk it. If we meet again, Katsura-dono, then perhaps one thing may be settled, even if only one of us walks away from the encounter alive. I have honed my skills with Kikyue-hime's help, and I will fight for my life, even if that means taking yours. Izumi isn't in danger and I have nobody else to protect — so if we meet again, perhaps that ghost will also be laid to rest.

The tunnels were as he remembered them, and dust had settled in the entrance, indicating that nobody had been here since the altercation with Keitarou had broken the mine's sanctuary once and for all. Keitarou himself had clearly paid it no further interest once his prey had managed to escape, and as he turned and descended into the walkways he had known from his early childhood, he found a hollow sense of emptiness begin to gnaw away at him. It was not simply the Sekkiseki that made this place empty now, he realised with a jolt, but the fact it was no longer a home, and they were no longer a family. *Keitarou succeeded in destroying the Kitsune, but not in the way he imagined.*

Letting out a sigh, Joumei lowered his head to step into the chamber in which the corpses of his sickly kinsfolk still lay. Though it had been some time since they had died, the aura of Sekkiseki had helped to stay their spiritual decomposition, and so they appeared frozen in time, no longer of this world but not yet belonging to the next. It would take a little time to bury them alone, he realised, but nonetheless he did not want help. Their burial was his last duty as their leader, and he would not shirk from completing it in person.

Before he did, though, there was one other place he needed to go and one other thing he needed to see through.

Leaving the chamber behind him with a silent promise to his dead kin that he had not abandoned them a second time, he headed deeper into the bowels of the mine, pausing to draw breath as he reached the area where the Sekkiseki seams remained at their strongest. He had been in Inner Seireitei too long, he realised grimly, for sweat was beading his brow as his body protested from the sudden exposure, but he pressed on, determined not to turn back. It seemed a lifetime before he reached the chamber with the collapsed in ceiling, and though the dust and stone had settled, the whole area surrounding the door was blocked by heavy layers of rock. He was still very close to the Sekkiseki seam here, but on examining the fallen ceiling rock, he realised with relief that it was mostly ordinary stone, and therefore susceptible to spiritual magic. Hiko had brought it down on top of himself, he remembered grimly, and, now he was no longer under Keitarou's control, surely a second blast of *Shakkahou* would shift enough for him to be able to enter the chamber and retrieve his friend's corpse.

Hiko had not been a Kitsune, nor even a blood Urahara, but it didn't matter. Like Souja, he had been a valued ally, and, like Souja, Joumei wanted to ensure the man's spirit was allowed to rest in peace.

He closed his eyes, taking a deep breath to steady himself as he attempted to draw together what fragments of spirit power he could muster in the heavy, toxic atmosphere. Still, hard as it was, it also gave him a sense of relief. If, after just a short time away from the mine, his resistance to Sekkiseki could falter this much, then, perhaps, there was hope for Izumi to live a normal life without fear of developing the terrible wasting sickness that had killed their father, their grandfather and so many of their other kin.

At his third attempt, he managed to draw enough *reiryoku* together to fire one spell and, though it was raw and rough around the edges, it illuminated the whole cavern like a beacon, cannoning into the rock at close range. Joumei had aimed it perfectly for the rock's natural weak spot, and, as a result, fragments of stone went flying in all directions, causing him to drop to the ground and cover his head to protect it from flying shrapnel. The corridor was thick with Sekkiseki dust, and Joumei coughed violently, feeling nauseated as the heavy substance infiltrated his lungs and pricked against his throat. It took a moment for the cloud to clear, but, as it did, Joumei could see the chamber proper for the first time. Steeling himself to find his friend's crushed corpse, he scrambled to his feet, clambering over what was

left of the wreckage and then stopping dead, gripping hold of the rock more tightly between his fingers as he struggled to process what lay before him.

“Hiko?”

Although the ceiling had fallen, the majority of the chamber had remained undamaged, and though it was now cluttered with debris from Joumei’s explosion, it was far less damaged than he had originally expected based on Hiko’s spell. The chamber had once held a number of stored implements, weapons collected by Joumei’s father and other tools that had been used for one task or another over the years, and it was clear that the explosion had disturbed these, sending a few of them scattering across the ground. More importantly, however, although he could make out the dark shadow of blood against the stone, there was absolutely no sign of a corpse.

“Hiko!”

Suddenly galvanised into life, Joumei half climbed, half fell into the chamber, hurrying to the patch of blood and touching the edges of it with his fingers, watching as it flaked away against his skin. It had completely dried, yet as he scanned his surroundings for any sign of what had happened to his companion’s corpse, he made out another, smaller patch a short distance away. He shuffled over towards it, and as he did so, he saw another, then another, and another. A slow trail of stains led across the chamber, some smeared, some in droplets, as though something dripping blood had been carried through room from one side to the other. Heart now pounding in his chest, Joumei followed the trail until it reached the back wall, pressing his hands against the stone.

Hiko, where are you? Did Keitarou come back and take you? What did he do with you?

Helplessness washed over him, and he sank down onto the ground, tears pricking at the back of his eyes.

If it wasn’t bad enough that you threw yourself away for me, did that man come back and abuse your body further?

Just as he felt that his grief and the cave’s oppressive atmosphere would overwhelm him, he caught sight of one section of wall that did not look quite as it should. Moving closer to it, he explored it cautiously with his fingers, taking in the broken edges. More importantly, however, as he drew nearer he could make out distinctive bloody fingerprints, smeared with what was unmistakeably the charcoal residue of firing a powerful flame spell. For a moment

Joumei's heart stopped, his eyes opening wide with disbelief and sudden, incredulous hope.

Pulling the shovel from his waistband, he began to hack furiously at the rock from every angle he could possibly conceive, trying desperately to pry it away from the wall. It was hard work and he was tiring, fatigued already by the drain on his *reiryoku*, but at length the sharp metal of the spade and his determination won through, the rock cracking and crumbling away beneath his gaze.

Behind there was a hole. It was a crude one, as though it had been blasted open with some kind of spell and then the rest had been physically whacked through, but as he gazed at it, Joumei's sluggish heart suddenly began to palpitate in his chest. On the rough edges of the hole were further signs of bloody splatter. Inside the tunnel, discarded but covered with the same bloody prints were the mangled remains of two old swords and a halberd, the handles cracked and the edges blunted as though they had been used to force a way through. Joumei was enough of a scientist to understand the evidence that lay in front of him. Had Hiko been dragged from here dead, the blood would have smeared the floor and passage, but there was no sign of this. Dazed and reeling, he clung to the only other explanation that he had.

Hiko had not died in the explosion.

Hiko had left the cave, wounded but able enough to force a tunnel through to one of the old, disused exits that only a Kitsune would ever know how to find or navigate to the surface, backfilling his excavation to cover his tracks.

Following the trail down the tunnel, Joumei became ever more convinced that his hypothesis was correct. There was no sign of a body, just the discarded blade that Hiko had used to stab himself with Sekkiseki dust before diving into the chamber and firing the spell.

Hiko was still alive.

Joumei fell back against the tunnel wall, the tears falling unbidden as he processed this.

But why, then, would you not come to Inner Seireitei? Why would you leave and not tell me? Why would you do that, Hiko, if you were all right? You must know how we felt... you must know we'd want to know.

And then, in a flash, he understood, his relief replaced by a cold sense of reality.

Keitarou made sure you got out of the way of the explosion. Keitarou

prevented you from killing yourself. Keitarou made you escape the danger... probably because he felt that he could use you in some way later in order to get to me. You're not here, so either he didn't leave you here to ambush me, or when he died, the immediate control over you waned enough for you to follow your own will. But Keitarou's power of possession doesn't break by itself. Killing him doesn't free you from what he did to either of us. Kohaku saved me, but he didn't save you. None of us knew you were still alive, and none of us could do anything to help you. The orders he left with you, they remain. Hirata-sama was quite clear about that when talking about Ohara-dono, before he knew what Kohaku could do to help.

He closed his eyes, clenching his fists in anger and frustration.

If you left here on your own, then probably, you returned to your senses enough to make that decision. Probably, too, you understood what Keitarou's curse meant. Maybe he told you there was no escape from it — who knows what poison he pumped into your brain after I left this place. Maybe he still knew where you were, right up till he died — but he was only interested in me, and so let you run, in case he needed a later back-up plan to deal with me. You told me you wouldn't ever hurt me, and you're smart enough to have figured out what it's taken me this long to know. You don't know about Kohaku, or that there's a way to break Keitarou's spell. You only know that you promised me you wouldn't hurt me... and you're keeping that promise by staying away. If Keitarou ordered you not to kill yourself, then you won't be able to escape his curse that way. And if we ever meet, you'll try to kill me. Even if you've returned to rationality in all other respects, those orders will remain unless Kohaku is able to remove them... and I have no way of knowing where you even are.

He opened his eyes once more, new resolution burning in them.

I will find you, Hiko. Even if it's dangerous, I will. Even if you try to hurt me, I won't just abandon you. If you're alive out there, then I'll find you, and then, I'll go to Seireitei and beg Kohaku to heal you. I promise, no matter what, I will. I couldn't do anything for Souja-dono except kill his killer — but in your case, if it takes the rest of my life or even costs me it, I will find you. Being with the Kitsune damaged your life irrevocably — at the very least, I want to try to give some of it back.

79. Epilogue: To Stand Upon The Heavens

EPILOGUE To Stand Upon The Heavens

“Enter, Shiba Sora.”

The big heavy doors of the Captain’s Chamber swung back to reveal the long hallway within and Sora gathered her courage, clenching and unclenching her fists beneath the sleeves of her dark *shihakushou*. It would not do to falter now, on the biggest of stages, yet her heart was beating a mile a minute and Hotarue’s skittish excitement was doing nothing to calm her nerves.

Her room at Eighth had been all but cleared, and, as she had got ready that morning, it had been with a sense of bittersweet nostalgia that it would be the last time she would awaken within these four walls. Mitsuki and Naoko had appeared to help her with her *haori* and her apprehension, but, by the time Shunsui had poked his head around the door of the Vice Captain’s office to tell her that the summons had come, they had long since departed to attend to their own duties. She had been glad to see him, and at the sight of her, he had offered her a grin of approval.

“It will be strange, staring at you in the Captain’s hall instead of Anabomi,” he had reflected, and Sora had detected the genuine sadness in her friend’s dark eyes as he had surveyed her, “but you look the part, now, Sora-chan. Ninth need to know how lucky they are, getting such a well trained officer to lead them.”

At that point he had winked, and the momentary melancholy had all but gone from his expression.

“Remember, you’re representing Eighth Division going into this,” he had bantered, “so if you trip up or fall over your feet, I won’t forgive you.”

At his light-hearted words, Sora had felt tears pricking in her own eyes and, unashamedly, she had hugged him, dislodging the pink *haori* from his shoulders to reveal the newly restored white one that lay beneath

“Hey, what’s all this?” he had been taken off guard at her sudden show of emotion, but Sora had not cared.

“I’m just grateful to finally get out from under your paperwork and your hangovers,” she had bantered back, meeting his gaze with a warm one of her own. “I hope you’ve told Tetsu what to expect when he tries to enter your office — I’d hate to think you’d sold him my seat under false pretences.”

“Ah, well, Tetsuya has worked with me as long as you have, pretty much, so there’s no concealing the fact that I’m lazy and incompetent at best,” Shunsui had held her at arm’s length, amusement glittering in his own expression. “He’s a brave lad, though, and he’s agreed to take it on. We’ll be fine, and he’s said that, if it all gets to much for him, he’ll run to claim sanctuary at the Ninth.”

“Sensible man,” Sora had laughed, stepping back and smoothing down her *haori* once more, glancing at the office’s small mirror to make sure she was still presentable and that none of her dark curls had come loose from the ribbon in which she had confined them. “All right, I suppose I’m as ready as I ought to be. Go on, Shunsui. You shouldn’t be late on my account. I know where I’m going and I’ll follow right behind you — but from today, I’m not your subordinate any more. I’m your equal and I have to stand on my own two feet, no matter how scared I’m feeling — otherwise Ninth will never have confidence in me to rebuild all the damage Keitarou’s done.”

“They’d be fools if they didn’t, but I suppose you’re right,” Shunsui had pursed his lips, but he had nodded. “I’ll see you there, then. Remember, Juushirou, Hirata and I — we’re all your allies, and we’ll help you through, if you need it, the first few weeks. Standing on your own two feet is all very well, but the Gotei would be much more successful if it put pride and rivalries aside and worked cohesively, so don’t forget that asking us for advice isn’t abusing your rank. In this regard, we’re your senpai — and we’re always here to back you up, whatever we might say to you behind closed doors.”

“Thanks, Shunsui. I’ll remember that,” Sora’s eyes had shone with gratitude at this, and Shunsui had offered her a parting wink before disappearing from the office altogether. A moment later she had heard him give instructions to Shindou, before crossing the threshold and leaving Eighth’s compound completely, and she had taken a deep breath, summoning all her courage to make the short walk to the Gotei Captain’s hall.

Now, she was standing before that very door that, for so many years, she had waited impatiently outside, and, for the first time, it had opened to admit her as one of them.

Remembering Shunsui’s words about tripping up, she made her way

slowly and properly into the chamber, trying to ignore the Captains that flanked her on either side. Nagesu stood at the head of the room, his own uniform impeccable and his expression composed and grave as befitted the occasion. The room was so silent that you could've heard a pin drop, and Sora swallowed hard, then dropped down onto her knees, bowing her head low before the representative Captain who currently held sway over the rest.

"Shiba Sora, presenting for duty," she murmured, and Nagesu bent to touch her on the shoulder.

"Shiba Sora, you understand the will of the Captains in summoning you here today?"

"Yes, sir, I do."

"And you accept the responsibility conveyed upon you by your fellow officers, to lead and serve the Ninth Division from this point? You understand that this duty is a heavy one undertaken until such time that you are no longer able, even if that be till the end of your natural life?"

"Yes, sir. I understand, and I accept the burden of that responsibility."

"Then stand, Shiba Sora, Captain of the Ninth Division. From this point on you are one of us, and you should join the ranks as the others have before you."

Gingerly Sora stood, blinking at Nagesu for a moment, and the Head of the Third Division offered her a smile, extending an arm to gesture to the vacant space between Hirata of the Seventh and Atsushi of the Eleventh. Turning, she met Hirata's gaze, and something in the pale depths of her old friend's eyes helped to steady her nerves slightly. She made no comment, merely lowering her head in acceptance of the instruction, before making her way carefully and as demurely as she could muster to the side of the chamber, taking her position with an inward sigh of relief. On her right, Atsushi made no attempt to meet her gaze, but this rebuff was quickly forgotten as she registered Shunsui standing directly across from her.

So that was what you meant, when you said you'd be staring at me instead of Anabomi.

Despite her nerves, Sora's lips twitched into a genuine smile, and Shunsui's eyes twinkled.

Though I'll be all right, Shunsui. You've put me in this position, but I'll rise to the occasion and prove you weren't mistaken. I won't let them think

that a Shiba who trained in a foreign Division is in any way lacking. I'm a woman going into a Kuchiki Division to lead, and a foreign Clanswoman at that. There will have to be lots of changes, but sometimes that can be good. I've not had as much opportunity as I would've liked to visit the Ninth and meet its members, but after this, I will work hard to do what Anabomi did and know them all completely. I will make them accept me and move forward — both for the Gotei and for Ninth.

“Now that we have a full compliment of Captains again, Nagesu-sama, may I raise the question of when we can officially inaugurate replacement Vice Captains?” Shunsui turned his gaze to the front of the chamber. “Kitabata Hajime has been assessed under the new criteria for promoting adjutants, I believe, but I'd heard Hirata hadn't formally been given authority to award the badge. I'm waiting on similar clearance to present the Vice Captain's badge to my current Third Seated officer, Shindou Tetsuya — he's accepted and, as I understand it, also been passed as a candidate for promotion. This new system of testing suitability is all very well, but if it leaves squads without key officers, maybe it needs a proverbial kick up the rear.”

“There's something ironic about it being you talking about kicking anything up the rear, Shunsui,” as Sora tried to process the sudden shift in atmosphere from oppressively solemn and formal to a casual banter, Kyouki let out a chuckle of amusement. “I do second your point, though. Midori-dono and I ratified Shindou's suitability, and I believe that Guren-sama and Ukitake have done the same for Kitabata. Surely we can officially accept them into their new posts, if we can manage to prepare a *haori* to fit my daughter in time for this morning's ceremony?”

“I apologise. It's as you say, with so many things to arrange, final clearance hasn't been authorised, but it's another duty that the Captain Commander will simply have to see to more quickly, even among his Clan duties,” Nagesu acknowledged good-naturedly. “Hirata-dono, Shunsui-dono, you may inform your officers that their promotions have been accepted and ratified and you may award them their badges. From this point on they are Vice Captains of their respective Divisions.”

“Sora, what about Mikihara?” Hakubei cast his sister a quizzical look. “I know that he's been formally discharged from the Fourth, but I was under the impression that he wasn't physically fit to return to duty yet. I'd heard from the members of Ninth that he was going to go convalesce in Sixth District for a while — was that wrong?”

“I've been in close communication with him since it was agreed

that I'd take on this," Sora touched the *haori* self-consciously, pinkening slightly at being so suddenly under scrutiny. "We've discussed many things relating to the squad, and I've no intention of replacing him, even if I had a candidate of my own. There's nobody who knows Ninth better or cares about it more, and considering what the squad has been through, I want to have someone like that working with me if at all possible. I know that he's undertaking physiotherapy for his arm wounds — Retsu-sama can probably tell you more than me about how long that will take, though."

"It will take time, though Hyakken-dono is determined to regain his fitness and that is a help," Retsu reflected thoughtfully. "I believe your Vice Captain may take a year, perhaps longer before he can adequately raise a sword in the way he did before. However, we can hope that Soul Society has entered a period of peace. I think Sora-dono's assessment of the situation is a logical one, Hakubei-dono. Ninth Division need some stability, and Hyakken-dono is well-placed to ease the transition between the old regime and a new one."

"As for his convalescence, his daughter wants to take him, but he's resisting it thus far," Sora added ruefully. "He says that his place is here and there's nothing he can do in Sixth District that's of any use, whereas here he can at least be involved, even if he can't train or fight. He's quite obstinate in that regard. The better I come to understand him, I think that sending him to Sixth District to do nothing would hurt both his pride and his recovery. He's a soldier first and foremost, and I'm certain that he considers Ninth Division his real home. I'll keep him here and work with him, but I've told him that it's on the condition that he follows Retsu-sama's instructions and doesn't try to over-tax himself. If he does, I'll send him to his daughter myself."

"It sounds as though you have my kinsman's measure quite nicely," Guren remarked. "He's as you say, a soldier before anything else. I suppose it's an advantage, having worked as Vice Captains together. You're acquainted and so know a little of each other's methods."

"On the contrary, we had little involvement with each other until recently. We attended the same meetings, but I wouldn't say we were well acquainted," Sora shook her head. "I'm coming to know him now, though. I believe we'll work fine together, Guren-sama. Shunsui will tell you that I'm pretty stubborn too."

"I might actually get a lie in, now you're living next door," Shunsui reflected, and Juushirou let out an amused chuckle.

"If I know Sora, and I do, she'll have told Shindou to make sure he

doesn't let your discipline slip," he warned, and Sora nodded.

"Of course," she said frankly, as Shunsui groaned. "I'm not going to let the reputation of Eighth crumble just because your first Vice Captain got promoted."

"Then I think we can lay to rest any concerns about the rebuilding of Ninth," Midori observed. "Kyouki-sama, what of the health of your own son? I understand Ryuusei-dono was questioning his own position after the Real World incident."

"For the time being, Ryuusei will remain as Vice Captain of the Fifth," Kyouki's expression became shadowed, but she nodded. "Like Mikihara, he knows the role best, and in peace-time, that's an important thing to remember. But he's actively considering his future, and so am I. We intend to work hard with the Division's current third seat, Arai, with the view to making him Vice Captain at a future date."

"Oniisama is going to retire from the Gotei completely?" Sora let out a gasp, and Hakubei pressed his lips together, shaking his head.

"I wondered, from things he'd said to me," he owned. "Sora, Ryuu-nii is the heir to the Clan. That's the role he was born into, and if he had been killed in the Real World, that duty would've fallen to Seikyou, whose training is a long way from complete. Seikyou's going to the Academy, but Ryuu-nii's been considering prioritising his Clan position over his military one. Now that Seventh has set the precedent of not naming a First Degree Clan member as adjutant, Ryuu-nii doesn't see the need for him to keep up appearances if there's a better man to take on the role."

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but Ryuusei-dono lost his left arm?" Mareiko frowned. "My right has been impaired for a long time, and that was my sword-arm, but nobody has considered it wrong for me to stand here and do this duty. Surely Ryuusei-dono is right handed? Surely then, his sword arm..."

"It doesn't matter," Atsushi shook his head. "Your case is different, Mareiko. You still have your arm, and though it's impaired for holding a blade usefully, you're capable of using that arm if need be. It just isn't strong enough to wield a sword any longer. Ryuusei-dono is missing his arm completely. As a sword fighter, that loss puts you at a disadvantage whether you are right or left handed. And, for a shinigami, even more so. Ryuusei-dono's decision is a sound military one for the future of the Fifth Division and should be respected. If he can no longer do the job fully, then it makes sense for him to bow out. Even if he is the heir to the Clan."

“Ryuusei sees things much that way, and the Clan would prefer him at home dealing with family business,” Kyouki nodded. ‘I had planned to hand over my Captaincy to him at some point, because the Shiba complain a lot about my constant absences, but now it seems that things will move in the other direction. I will remain active Captain of the Fifth Division for the foreseeable future, and Ryuusei, when he retires, will be my deputy in District Five and will deal with the administrative issues there. He is very competent at such things, and much more so than a sixteen year old boy could be. Better him than Hakubei,’ she cast her second son a wry smile, “whose skill with a sword might be great, but whose head for figures is nonexistent.”

“Hey, I can count to ten, and that’s the number on the back of my *haori*, so that’s all that matters,” Hakubei seemed unconcerned by the criticism. “And Ryuu-nii already knows that I support his decision, if and when he makes it.”

“Nobody even mentioned it to me,” Sora murmured, and Kyouki cast her a glance.

“Because, Sora-chan, you’re no longer a Shiba in the political sense,” she said softly. “You were Vice Captain of the Eighth, now Captain of the Ninth. You’ve forged your own path — it’s no longer your decision to make.”

“No, not as a political entity,” Sora shook her head, “but you know, it would be nice if Ryuusei-nii remembered I’m his sister sometimes, too. It’s all right, Okaasama. It’s none of my business, as you said — and I’ll have plenty enough to do with Ninth and Mikihara to bother much about what goes on in Fifth anyway.”

“When Fifth are ready to consider a change, Kyouki-dono, please notify us of your choice of replacement as soon as you are able,” Nagesu interjected quickly. “The priority is to get the Gotei squads up and functioning at full throttle. Retsu-sama, I believe you are working on plans to return to Rukongai?”

“Indeed,” Retsu nodded sombrely. “The Fourth will begin sending representation back through the *Senkaimon* at the end of this month.”

“That soon?” Juushirou bit his lip, and Retsu offered him a smile.

“I intend to reduce the burden on all officers by rotating those stationed there from time to time,” she said evenly. “However, the support of other squads, as I mentioned before, will be required. I am in the process of drawing up a potential plan for this — and I hope to present it before the next Captains’ meeting. I wish to have the support of all of you and your squads, as I think we’ve already learned

that Rukongai is too important for us to ignore.”

“The same will apply to the Real World, and part of the reason I’ve taken so long to process the Vice Captain nominations has been because I’ve been working on a similar overlay for Real World dispatch,” Nagesu added. “Next meeting, then, we will address both concerns and, between us, agree on the way forward for patrols. Sora-dono, I trust that you will have Ninth in some working order by that time?”

“I hope so,” Sora nodded. “I intend to begin trying to sort things out this afternoon, and I’m told that most of the patrols are still intact from Anabomi’s day. We should be fine, Nagesu-sama. Don’t delay on our account. Ninth will be ready alongside its fellows, and even if I can’t dispatch my Vice Captain into active military service for a while, I’m not afraid of undertaking it myself and leaving matters here in his hands.”

“Then for the time being, I think we can close,” Nagesu looked satisfied. “The next meeting will be two weeks from today, and all Captains should bring with them patrol data, so that we can hash out a working plan for these future deployments. Meeting dismissed.”

He raised his hand, and the great doors at the end of the chamber swung open once more, allowing daylight to stream into the dimly lit hall. Sora let out a sigh of relief, turning to leave with all the others, when she felt a hand on her shoulder.

“See, you did fine,” it was Shunsui’s voice, and she turned, offering him a rueful smile.

“Is it always like that? That formal, then that casual?”

“No...” Shunsui looked pensive. “Usually it’s just casual. Or if it isn’t, I’m rather good at making it that way. I’m sorry if we’ve destroyed your illusion of what a Captain is, Sora-chan... but you had to learn the truth sooner or later.”

“It’s quite reassuring,” Sora laughed, as she allowed him to lead her out towards the sunshine. “I thought I’d be afraid to speak, but I think I feel better, knowing now that I can. Even if I do have to stare at your ugly mug for most of the proceedings.”

“The same applies to me, you know,” Shunsui objected. “Still, I suppose we’ll both get used to it. And now I’m going to have to take my leave of you, because I want to grab Juushirou and discuss something with him before I head back and drop the entire weight of Vice Captain responsibility on Tetsuya’s unsuspecting head. You have

your own duties now — and one of them has come to meet you.”

He gestured, and Sora’s eyes widened as she took in the slim form of her Vice Captain, standing to one side of the walkway. His arms were still heavily bandaged, but he was dressed in full uniform and, on his upper arm Hyakken wore the insignia of the Ninth Division. As they drew closer, he stepped forward, bowing his head.

“Mikihara!” Sora found her voice, only just managing to refrain from grabbing the man and giving him a shake. “What are you doing here? And in uniform, too? I thought you weren’t supposed to be actively up and about too much for the immediate future, and I know I told you that I’d come straight back to Ninth after this, so you didn’t need to bother about anything.”

“I apologise for the insubordination, Sora-dono,” Hyakken raised his gaze, and Sora was struck by the resolution that burned in their grey depths, “but it is the duty of a Vice Captain to meet his new Captain and to introduce her formally to the Division. Besides, the fresh air has done me good. I am not over-taxing myself, simply walking up here, and I have no intention of trying to do anything more strenuous than accompany you back. Everyone at Ninth is eagerly awaiting your arrival, and it would not be proper for you to arrive without my meeting you.”

“You still look like the wind might blow you away, Hyakken-dono,” Shunsui eyed the Ninth Vice Captain critically, and Hyakken managed a faint smile.

“Perhaps I am not recovered,” he admitted, “nor should I expect to be, after being at risk of my life. It is important, however, that Ninth see for themselves that I believe in Anabomi-taichou’s replacement. Even if I can’t hold a sword, there are things I can do — and I hope, Sora-dono will allow me to do them.”

“Well, keeping you out in the breeze and on your feet when you shouldn’t be roaming wild around Seireitei won’t endear me to the Unohana, so I suggest that we head back to Ninth,” Sora relented, offering Shunsui a resigned smile. “I’ll speak to you soon, Shunsui. My new Division calls.”

“Good luck,” Shunsui returned the smile with one of his own. “Not that I think you need it... and I should know.”

He winked again, then was gone, leaving the two, Captain and Vice Captain alone.

“Well, I suppose we’re going to Ninth,” Sora said with a sigh.

“Though I wish you’d told me you were going to come.”

“You would have tried to talk me out of it,” Hyakken said matter-of-factly, and Sora nodded.

“I would,” she agreed, “and I suppose you’d have come anyway, which wouldn’t have done much for my authority in front of the Ninth. Are they really that on edge about my coming that you felt you had to drag yourself up to come meet me? Because I know that it will take them time to get used to me, and I haven’t had all the time I hoped to speak to them, but...”

“I know my duty,” Hyakken shrugged his shoulders. “More, so do they. The Ninth is not entirely comprised of Kuchiki, but there is still a sense of doing things by the book that your predecessor instilled. They will understand far more clearly my support for you if they see us arrive together. As you said, you need my knowledge of them, and I need to have a purpose whilst my wounds recover, so facilitating your takeover will have to be it.”

“And if I send you home to your daughter instead?”

“I don’t think you’ll do that,” Hyakken offered her a knowing smile. “You’d hate it yourself, wouldn’t you, if you were hurt and sent away from the action instead of being allowed to heal right in the middle of the place you belong?”

“True,” Sora acknowledged. “All right. This time, you win — but only because I’m apprehensive myself about the Ninth and their accepting me fully as their new Captain. I intend to do my best, but running you into the ground while you heal isn’t on my agenda — so when we get back, you make sure you get off your feet and rest. I’m sure nobody wants to spend much time in Anabomi’s office considering that neither the stains nor the memories are likely to soon fade, but until I’ve worked out plans for my own work space, we can talk in the Vice Captain’s office quite adequately. I know that there are cushions in there, because I’ve seen them.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Hyakken inclined his head slightly, and Sora sighed.

“I’m nervous,” she admitted. “I’d hoped to spend more time at Ninth before the changeover, but with processing the aftermath of what happened at Eighth and seeing to the people there, it didn’t work out that way. I did speak to Sakura-chan and I did find out some things from her... but most of the others I still know only by sight, not by name. When I called by Ninth to see Ryuu, most of the members I saw just kind of stared at me, they didn’t seem to feel they could approach. I know Ryuu’s returned to Sixth now — and I don’t want to

be walking into a wall of eyes and nothing else.”

Hyakken did not reply right away, and for a short while they walked in silence, Sora slowing her pace to match the slightly hesitant gait of her companion. Though he had said that he was not pushing himself, she knew that deep down he was. The grief that she had sensed in the air on her awkward visit to Ninth was there in Hyakken’s aura too — a need and determination to return to work to chase away the ghosts that were still deeply rooted within his soul and the soul of the Ninth. This was the real challenge that she faced, she recognised with a jolt. No matter how confident she was in her skills and her training experience, dealing with a Division still in mourning would be the trickiest part of the challenge. Would they even accept a new leader? Anabomi’s memorial had taken place the previous weekend, followed by those of his subordinates, and the bodies long since returned to District Six to be properly buried. Though some weeks had passed now since Keitarou’s invasion, the wounds were still likely to be raw.

As they reached the gate of the Ninth, Sora hesitated for a moment, her gaze flitting beyond the marble wall towards the place she had considered home for so many years. A tiny knot of homesickness curled up inside of her, but she forced it away, allowing her fingers to brush against the soft white of her *haori* as she reminded herself that that was the past now, and this was her future.

As though sensing her unease, Hyakken turned to glance at her, offering her a pensive smile.

“It’s a big change for all of us,” he said evenly. “Life must go on. They know that too. You needn’t worry, Sora-dono. You care about this Division, and I’ve seen that with my own eyes when you’ve come to talk to me about it. They’ll soon realise it too. You are the kind of Captain Anabomi-taichou would have probably chosen to succeed him. This is not really a Kuchiki Division any more than you are a Shiba Captain — Anabomi-taichou did not believe in it, even though at times he couldn’t avoid Guren-sama’s commands. He saw very clearly that Ninth’s future lay in separation and autonomy. He would accept you, as I have, and so, ultimately, will they.”

“Fukutaichou! Sora-dono!”

Before Sora could reply, there was an excited yell, and Sakura came skidding out of the gateway, almost tripping over her own feet in her hurry to greet the pair. Cheeks flushing red with embarrassment, she hastily righted herself, moving to bow properly before her two senior officers.

“I’m sorry. I meant to do that so much more neatly,” she admitted self-effacingly, and despite herself, Sora laughed, feeling some of her tension slip away.

“It’s quite all right, Sakura-chan,” she said warmly. “I’ve spent my last twenty-five years at the Eighth. I don’t know the first thing about keeping up appearances.”

She held out a hand to pat the younger woman on the shoulder.

“Truth is, you’ve helped settle my nerves,” she added. “Is everyone assembled inside? I think I’m ready now to meet the Division properly and formally as a Captain should.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Sakura nodded eagerly. “Fukutaichou gave me strict instructions and so the whole Division is waiting in the yard to meet you.”

“Thank you, Takaoka,” Hyakken offered a faint smile. “We’ll be coming there now.”

“I thought I told you you were going to go sit down and rest,” Sora shot her new adjutant a sidelong glance. “You can come in with me and introduce me, fair enough, but after that you’re retiring to the office to wait for me. You can take that as a stern order from your new Captain and I won’t tolerate any deviation from it.”

Sakura’s eyes widened at this casual, blunt instruction, but Hyakken’s expression became rueful and he nodded.

“I will,” he promised. “Once I’ve discharged my duty to my previous Captain in bringing forth his successor, I’ll embrace fully my new Captain’s orders and follow them to the letter. You needn’t worry, Sora-dono. I don’t intend on being troublesome.”

“Then good,” Sora looked satisfied. “Sakura, we’re coming in now. Run in and tell them, all right?”

“Yes, ma’am!” Sakura saluted, then disappeared, leaving her two fellow officers to follow.

“She’s working double-time, isn’t she, in the absence of any other higher seats?” Sora murmured as they crossed the threshold, Hyakken leading the way around the side of the barracks to the Ninth Division’s training yard. “Is there something we can do about that, Mikihara? Ryuu said it too — that despite all she’s been through, Sakura’s been taking charge and supporting the other members as much as she’s been able.”

“You mean in terms of promotion?” Hyakken looked thoughtful,

then he nodded. "Ryuu-dono also mentioned her name to me when he came to visit me before I was discharged. He said the same thing you just did. Ryuu-dono is a self-effacing man and doesn't usually like to claim credit for his own influence in these things, but even given that, he made it sound as though Ninth would have gone to pieces without Takaoka's efforts. Even though in many ways she had the most traumatic experience of all of them, witnessing the murder of her comrades and coming under the attack of a possessed Captain, she's not let it scar her, nor has she talked about leaving the Division. She isn't the only member who isn't a Kuchiki, but she is the only one with such high rank and long experience in the squad at present. She joined because of Anabomi-taichou, but I wouldn't have been surprised if she had said she wanted to leave and, being a Yamamoto, she would probably have managed to find a place in Eleventh or even First based on her military conduct. She hasn't done that, and Ryuu said that she gave short shrift to any recruit or other member who dared suggest trying to leave to go elsewhere. I think that loyalty ought to be rewarded with promotion, too."

"Then when the formal mourning period is over, we'll promote her." Sora decided. "And from that point, we'll build up. Even if it happens bit by bit, I intend to go to the Academy like Anabomi did. If necessary, I'll steal recruits out from under Juushirou's nose."

She grinned mischievously.

"I know him and I know all his tactics," she added, "so I'm sure that I can bring some more people our way. Too many District students haven't completed the Academy programme successfully or have felt forced into dropping out, but if they know that the whole Gotei are now interested in recruiting them alongside Clansfolk, I think that might change. Right now, though... first things first."

Hyakken nodded, and they stepped out into the yard, Sora pausing for a moment as, like one person, every gaze turned towards her. There was a hush, and Sora swallowed hard, feeling the tension come creeping back into her body. Then Hyakken stepped forward, and Sora was startled by his change in demeanour, for the steely glint in his grey eyes made him suddenly seem not so frail and delicate.

"Is that the way Ninth Division greets its new Captain?" he demanded, in crisp, curt tones that carried across the whole of the yard. "You don't need me to tell you that you bow before an officer of high rank."

There was a sudden sense of fidgeting and discomfort from within the ranks, then Sora watched with a mixture of bewilderment and

fascination as the gaggle of officers suddenly formed themselves into straighter lines, bowing their heads towards her. Despite the pressure, something about the robotic solemnity of the process made her want to laugh, and she bit her lip, hoping that they would not sense her amusement and be offended by it. It took a moment for her to regain her composure, but she took a deep breath, moving forward into the heart of the courtyard proper.

“At ease,” she said softly, and, slowly, the Ninth Division officers obeyed, raising their gazes to hers. Some faces she knew, but many she did not, and there were questions and hesitations in the expressions of many. She pressed her lips together, berating herself for her moment of mirth. This was a serious situation and she needed to face it like a Captain.

Preferably not one like Shunsui. I chose a bad role model. Oh well. How would Juushirou deal with this? It's either him or Hirata, and I think this squad's had enough of Seventh Division's hunter ethic for the time being.

She took another deep breath, then,

“Ninth has been through a lot of stuff, lately,” she said gravely. “I don’t expect any of you to forget or overcome the things you feel about that right away. You have lost a Captain who loved you all very much — and talking to Mikihara has made me realise exactly how important he was to all of you. You’ve also lost other officers, and must miss them badly, too. It means a lot of changes from this point on.”

She offered Hyakken a smile, then,

“I’m not Anabomi,” she added. “I’m not going to be the Captain he was, nor will I have all of the same expectations of my members. But one thing I think is really important is this Division’s sense of identity. I’m a stranger here, and you know Ninth better than me. I will take time to get to know all of you and work with you in whatever regard is necessary, but I want you to all understand that I also believe in Ninth Division and its future as a Division that stands equal and proud to any and all other squads in Seireitei. If I didn’t have that commitment, I wouldn’t have accepted this position. I hope you’ll all help me to do that, and to implement the changes that will have to come as a result of the losses here. As I said, I don’t expect you to put those events behind you immediately — but as a military organisation, even in grief, we can’t simply stand still. The Captains are already discussing deployments to the Real World and Rukongai, and I told them that Ninth Division would be ready and prepared to take its place with the others when that time came. I am confident

from all Mikihara has told me that you're not going to make me break that promise, so I want to begin getting to grips with this squad and its systems right away."

She gestured to Hyakken.

"For the time being, Mikihara will not be taking drills or practical sword training sessions, not until the Fourth decide he is healed enough to do so," she continued. "I will personally take on any of those duties for the foreseeable future, as it will give me a chance to get to know people. Mikihara has told me that he usually organises patrols and things of that nature, and he is happy to continue to do so. That leaves me to do the job of getting to know every other bit of Ninth, and, particularly, its strengths and weaknesses. Mikihara, do you have anything else you want to say before I dismiss you to go over the patrol paperwork for this week?"

"Just that I want everyone to be clear that Sora-dono is a Captain I have agreed to serve because I believe she is the right person to continue what Anabomi-taichou began," Hyakken said matter-of-factly. "We are our own Division, and we will continue to evolve as such. You may all consider any insubordination against Sora-dono as insubordination against me, against Anabomi-taichou, and against the spirit of the Ninth Division itself. Sora-dono might be forgiving of such things in the early part of her time here... but I will absolutely *not* be. And, even if I cannot draw my sword at present, I am still capable of overseeing necessary discipline. Remember that any such action will simply be dishonouring the memory of the officers who lost their lives here. I believe Anabomi-taichou would welcome this change, and so, so do I. I trust you all understand?"

There was a collective assent, and Sora pursed her lips, taking in once again the sudden vigour that had apparently animated her companion's frail frame.

He may be overdoing it, but this is the Vice Captain I'm working with. Strict, disciplined, and a soldier. He wants them to make a good impression on me as much as he wants them to accept me. Completely different from Eighth, where Shunsui left me to do the paperwork when he could and threw disciplinary challenges my way all the time. Mikihara sees himself as the one who does those things... and I'm probably going to let him. Well, it might be nice to have extra time to think about other matters for a change.

"In which case, Mikihara, you're dismissed. With the Captains' meeting only a fortnight away, and so much to reorganise, it's better you begin looking through papers right away," she said aloud, and Hyakken bowed his head solemnly in her direction before turning on

his heel and disappearing back towards the main barracks. Her words had been casual, but she had seen the gratitude in the man's eyes for making out that his relegation to the office was due to a heavy workload than to the state of his injury.

"Right then," once he was gone, Sora turned her attention back to the gathered Division members. "Sakura-chan, I'm going to need your help with this, if you don't mind. I intend on organising a brief, brisk training exercise to get a feel for everyone and the range of skills they have. You know everyone far better than me, so I'm going to rely on you to assist. First of all I want to know what other higher seated officers I have — Ninth Division has a Seventh and an Eighth seat as well, I trust? And a Ninth and a Tenth?"

"Yes, ma'am," Sakura nodded, gesturing towards the group of officers and, one by one, four men stood forward. "They were on patrol on Anabomi-taichou's orders at the time of the attack, but returned safely to Inner Seireitei a day or two later with no reported losses in the field. Shall I present them to you?"

Present them..?

Sora blinked, then reminded herself again of the formality the Ninth was used to, and she nodded her head.

"Please, do," she agreed, and Sakura beamed, beginning to introduce each of the seated officers in turn. As she did so, Sora took another careful glance around the Division, noticing how the tension in the air had begun to dissipate. A slight smile touched her lips.

Well, so here it begins. I'm really the Ninth Captain now — and from this point on, that's where my loyalties will have to be. This isn't a squad that can take more grief and pain — so whatever else I do with Shunsui's nomination, I'm going to make sure I win the trust of these people and turn them back into what Anabomi wanted them to be — a Division where people want to recruit and work. So it's not quite the casual family atmosphere of Eighth yet, but there's time. Time to rebuild from the ashes, and create the kind of Division that can stand proud among the rest.

The path was a well-trodden one, where the grass had been worn away by years of sandalled pilgrimages up the same hill. At the top, the glint of sunlight off the golden gates seemed almost ethereal, and Mareiko paused, shielding her gaze from the bulk of the glare as she surveyed her surroundings.

Her heart was heavy, yet at the same time, determined. Pressing her lips together in a thin line, she marched forward, resting her hand

momentarily against the gilted railings before reaching into the folds of her *obi* for the ring of keys she always carried with her. Today she wore no *haori*, and her sword had stayed at home. She had not come as the Twelfth Division Captain, but simply as an off-duty shinigami, to a place that, over the course of the past twenty five years had become as familiar to her as her own Division grounds.

Or maybe, considering the frequent rebuildings that took place there, more so.

A faint smile touched her lips, but it was quickly gone, and she fumbled through the keys for the right one. As she did so, though, the gate creaked slightly beneath her touch, and to her surprise, she found that it was already unlocked. Someone had come before her, she realised, pushing the divide back and returning the keys to the safety of her belt. In all the times she had previously visited, she had generally been alone, yet there was no mistake. Today, another had arrived here before her and, as she reached her final destination, she could see her companion, his tail of fair hair fluttering in the wind.

“Nagesu... sama.”

The words left her lips before she realised they were going to, and the man turned, offering her a pensive smile.

“Mareiko. I wondered if you might come here... I know that you often have. Michihashi told me that when you needed time to think, this is where he knew he could always find you.”

“Did you come looking for me, sir?” Mareiko was immediately on her guard, but Nagesu shook his head.

“I came to ponder the rightness or wrongness of the decisions we all make,” he admitted. “I came to see your Captain’s plaque, and to consider whether or not it ought to remain.”

Mareiko did not respond for a moment, instead picking her way across the uneven tufts of grass towards the far wall to stand at her Clan leader’s side. Her gaze strayed to a stretch of marble wall which had been carefully and religiously cleared of creeping ivy and other weeds and plants that had woven their way over other parts, papering over cracks and chips that weather and neglect had ripped through some of the older markers.

No bodies were buried here, but nonetheless, this was a place of reverence, for in this enclosed space, surrounded by trees and birds and aesthetic landscaping were the memorials of all of the Captains who had ever died fighting for Seireitei. It was older than the current

Gotei squad system, older even than the Council of Elders, and some of the plaques were so ancient that it was no longer possible to read the names of the individuals that had once been hammered into the rusted metal. Of all those who had been remembered here, Shougo's marker was the newest but, as she glanced around her, Mareiko could see that already wooden pegs had marked out a new spot, and her heart ached suddenly in her chest as she recognised the badge of the Kuchiki and knew this would be the place where Anabomi would be added to the rest.

"Anabomi-taichou's marker will be very close to Taichou's," she said at last, turning her back on it and meeting her Clan leader's gaze instead. "Do you think he'd be happy about that, Nagesu-sama? It was Shougo-dono's potion that made him a monster... do you think he'd want to be here, if he'd known what his friend had done?"

"I don't know," Nagesu admitted, looking troubled, and he reached out a hand to brush it against Shougo's plaque. "I want to believe that that, at least, was some kind of terrible accident. When you betray your Clan, your subordinates, your colleagues, it's a lonely reality. Shougo-dono sacrificed all of those things for a goal of his own... but I've been going over everything from that lab, and I can't find a single piece of evidence that he meant Anabomi any harm. The journal we retrieved from Ninth is full of notes and formula, but I believe he gave it to Anabomi for safe-keeping, not with the intention of making Anabomi a test subject. It would've been too risky... and Anabomi died without any suspicions of the depths of his friend's work. Whatever made him drink that potion, I want to believe his death was never in Shougo-dono's plans."

"I don't see why it couldn't have been," Mareiko's words held a bitter edge. "He intended it for everyone else who trusted him. Why not Anabomi as well?"

"Mareiko..." Nagesu cast her a startled glance, then he sighed, shaking his head.

"I'm sorry," he murmured. "He hurt you more than anyone... I suppose I shouldn't be surprised to hear the anger in your voice."

"You mistake me, sir," Mareiko shook her head, her eyes darkening momentarily with resolve. "I'm not angry with him. I don't know how to be. If I'm angry, I think it's just with myself. I was inadequate in many ways, and I never understood. I put Atsushi-kun through so much suffering *because* I didn't understand, and then I made it worse by drugging my Division and trying to kill him. When I think of how easily I was manipulated to do such things, I realise how easy it was

for Taichou to fool me. I was blind. That's all. Taichou isn't to blame. I am."

"Perhaps that extends to all of us, but it doesn't change the severity of his crimes," Nagesu reflected. "Atsushi-dono is the only one who saw through him, and as we now know, paid a heavy price for it. He's a brave man, Mareiko. I'm glad you've decided to train with him again. I've often regretted how badly you were hurt in the Rukon incident, but if you believe you can fight with your left hand instead, then perhaps..."

"I want to be a useful Captain to the Gotei in whatever way you need me," Mareiko said firmly. "That's all that matters to me now. Atsushi-kun made me realise how bad this has been for Twelfth, not just me. I have to... to lift them and make them believe that was the past. I became a Captain because I wanted to finish Taichou's work, but I realise that I never understood what that meant. Now I do, I want no part of it. Of any of it. Not even if I do owe him the biggest debt for making me his Vice Captain and giving me the life I have now."

"Mm," Nagesu was silent for a moment, then he sighed, slipping his fingers into his *obi* and pulling out a sheet of faded paper, the edges curled and worn with age. He hesitated for a moment, running the folded sheet between his index finger and thumb absently, and Mareiko saw the indecision in his pale eyes.

"Is something wrong?" she asked quietly, and Nagesu glanced at the sheet, tapping his index finger against it once more.

"We've never talked about your family," he said softly. "I knew, of course, that your parents had adopted you... but it never seemed important that they had."

"Nagesu-sama?" Mareiko's eyes widened with consternation, and Nagesu offered her a sad smile.

"I knew that Daigo-dono had arranged the adoption," he continued evenly. "He told the Urahara court that you were the child of a noblewoman who had lost her husband and who had fallen on hard times. He said that he had seen spiritual potential in you, and the Sekime family were eager to make you their child. I knew that your mother... your adoptive mother... was unable to conceive, and so you were the answer to her prayers. The moment I first saw you, I didn't doubt a word Daigo-dono had said. You were so obviously Urahara. I never asked any questions. I never thought I needed to."

Mareiko chewed on her lip, lowering her head in shame.

"I'm not that," she murmured. "I know that my mother and father weren't married, Nagesu-sama. And my mother... was outside the degrees of Clan. I can't tell you about my father, but I've always known those things. Only my adoptive parents made me promise not to talk about it, and so I haven't. Daigo-sama and Taichou looked after me and I never wanted for anything because of their kindness. I was trained, educated, and given this position to shine in the Gotei. I was in a position where I was even able to be useful to a man of your status... things an illegitimate child like me should never aspire to."

"No," Nagesu clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth, looking troubled. "No, I'm rather afraid that attitude has lurked in the shadows of far too much for far too long. Daigo-dono took those three creatures he turned to Hollow from the jails, true enough, but two of them were born as you were — illegitimate. He used them for his experiments, but instead, he saw a different potential in you. He found you a home and gave you favour and attention not befitting your rank. Did you never wonder why he did it?"

"I always thought it was because my mother was in trouble and he took pity on me," Mareiko owned. "I didn't have any other explanation... or any reason to doubt his intentions. Only now... since all of this... maybe I do wonder. And if what you just said is true... it makes me wonder what he did with my mother. Whether... whether she was one of his experiments, too..."

She faltered, her voice breaking slightly, and Nagesu grasped her by the shoulders, giving her a gentle shake as tears glittered against her lashes.

"I've found no evidence of that," he assured her. "I don't know what happened to your mother, Mareiko, but I am certain she wasn't one of Daigo's test subjects. I have a lot of warrants and a paper trail of evidence identifying several individuals who were, but your mother is not among them."

"You know my mother's name!" Mareiko's head shot up, and Nagesu nodded.

"I do."

"Then you came here knowing... what I just told you about myself, you already..."

"I came with the same doubts in my heart you have about Shougo-dono's motives where you were concerned," Nagesu admitted. "I didn't expect to see you now, but its as well we speak here than at Twelfth, where people might overhear things they should not. I think

it best that this discussion remains between the two of us.”

“Sir?” Now Mareiko was well and truly on edge, and Nagesu relinquished his grip on her shoulders, glancing at the paper which had become creased as a result of his impulsive gesture.

“This was among the papers I retrieved from the Real World. I found it in among some others — one of which identified the third of Daigo’s hollow men, who fought and decimated Fifth Division’s members,” the Third Division Captain spoke grimly. “It seemed to have no connection to anything, but the more I read through Daigo-dono’s diary and the notes added by his son, the more I began to see the whole picture. For the first time I understood their real intentions where you were concerned... the reason they were so interested in you, and why you did not become one of their experiments.”

“Because of that letter?” Mareiko asked faintly, and Nagesu shrugged.

“It’s a love letter,” he owned. “A letter from your father to your mother, written a long time ago.”

“My... father?” Mareiko blanched, and she held up her hands. “I don’t... I don’t need... I don’t want... he... he never came after me, or helped my mother, so I never... Nagesu-sama, if you want to denounce me as your kinswoman, and reject me, then I will accept your judgement, but please, don’t humiliate... don’t make me...”

“Shh,” Nagesu shook his head, his pale eyes softening behind his glasses. “Calm yourself. I have no intention of doing that. This whole incident has taught me that the value we place on purity of birth and lineage is a false security. I have been betrayed enough times by men and women of pure blood. In the last few weeks, though, I have met a young boy who saved all of Seireitei, even though he willingly signed himself off as illegitimate and turned his back on both the Clans to whom he could claim connections. I’ve met those who’ve lived in shadows for years based on my Father’s decisions, yet in our time of need, they stepped forward and contributed to this war effort. And I’ve always had you too, Mareiko... and your science. Even now, after being dealt this kind of a blow, you’ve rallied and you’ve come through for me. I don’t care how you came into this world. I’m just glad that you did.”

“Please, don’t say such things,” stricken, Mareiko could not prevent the tears from falling, and she grasped Nagesu’s arm, shaking her head in dismay. “I’m not... I’m such a failure in all ways. If you knew... if you understood...”

“I understand that, over the last twenty-five years, you have proven yourself more adept and useful with your scientific gifts than your predecessor ever managed to do,” Nagesu cut across her. “And now I know why. I understand what Daigo and Shougo wanted to cultivate by training and patronising you. I value your involvement in Seireitei, Mareiko, and I intend to keep you exactly where you are for as long as you’re willing to serve.”

“But I... if you listen, if you let me... I need to... all the things I’ve...” Mareiko was beside herself now, unable to form a coherent sentence, and Nagesu gently detached his arm from her grip.

“We both trusted a man who betrayed us, and it’s a hard pill to swallow,” he said soberly. “But I believe, so long as I have your support, not all is lost. He gave you to me and, as a scientific aide, you are not replaceable. So please don’t tell me you intend to hang up your *haori*, Mareiko. If you do, I will be lost, and so will Seireitei. Your work and your research is pivotal — and I haven’t forgotten that, by your giving my notes to Ukitake, it fell into the hands of a promising young scientist who was able to see through the flaws to the truth beneath. I won’t ever disclose the truth of your origins to anyone, Clan or otherwise, so in return, I want you to promise you won’t let this come between you and your duty. We both know Twelfth needs you — more badly now than it ever has.”

For a moment Mareiko was too choked to form an answer, then she gulped, reaching up to wipe away her tears with the sleeve of her *haori*.

“I don’t deserve your kindness,” she whispered, her voice shaking with the depth of her emotion. “I don’t and I never have, but I promise, I won’t ever disappoint you again. I won’t ever do anything to shame you or the Gotei, so long as I live. I promised Atsushi-kun that I wouldn’t leave Twelfth, because even if I don’t feel that I deserve to be there, Aoi and the others need me. I know they do... because I know what it’s like, when you’re a Vice Captain and your Captain is suddenly ripped away. I won’t do that to them, so I’ll stay. I promise, I’ll stay.”

“Then I feel safe in revealing this to you,” Nagesu held out the letter, and Mareiko hesitated, then took it nervously between her fingers.

“I haven’t ever thought much about my father,” she murmured. “He left mother alone to fend for herself. If not for Daigo-sama...”

“Your father died the same year you were born. In fact, I think it

highly possible he died before you were born,” Nagesu said gently, and Mareiko was struck dumb, her eyes becoming wide with disbelief. Nagesu nodded.

“I don’t know whether he would have claimed you or whether he would not. I don’t even know if he knew about you,” he admitted. “In a Clan, such things aren’t talked about. I certainly knew nothing of it until I found that letter, and began to piece together the clues. Well, Clans are complicated and full of levels of deception — as well you know. Putting together the entire picture and knowing I was right was only possible when I went back home and dug through old papers there to fill in the gaps. Once I did, though, it all became blindingly clear.”

“Yes, but...” Mareiko swallowed hard. “He was dead all this time? I’ve thought such bad things about him, when really...”

“Dead men can do little in this world,” Nagesu reflected, “but sometimes the shadows they cast are long ones. Your father fell in love with a woman who his family disapproved of. She was born too low — outside the degrees of the Clan — and so he was forbidden to marry her. But he didn’t ever stop seeing her. He married the woman his father told him to, and he had the son he was expected to have, but he never abandoned the woman he truly loved. He tried to hide her away, instead. How much he succeeded, I don’t know... I was just a child myself when he died. My father probably knew... but my father was not an understanding man, and circumstances made him worse.”

He sighed, removing the glasses from his nose and rubbing them against his haori to clean the lenses.

“Read the letter,” he instructed. “Not here, if you don’t wish to, but in your own time, when you’re ready. Like I said, it’s a love letter. When Daigo met your mother, she must have shown it to him as proof of her connection to your father. That’s why he took you. She couldn’t feed you, so she made a deal with him. She sold you into his care to ensure you would have a better life, and in return, she cut off communication with you. She had to, because otherwise it would have become known, whose child you were. And that didn’t suit Daigo-dono, nor would it have helped you.”

Mareiko swallowed hard, her fingers trembling around the precious piece of aging parchment.

“Please, sir,” she murmured. “I’d like you to tell me... my father’s name.”

I can see from your eyes that you already suspect the answer, “Nagesu reflected.” Just as he was, you are quick to put pieces together. You inherited his brilliance. Shougo-dono knew that. I wonder if, eventually, he would have tried to use you to help him in his plans, if not for Atsushi-dono’s challenge. Maybe he would. I can’t help but think he was grooming you for that purpose, only your friendship with Atsushi-dono got in his way. He intended to put an end to it — one way or the other.”

“And so he planned to kill me, or at least, tell Atsushi-kun he would, to make him angry,” Mareiko felt the anger and indignation flicker up inside of her at this. “He played all of us far more than I thought. Which means that my father, he must have been someone considerable. Someone intelligent. Someone whose talents Daigo-sama and Taichou thought they could exploit through me, even if he was dead. Someone who was skilled with working with lots of different mediums... and whose research notes I might have understood. Someone... someone like...”

She faltered, and Nagesu smiled sadly, nodding his head.

“Someone like my uncle,” he agreed wistfully. “Urahara Keitsune. Keitarou’s father.”

Mareiko’s legs wobbled beneath her at this, and she put out a hand to steady herself, her fingers brushing against the plaque that bore Shougo’s name. Suddenly angry, she balled her fist, punching the plaque with her left hand, again and again until blood glistened across her knuckles.

“Mareiko!” Nagesu looked horrified, moving to stop her, but she took no notice, placing the letter in her *obi* and resting her palms either side of the plaque as, at last, the rage began to flood through her body.

“You lost track of Keitarou, but instead you found me, and you decided to use me!” she exclaimed, her voice shaking once more, but this time with the suppressed fury of twenty five years. “You took me and made me think I was indebted to you, when all the time you were thinking of how you could best exploit me for my father’s bloodline! You lied to me and manipulated me and made me doubt my closest friend, Taichou! No, you don’t even deserve to be called by that title! You were never really a Captain... just like Atsushi-kun told you, before you died. You weren’t fit to wear the *haori*, and I only wish I’d seen it before you died, because if I had... if I had had my full strength, and I had known what you were, it wouldn’t have been his sword which would’ve killed you. It would’ve been mine!”

“Woah.” Nagesu’s firm hand on her shoulder brought her abruptly back to herself, and she flushed red, realising that she had lost her cool in front of her startled Clan leader. She drew a deep breath into her lungs, lowering her hands from the wall.

“I’m sorry, sir,” she said contritely. “A lot’s been going on inside of me, since the day Seireitei was attacked. And now all the things I’ve never known, I know. But it’s too late. Too late to deal with Taichou. Too late to speak to Father and apologise to him for thinking of him in contempt all these years. Too late to take back the gratitude I had for Daigo-sama. Too late to even try and reach Keitarou. If I’d known this before, maybe... maybe I could...”

She swallowed hard, struggling to compose herself as a thought occurred to her.

“You said the letter was in Taichou’s lab,” she murmured. “Nagesu-sama, do you think... did Keitarou know about this?”

“If he had, I imagine he would’ve tried to exploit the connection in the way he did with that poor, foolish Kotetsu boy,” Nagesu reflected, and Mareiko swallowed hard, remembering the ease with which the scientist had met with her, how few questions he had asked, and how he had paid attention to everything she had told him when she had handed him the file. So she had not known about the secret lab, she told herself bitterly, but something in what she had given Keitarou had given him that knowledge. Had he simply taken a gamble on a bitter shinigami grieving for a lost leader, or had, as time gone on, he manipulated her for another reason? Had he even seen the letter, buried deep in endless mounds of books and paperwork, or had he exploited her connection to him in secret, amusing himself by turning the screw on her anger against Seireitei?

Did he keep it a secret from them and from me because I was useful to him, then, or because he knew we were siblings, and he had another plan for me? I’ll never know... and somehow, I’m glad. I had a luckier escape than I deserved in all respects.

“Mareiko?” Nagesu’s tone was concerned, and Mareiko chewed down on her lip, hoping that her expression did not betray her thoughts.

“If I had known this, what would I have done?” she whispered, more than half to herself. “Could I have done something differently?”

“Keitarou became what he was because of things beyond the control of you or I.” Nagesu shook his head gravely, “but he won’t be burned as a traitor, or mutilated in any way. I intend him to be

interred with Urahara, in the plot his father ought to have laid in, had it not been for the *reidoku* incident. All the land was stripped from Keitsune-jisama after his execution, and redistributed to other people in his place. The mausoleum, however, is sacrosanct. And, since Keitarou's son is now with the Gotei, I want to draw a line under the hatred and give Keitarou a proper burial. It's not as though there's anything else left to do for him."

Keitarou's son. Kohaku. My... my nephew.

Mareiko's eyes widened for a moment as she digested this.

Thank goodness none of Keitarou's family knew he was talking to me... at least I can be sure this boy doesn't know the first thing about me, which is a very good thing if he's going to be living next door to my Division from now on.

"Keitarou was my brother, and your cousin," at length she found words, her eyes once more wet with tears. "When Shougo-dono chose me as his Vice Captain, people said I was Daigo-sama's illegitimate daughter, but he let it go. He let it go, because he knew that I wasn't. But he didn't deny it, because he knew he couldn't admit who I really was. I'll always wonder, though, Nagesu-sama. Even knowing all the things Keitarou did, even so, if I had known Father's name when I was younger, would I have tried to find Keitarou? Help Keitarou? Would I have been able to reach him in a way nobody else could?"

"It's not a question anyone will ever answer," Nagesu reminded her. "All we can do is look forward. You, Kohaku, me. The people for whom Keitarou was family, not just public enemy number one."

"You still cared about him, sir, didn't you?" Mareiko hazarded, and Nagesu nodded.

"I always will," he said simply. "The Keitarou I taught to write his name, the one who followed me around and who always wanted to explore... I don't want to ever forget that he existed. He's the man I'm burying, back in District Three. If the Clan understand or they don't, I still intend to do it. Father rent the Clan apart with his decisions. I'm going to use every breath left in me to knit it back together. Whatever it takes."

Mareiko was silent for a moment, then she turned her back on Shougo's plaque, leaning up against the wall and offering her Clan leader a bittersweet smile.

"I'll be here to help you, as much as I can," she promised. "I'll work hard with Atsushi-kun and become a shinigami you can rely on in all ways again, and then, whatever I can do to help, I will. I think... it's

what Keitsune-sama would have wanted. And... now I know the truth... I think it's the best response I could ever give Taichou. I'm nobody's puppet. Nobody's fool. Nobody's tool. I'm an Urahara and I support my Clan Leader, as Captain of the Twelfth Division until the day I die. I think Taichou's plaque should remain, Nagesu-sama. As a reminder to all of us... that we can easily be deceived by those we trust the most."

"And, perhaps, that justice always finds us," Nagesu mused. He nodded. "Very well. If you feel that way, then I will agree. Shougo-dono will remain here. If I can bury Keitarou, then I can turn the page on Shougo-dono and his father, too. They're gone and the world is changing. We'll soon leave them far, far behind."

"Beneath the ivy, perhaps," Mareiko fingered a nearby tendril. "I've spent a lot of time clearing and polishing Taichou's plaque, but instead, maybe, I'll let it be eaten by the plants. Anabomi's seems far more deserving. When his plaque is placed here, I think I'll come polish it sometimes instead. He was my comrade, not my kinsman, but he and I were both poisoned by the same evil man. For that reason, even if Anabomi has no family to do it, I will."

She smiled.

"I think, that way, I might heal," she added. "Reminding me of the reason he died, and the reason I'm still alive will help me focus on what I still need to do from this point on to lead Twelfth as a Captain should."

"I still don't understand why I have to do this blindfolded."

Kohaku put his fingers to the cloth strip covering his eyes, only to hear Kirio's laugh then feel her hands pulling his back down to his sides.

"Because it will be all the more spectacular if you don't get any clues about it beforehand," she said lightly, and Kohaku felt her arm slide through his, purposefully leading him forward. "It's all right, nobody'll let you walk into anything or anyone."

"Izumi's blindfolded too, and she's not complaining," Ketsui's voice added to the mix, and Kohaku frowned, pressing his lips together in a pout.

"If she was, I wouldn't know, because I can't see her hands," he objected. "Why won't you tell me where we're going? I still have two chapters on Sakusen to read before tomorrow's review with Taichou,

and I promised him I wouldn't get behind. Just because this evening I'm technically free from any kind of duty doesn't mean that..."

"Oh, shut up and go with the flow, will you?" A light cuff across the back of his head accompanied Kayashima's unsympathetic interruption, and Kohaku bristled, flailing his own arm in the direction he thought his friend was standing. "Hey! Be careful what you're doing with that! You'll have someone's eye out if you're not careful!"

"If I had use of *my* eyes, I'd know better where you were," Kohaku shot back, and there was the sound of Kayashima's derisive snort.

"Don't give me that," he said frankly. "You see plenty of things without using your eyes, and you sure as hell know how to find people's *reiryoku*. You were aiming that right at me, so don't pretend otherwise. This wasn't all my idea, you know. Kirio-san was the one who suggested blindfolding you — and Ichimaru-san isn't putting up half the fight you are."

"Like I said, I can't see her, so I don't know if that's true or not," Kohaku began his objections once more, but at that moment they suddenly halted, and the final member of the party's voice broke through the banter.

"We're here, so you can take the blindfolds off now, Kirio — Ketsuikun. They ought to see this for themselves — given how beautiful the weather is tonight, I think they'll be suitably impressed."

"At last," Kohaku pulled a graphic face, as he heard Kirio laugh, but obediently begin to loosen the rough bandana that had been looped around his head as they had left the Seireitei Gate. As light began to penetrate his vision once more, he raised his fists to his eyes, rubbing them to remove the sensation of cloth pressing against his lids.

He had been a recruit of the Thirteenth Division for almost a month now, and in that time period he had quickly learned that his new Division mates had no intention whatsoever of treating him with kid gloves. Since the first day he had been thrown into the parade yard, he had been considered one of the pack and fair game for any mischief or pranks that happened to be going around and so, as he apprehensively opened his eyes, he was half expecting to find himself in the middle of some horribly embarrassing situation. As he took in his surroundings, however, any further protests he might have had died on his lips, his mouth forming a perfect 'o' of surprise. Alongside him, Ketsui had removed Izumi's own bandana, and had the girl been able to speak, Kohaku felt sure she would have let out an exclamation

of amazement at the scene that lay before them.

It was night, and they had come to one of the local villages that were dotted around the border between Inner Seireitei and the District lands beyond. Kohaku had come here before on one or two occasions, to get supplies or take messages, but although he was familiar with the streets and houses on an everyday basis, that night everything seemed like it had come from another world. Magic had touched the settlement, for every tree was woven with thread and paper decorations, and from the fronts of each home hung coloured lanterns with long trailing streamers like the tails of a comet, carefully fashioned from local materials. The entirety of the main street was lit with flames deep within some of these lanterns, giving the whole area a gentle, enticing glow. Above his head, the sky was clear as he had ever seen it, the stars glittering like tiny white diamonds embedded in a velvety expanse that seemed to go on forever. Despite himself his heart caught in his throat as he absorbed the merry beauty of what he was seeing, and Kirio gave a nod of triumph.

“You see? I told you the blindfold was a good idea, Shiki-chan,” she said, nudging her companion and the final speaker with a knowing smile. “I said that they’d get the full effect better this way. Well, you two? Have you ever seen anything like this before? I bet you haven’t — I bet this is your first matsuri, right?”

“Matsuri?” Somehow Kohaku drew his eyes away from the colours and the lights, fixing Kirio with a bewildered look, and Kayashima smirked, clapping him condescendingly on the back.

“Tanabata. Tanabata,” he said, causing Kohaku to blink at him in non-plussed silence. “It’s what it’s called. Tanabata. When I was a kid they used to have streamers and lanterns from one end of the main street to the other, just like this — even if nobody could buy materials, they always found something to use to make it look special.”

“Tanabata is a Star Festival, Kohaku,” Ketsui shot the bemused recruit a sidelong grin. “It’s celebrated a lot across the Districts at this time of the year. District communities are more superstitious than Clan ones, in some ways — I don’t know if the Clans celebrate it or if they don’t. But I remember that in our village in Eighth, there was one house who’d always deck out with lanterns covered in every single flower they could find and Ten-nii used to see whether I could name them all — though I never could and nor could he. We had our own names for most of them. Mother used to help make some of the village decorations, and then we’d all get to write our wishes on strips of

paper and the village leaders would make sure everyone's got hung up in this great tall bamboo tree that stood at the very corner of the square."

"I used to get my sister to tell me the story of the Tanabata stars pretty much every year till we were separated," Kirio remembered. "What about you, Shiki-chan? I assume the Ukitake family celebrated Tanabata?"

"Yes, though our wishes were often draped over the roof of the house on bamboo sticks, because Shinkei-nii thought it was more fun that way," Shikiki dimpled, looking amused. "Okaasama would always yell at him about it, but he'd do it anyway, and then when they had to be burned the next day, he'd have to go bring them all down again. I made lanterns, too."

She gazed up at the stars with a pensive smile.

"My name means 'weaver princess,' she said reflectively." The first time we had Tanabata, when I went to live with Juu-nii's family, Okaasama told me that my name was written with the same characters that the Star-hime's name was written with. I always loved the story after that."

She pinkened slightly.

"I had this silly idea as a kid that I might meet my Star Prince on Tanabata one year," she admitted sheepishly. "I've outgrown the idea now, but my sister Miyabi has a head for romantic stuff and she probably influenced me to think that way."

"Well, I'm fine about the writing of wishes, not to mention the eating of festival food, since I'm starving," Kayashima said honestly. "I'm not so much for the girly mush about romance though. Tanabata is a fun time, but the love story I can take or leave."

Izumi's features twisted into a derisive expression, and her fingers fluttered together, their actions staccato enough to give away her tone, even if not her words. Kayashima sent her a suspicious glance.

"What did you just say about me?"

Izumi offered him an innocent smile, shrugging her shoulders, and Ketsui laughed.

"You should be able to tell by the expression on her face that whatever it was probably wasn't repeatable in polite society," he teased. "Give it up, Kayashima. You won't win. Trust me."

Izumi poked her tongue out, and Ketsui offered her a smile.

“You know I’m right,” he told her. “I might only know how to read some of your signs, but I know when you’re ripping someone else to shreds, and when it’s not worth trying to come up with a response.”

“Izumi-chan just said that Kayashima wouldn’t know romance if it jumped up and bit his behind,” Kohaku observed pensively, his gaze drifting to the long woven streamers wound around the branches of the bamboo, wound into which he could now make out the tiny knots of paper that marked wishes already attached by the local people. “You said something about wishes, Ketsui-san? Can we write wishes? How does it work? I don’t know anything about this story — it wasn’t in the book that Kirio-san found for me about legends.”

“It’s a love story,” Kayashima pulled a graphic face, then, “hey, wait a minute? Koku, did you just read Ichimaru-san’s finger-symbols?”

“Mm?” Kohaku was only half listening, and Kayashima jabbed a well aimed elbow towards his ribs, causing him to yelp and round on his friend indignantly. “Hey! What was that for?!”

“You not listening. Going off into your own world is a bad habit of yours and tonight it’s strictly forbidden, especially when I asked you a question,” Kayashima was unrepentant. “Now answer it. Did you read Ichimaru-san’s sign-language?”

“Probably. So?” Kohaku cast his friend a confused look. “What about it? Izumi-chan speaks that way. I have extra classes with her with Taichou all the time lately, because we have to meet the Council’s criteria in order to stay in the Division as proper members. We both know different things so we’re helping each other — how on earth would we study together if I couldn’t speak her language?”

Izumi’s fingers fluttered again, her eyes rolling skywards, and Kohaku grinned, shrugging.

“I guess he doesn’t,” he agreed cryptically. “I didn’t think it was a big deal, but maybe it is.”

“You can understand Izumi’s signs?” Ketsui cast Kohaku a startled look. “How did you learn them so quickly?”

“I don’t suppose I really know,” Kohaku pursed his lips. “I don’t think I did learn them exactly. I think it was just... I knew how to read them. It’s hard to explain, Ketsui-san. But when I saw Joumei-dono attacked in the caves, I saw the attack through his eyes for a bit. And when I saw Izumi-chan when she was in danger at Thirteenth, I saw that through her eyes. I think when I did that, I also got pieces of their

knowledge, too. Sometimes it happens like that. I learn things I never got taught how to do, because I confuse my mental boundaries with other people's when my *reiryoku* is heightened and I'm having a vision."

He shrugged.

"Yamamoto-sensei said when he came to meet me that the *reidoku* Father drank probably made my spirit power too sensitive, so I pick up on changes in *reishi* too easily. He thought that was why I had visions, because *Kyouka* amplifies that ability — so when I pick up those signals, I also pick up other unnecessary things that, if my control was better, I ought to be able to filter out. It's why sometimes people get affected by my mood, too — I can't control properly yet where I put my *reiryoku* and what I'm reading from other people's."

He grinned at Izumi, who offered him a smile in return.

"In *this* respect, though, it's an unexpected bonus," he added. "I guess there have to be some of those, given all the drawbacks of having power like this."

His expression became sheepish at Ketsui's incredulous look. "Father told me it was how I learned to read and write. I don't remember doing either, but when I was given the books Father found for me, I could read them just fine. I think I picked that up from seeing things through other people's eyes, too."

"Now that's a useful skill," Kirio observed, and Kohaku shrugged.

"Izumi-chan and I see a lot of each other," he said philosophically. "If I can understand her, it makes it easier. Besides, we're friends. Aren't we?" This last with a note of doubt, as he glanced at the young Kitsune, and the silver-haired recruit nodded her head. Her fingers danced and Kohaku grinned, relieved at the reassurance in her words.

"Well, at least it means there's someone in the Gotei who speaks Ichimaru-san's language," Shikiki remarked.

"Shikiki's right," Kirio nodded. "Don't look so starstruck, Ketsui — maybe Koku'll teach you, in return for all the sword drill you've been doing with him lately."

"He's better at that than I expected him to be," Ketsui acknowledged, casting his friend a rueful smile. "His *shunpo* sucks — he's the first *shinigami* I've ever known to headbutt a gatepost he's not supposed to be anywhere near when trying to step — and he hits like a girl — no offence to the girls present, of course! *But* his sword skills aren't as basic as I thought they were. I'm just wondering whose

thoughts he might have picked that up from... and whether his improvement in that skill area had anything to do with seeing Minaichi-taichou fight Sakanoue and Kusakawa in the chimera he made us see the day Keitarou attacked.”

“Maybe,” Kohaku pursed his lips, and Kirio frowned, reaching over to cuff Ketsui with a warning glare.

“Stop downing the mood. We’re here for the matsuri, not to dig up bad memories,” she warned. “Besides, didn’t you say Magaki-san was going to meet us here? We ought to go find her — else she’ll think we got lost along the way.”

“Eighth have been pretty busy lately, because of Sora-dono going to Ninth and Shindou-san getting promoted,” Ketsui pointed out. “Shizu said she’d probably be a little late, otherwise we might as well have waited for her. But if we stand out here we’ll miss the festival. Koku wanted to write wishes, and we should all do that. Soul Society is at peace again — and so it’s a good time to think of what we want for the future.”

“I’d just like to not see any more future,” Kohaku murmured. “But I want to know what the story is. Will you tell me, Kirio-san? I don’t mind if it’s a love story. I just want to understand what all of this is for.”

“It’s the story of two stars who cross the sky once a year to meet over what’s known as the River of Heaven,” Kirio explained. “The Star Princess was the daughter of the Sky King, and she was lonely, so he arranged for her to marry the Herder Star. Only they fell so much in love they weren’t doing the duties they ought to do, so he separated them and broke their hearts. In the end he relented and allowed them to meet once a year, across the River of Heaven, and that festival is Tanabata.”

“I told you. Mushy girly romance stuff,” Kayashima said disparagingly.

“And the wishes?” Kohaku pressed.

“Traditionally girls wished to be better weavers, and men wished to be better at calligraphy, but I guess these days people wish for all kinds of things,” Shikiki remarked. “Things to make the world better. Things for their own happiness. Any kind of things. It doesn’t matter what.”

“I see,” Kohaku’s expression became thoughtful, but before he could make any further remark, there was a loud yell of “*Ketsui!*”,

followed by a woosh of reiatsu as someone dropped out of an excited flashstep less than a foot away from where he stood. He jumped, almost falling headlong, and as he hurriedly steadied himself, he realised that the missing member of their party had finally arrived.

“I finally got away!” Shizuka’s eyes were glittering with anticipation. ‘I didn’t think I would, but Tetsuya-dono let me off early, since I said I was going to the matsuri. I’m meant to be sweeping out the training hall — again,’ she paused to roll her eyes, “but Taichou’s gone to Thirteenth for the evening and Tetsuya-dono said he didn’t mind if I slipped out. So here I am. I didn’t miss anything, did I?”

“We were just going to head into the village. Kohaku wanted to write wishes,” Ketsui told his friend, amused. “You almost cannoned right into him, Shizu — you should know that Kohaku can’t shunpo to save his life. Literally, if you come at him like that... he’s not a natural at dodging.”

“Rubbish. I was in complete control,” Shizuka snorted, then turned to offer Kohaku a grin. “Well, Koku? What do you want to wish for?”

Kohaku, who had been startled by her sudden appearance, recovered himself, returning the smile with a shrug of his own.

“I don’t know,” he said pensively. “I mean, there are a lot of things I could wish for. Father being reborn into a life where he doesn’t have to suffer any more. Katsu-nii finding a safe place and not ever clashing with the shinigami again. Mother being at peace with everything. Lots of things. But... I don’t know that I’ll wish for any of those things, when it comes down to it. They’re things I want, but I don’t know if they’re things I ought to wish for.”

“Why not?” Shikiki cast Kohaku a startled look. “They seem like good wishes to me, Koku-kun. And your father needs that new beginning — more than anyone, I think I understand how you feel about that.”

“Mm,” Kohaku nodded. “I know, and I’m glad you knew the other side of him too, Shikiki-san. It makes me feel better about everything he did do to people. But...”

He paused, gazing up at the sky and taking in the glittering specks that covered the heavens.

“The world is so big. I never realised how big till now, and I’m not the only person who’s lost people he loves, lately,” he murmured. “I can’t just wish for my family, not when there might be other families suffering just as much tragedy. I’m lucky. There’s nothing that I need

in my own life, now. I found a place where I'm myself, and nobody's afraid of me. True, they steal my *tabi* and tie my hair to the bed when I oversleep, but I sort of enjoy that part of it. It makes me feel like I belong in Thirteenth. In Rukongai I was always separate. A secret. Hidden... either literally, or figuratively. Nobody there could ever call me Kohaku — but now they do, and I'm starting to like hearing it. It's not a demon's name — it's *my* name, and it's a nice one. It has a nice meaning, and I'm growing to like it."

"Kayashima, what do you guys do to the poor lad in the recruit dorm?" Kirio tut-tutted, and Kayashima grinned unrepentantly.

"New recruit initiation," he said innocently. "It's like Koku said. All about making him belong. Besides, he's only telling you half the story. I bet nobody told you that the reason Furuta showed up late to patrol yesterday and squelched his way through drill was because Koku threw his sandals in the koi pond."

"I did not!" Kohaku reacted indignantly, and Kayashima put his hands on his hips.

"Oh, so you didn't try and throw them the length of Ugendou and they didn't wind up sunk in the reeds? My mistake!"

"I was trying to get them all the way over! And you challenged me! You said they were *your* sandals! I didn't know they were Furuta's till later!"

"...I think I don't want to hear any more of this," Kirio exchanged wry looks with Ketsui, who shrugged philosophically.

"Recruits will be recruits," he said reflectively. "In any case, Kohaku, you were talking about your wishes."

"Oh. Yes," Kohaku reddened slightly, looking sheepish, but he nodded. "I just meant that I never knew anything about being a shinigami but now I do, I know that this is a place I ought to be. I could've ended up alone and with nothing, but I didn't. So wishing for something else for me seems selfish. Even if it's for my family. My family hurt a lot of people. It seems unfair to wish for them."

"I think that even if you don't make those wishes, Koku, they'll probably come true," Shikiki said thoughtfully. "Keitarou's soul will be reborn. It wasn't damaged or mutilated, so it will be, one day, in a completely different time and place from here. Juu-nii told me that there's no sign of your brother anywhere, so patrols to find him have been scaled back... Taichou hasn't made any attempt to pursue justice, and I almost wonder if she feels as though it's for Katsura-san

to find a way to make amends for the things he did, rather than be killed for them. As for Eiraki-hime, she's back in District Seven now, isn't she? Her family took her home... and even if she's not herself, she's not in pain. People there still love her, despite what she did. She isn't alone."

"The world has to heal and move on, that's what you're saying, isn't it?" Shizuka's expression became grave. "I'm going to make my wish for Taichou. He's been better, lately, but I know he's still hurting a lot over this too. He hasn't come to see you yet, has he, Koku?" this last to the young stray, who shook his head.

"I asked Ukitake-dono if I should go see him," he admitted, "and he said I should wait. He said that Kyouraku-dono was a very sensitive person who didn't talk much about the things that bothered him the most. I'm sure I'm one of those things, so I'm trying not to be a bother to him. It's a shame because I'd like to talk to him more about the Kyouraku. Kyouka said my spirit power comes from that and Yamamoto-sensei said so too. He said that, probably, there are records relating to past Kyouka swords in the Kyouraku archive, but... I don't know how to broach that divide at the moment. We both did the things we had to do, and I'm not cross with him — but I don't want him to be upset because of something I've done or said."

"I could ask him for you," Shizuka suggested. "And like I said, I'm going to wish for him to be his old self again. Then I'm sure he'll come and see you, and you can talk. You are sort of family... in a really distant way."

"I have a lot of family I didn't know I had, but most of it is at arm's length and it's probably better that way," Kohaku observed. "The Endou, the Urahara... I don't blame them for wanting to keep their distance from me."

"Well, not this Urahara — and not Izumi, either," Ketsui said with a grin, and Izumi nodded, twitching her fingers in agreement. "Remember, our fathers were cousins, so we're on the same side. And you helped Izumi's brother, and mine, so you can count on us as family."

"Thirteenth are a family anyway," Kirio said comfortably. "Koku's just become a part of it, that's all."

"What about Magaki-san and I?" Shikiki objected playfully, and Kirio grinned.

"Honorary members," she responded. "but it makes me realise what I'm going to wish for. I'm going to wish that *this* family never gets

ripped apart the way so many of our families have been before.”

“Well, if we don’t wish soon, we’ll miss our chance,” Shizuka pointed out, linking her arm in Kohaku’s and pulling him forward. “Come on. You can’t shunpo, so I’ll take you. Everyone, follow us. Last one at the village square buys dango for the rest!”

And with that Kohaku felt himself pulled into a dizzy shunpo step, finding himself deposited in the dusty centre of the village square before he could draw breath. At the sight of his dazed expression, Shizuka chuckled, hauling him to his feet.

“You’re still not convinced about moving at that speed, are you?” she observed, as he dusted himself down, and he raised his gaze ruefully to hers, shaking his head.

“I’ve never done it, and I don’t have good control yet,” he agreed. “I understand the theory, but I think it will be some time before I can shunpo properly.”

“Well, you have that. Time, I mean,” Shizuka said pensively. “And Taichou will come round, Koku. He will. I know he wants to rebuild that bridge, because he knows that you’re close to Juushirou-dono and I can tell that he wants to help you settle here, too. It’s just going to take a little while — and in the meantime, I’m here to bridge the gap.”

She dimpled, and the sombre expression was gone from her eyes.

“For now, we have wishes to write,” she continued, grabbing him by the arm and pulling him towards a gathering of village people. As they approached, Kohaku was aware of Ketsui and Kirio, followed by the others entering the square, and he returned the smile with a wistful one of his own, nodding his head.

“I feel guilty, but I’m happy,” he observed. “It’s a sensation I’m not used to feeling, and I don’t know if I have the right to feel it with all that’s gone on — but I am happy. Do you think it’s wrong, for me to feel that way?”

“I don’t think it’s ever wrong to be happy,” Shizuka looked startled, then she shook her head. “You have a right to have your life, Koku. Just because people locked you up and treated you like a monster, it doesn’t mean they were right. We know you’re not one, and you’re an adult now. All adults have the right to choose their own lives. Riri-nee wasn’t happy about me being a shinigami, but she let me because she said it was up to me to be whatever I wanted to be. You want to be here, with Kirio-san and Ketsui and the others, so that’s what you should do. Being happy is important, and hard to grasp hold of — it’s

easy to lose, so you shouldn't feel guilty for it. If your family really loved you, they'd want that for you anyway. So be happy. It's not wrong. Especially on a night like tonight."

Kohaku opened his mouth to reply, but before the words left his lips, something faint brushed against his senses, and he paused, brow furrowing as he turned his head towards the dark shadows of the woodland beyond.

Katsu-nii?

"Koku?" Kayashima descended upon them at that moment, giving him a playful shove and almost knocking him off his feet. "Hey, I thought I already told you! No going off into your own world!"

"Kayashima!" Kohaku steadied himself, glaring at his friend, but the sensation that had been there moments before was gone and he let out a rueful sigh, knowing that it had more likely never been there at all.

Wishful thinking, maybe. Perhaps its selfish, but I will include you in my wishes, Katsu-nii. I'll wish that you find a life that makes you happy, like I have. And, even if we don't ever meet again, that you're safe. That's what Mother would want for you — and I want it, too.

"Thank you, little brother. And to you, too,"

For a moment, Kohaku thought he heard his brother's voice, but it was just the howl of the wind, and he took a deep breath, pushing the thoughts away.

The past is gone. The future is an open book. I'm going to write in that book, somehow, and do something important with this life. I'm going to make people happy, Katsu-nii. I'm going to help them live, and I'm going to make them happy. I'm going to use Kyouka in whatever way I can to make this world better for everyone... from now until the moment that I die. That's my wish. That I get to do that... somehow.

Out loud he said,

"I'm sorry. I'm fine. I've decided on my wish... so lets go."

"I'm going to make people happy, Katsu-nii."

From the recesses of the dark woodland beyond, Katsura pulled his body more tightly into the darkened branches, a sad smile touching his lips as Kohaku's words rippled across his thoughts once more. He had sworn to himself to keep away, but that night, he had sensed his

brother's *reiryoku* and he had not been able to resist seeing for himself that Kohaku was safe.

What he had seen had both reassured him and torn him in two, though it had not surprised him. Since the day Mitsuki had healed him, he had seen it more and more clearly in his mind's eye, images picked up from Kohaku's latent subconscious that, he knew now, the young man himself had not even been aware of. A subconscious part of him had always suspected Kohaku would become a shinigami, but he had just pushed the thought away and tried not to credit it, safe and sure in the belief that his brother could not possibly want such a connection. Now, though, he had seen it with his own eyes and he had heard his brother's resolve. He had not meant to connect to Kohaku's mind, but it had happened anyway, and as that resolution had tricked over their connection, Katsura had known that everything had changed.

His heart ached.

Well, little brother. You really don't need me to protect you any more. You're trying to protect me, instead, and everyone else, too. I wonder what Father would make of the you I saw today... probably he'd be disappointed. I'm not, though. Knowing we're going separate ways doesn't change the fact we're brothers. And besides, I believe you. Maybe you will make people happy. More, maybe you can be happy... even with the shinigami. If that's the case, I wouldn't ever interfere.

He closed his eyes, drawing a fleeting image into the forefront of his mind. It was hazy and translucent to begin with, but as he focused on it more and more, he could see the outlines of a young man robed in black and white, the heavy folds of a white *haori* fluttering around his shoulders. Across the back of the *haori* were the four slashes that made up the character for five, and as the man turned to face him, Katsura met the resolve deep in his brother's brown eyes. For a moment he held the gaze of this future illusion, and then, the next instant, it was gone.

He opened his eyes once more, gazing up at the stars.

I've seen your future, even if you haven't yet. You left it with me, and it means that, even when we're far apart, I'll know how you're growing and getting on. That's enough for me, I guess. Like the girl said, being happy is rare and important. You should take every chance you have to be that, Koku-kun. Whether we're there to see it or not, the people of Rukongai and Seireitei are in safe hands now you're learning how to protect them. That's a dream I can believe in too — so even from the shadows, I'll do all I can from this point on to help your wish come true.

Author's Note: The End Is Nigh ;)

So that's it, people. Sukuse is complete. Thank you all for coming along on this journey with Team Stupid and I — it was a story I wanted to write and at so many points I thought it would never get finished but you guys kept me going and so it did. I hope you think it was worthwhile reading along!

Obviously there are matters left unsettled. I'm sure some people will have at least guessed at the significance of Hiko and why he was included in the plot. Obviously it was already indicated that Hiko is Kirio's missing brother, but there's a reason I never gave their surname... I wanted to see if people could guess what was going on because I'm horrible and evil like that. If you're not sure, just bear in mind these two things — who it is that's looking for him, and the fact Hiko has red hair...

This epilogue also ties up the final loose end where Mareiko is concerned. When she was talking to Keitarou, she told him that they weren't kin. Obviously, that wasn't true — but until this point, she didn't know it. As far as she was concerned, she always grew up illegitimate and with no proper blood connection to the Urahara. Thus in her eyes, she wasn't related to him in any way. I wasn't sure whether to include this part, but realised that explaining Shougo and Daigo's real reason for taking in Mareiko needed to be clarified. For Mareiko's part, I've said before that I imagined her being one of the forerunners of creating the Kidou Corps.

Like I said earlier in the story, the antagonists in Sukuse were loosely based around the themes of the Espada. Very loosely in the case of Shougo. But a lot of people asked me when I was writing Third Chronicle and Fourth Maki, "why did Seireitei trust Sousuke, if Keitarou was such a threat?" Kohaku is the answer. People who've read Mirror, Flower, Water, Moon will already have known that connection, but he is the reason the Aizen name was restored.

As for Koku himself, people have also asked me who it is he marries. The answer is in this epilogue really ;)

As for me, I am still smitten with Bleach and its characters, even though the manga lately is making me frustrated. I think I've exhausted the Juu and Shun story ideas for the time being, though... I don't know what I might write next, if anything. I guess watch this space...

Once again, thank you for coming along with me on this ride. Though it hasn't quite been a Meifu tale, I hope that it's been enjoyable nonetheless. I never expected to be writing about Juu and Shun this long and I'm certain

it's because you guys were supporting me that I did. I hope that my writing has improved from the exercise, because my love of Juu and Shun certainly has!